CHAPTER ONE

Shaping Commitments

Intensely idealistic throughout his life, Van Gogh pursued a variety of utopian goals with a wholeheartedness that made his inevitable disappointments all the more painful. His letters provide many moving accounts of his enthusiasms and frustrations and of his continuing struggles to realize his aspirations.

Van Gogh’s first all-consuming ideal was religious. While he was still an employee of Goupil and Cie, he concluded that the art-dealing business was not for him, and he set out to become a preacher, like his father. His religious phase lasted roughly from 1875 to 1880, ending in disillusionment when he discovered that the Borinage miners needed material help more than evangelism. Prior to this recognition, morality for Van Gogh had been closely bound up with, but subordinate to, religion. The moral problem of unjust suffering was, for example, so overwhelming to him that he believed he could not deal with it without God. As he explains to Theo from Amsterdam in 1877, the “terrible things” in the world are so dreadful that “without faith in God one cannot live—cannot endure” (117/1:164). Here, religion subsumes the moral life, and in the same spirit, Van Gogh sees art and literature as also mainly supportive of his religious values. As we might expect, during his period of religious enthusiasm, he cited the
Bible frequently and was an avid reader of religious classics by authors such as Thomas à Kempis and John Bunyan.

After Van Gogh’s crisis of conscience in the Borinage, religion surrendered its pre-eminence for him, and citations from Christian texts simply disappear from the letters. Instead of religion, the moral problems of poverty and oppression took precedence. Van Gogh’s decision at this time to become an artist was driven by the conviction that he could illustrate the lives of working people, thereby affirming their vitality while also registering a moral protest against the social conditions they were forced to endure.

After leaving the Borinage, Van Gogh went to live with his parents in Etten, and as a result of his amorous relationships with Kee and, subsequently in The Hague, with Sien, his antagonism to his father’s traditional religious values flared up into a series of angry confrontations. But although Van Gogh broke decisively with conventional religion, his sense of wonder at the mystery of the universe and his acceptance of a benign, transcendent power remained strong. He used a range of terms to express his intuition of a spiritual reality that was not religious in the usual sense, seeking, as he says, for “something altogether new” that “will have no name” but that offers the same consoling effect “of making life possible that the Christian religion once had” (686/4:282). In the third section of chapter 5, I deal with Van Gogh’s “spiritual but not religious” experience in more detail, thereby completing the circle, as it were, by bringing the conclusion of this book back to its beginning. For now, my main point is that although morality displaced traditional religion for Van Gogh, the moral life continued to have a spiritual value for him, and art increasingly became an embodiment of the transcendent mystery for which religion was no longer an adequate vehicle.

The aesthetic did not emerge fully as Van Gogh’s governing ideal until he discovered his ability as a painter—and especially as
a colourist. While living in Drenthe (1883) and Nuenen (1883–85), he continued to focus on the lives of working people, but in Nuenen, he read about the colour theories of Eugène Delacroix, which had a transformative effect on him, the consequences of which became dazzlingly evident in Paris (1886–88) and Arles (1888–89). By then, his concern for the poor, which had found expression especially in his drawings, was replaced by an overriding conviction that art was itself the bearer of a higher morality beyond the conventional distinctions between good and evil. As he advises Theo from Arles in 1888, “We know so little about life that we’re not really in a position to judge between good and bad, just and unjust” (787/5:56). Rather, as he tells the art critic Albert Aurier, “a good painting should be equivalent to a good deed” (853/5:198). In short, art had assumed pre-eminence for Van Gogh over both morality and religion, providing a sense of the sacredness of the world as well as a compassionate understanding of our suffering human condition.

Van Gogh’s ideology of the aesthetic inspired him to found an artists’ community in Arles. But again, this utopian aspiration crashed on the rocks of bitter experience, as the relationship with Paul Gauguin (who Van Gogh hoped would be a founding member) disintegrated and Van Gogh’s mental illness became debilitating. Although he continued to paint, in his last days, he came to realize that the “artistic life” is not “the real one,” even admitting that he would have preferred to produce children rather than paintings (885/5:260). In St. Rémy and Auvers, he took steps to reconnect with his family, appreciating the value of personal relationships over and beyond his earlier utopian ideals.

As this brief outline suggests, a dialogical interchange among religion, morality, and art operates as a powerful organizing force throughout Van Gogh’s correspondence. Within this continuing dialogue, none of these three topics completely displaces the
others, even though each is in the ascendant at a different phase of his career.

Religion

For five years, from 1875 to 1880, Van Gogh was intensely religious, wishing to emulate his greatly admired preacher father. But he did not do well in his studies preparing him for admission to the University of Amsterdam and went instead to the Borinage as an evangelist. Following the crisis of conscience in the Borinage, which he described as a “moulting” time, Van Gogh’s relationship with his father took a turn for the worse, before descending into outright acrimony. Yet Van Gogh never made a complete break with his father (see the first section of chapter 5), and despite his increasingly fierce repudiations of what he took to be the hypocrisies of organized religion, he continued to engage with the traditional “God question.” He did so in a range of registers, evolving gradually towards a position that is the topic of the final section of chapter 5.

Van Gogh’s early Christian belief was based on a traditional acceptance of divine providence and was practiced in a spirit emphasizing the close connection between work and prayer (1). The authority of the Bible was paramount, so much so that Van Gogh wanted to learn the Bible by heart (2). Family values enshrined for him the ideal of the “Christian labourer,” as well as the importance of continuity and shared duty (3). These ideals and commitments were characteristic of his moderate Calvinist upbringing.

Van Gogh was also especially sensitive to the problem of suffering, which, in his early years, he thought was unendurable.
without religious faith (4). But in the Borinage another note began to sound, as Van Gogh turned his attention to the “many people” there who were ill (5). His experience among the miners did much to shift his focus away from the orthodox beliefs of his youth and towards a more direct concern with the dire social conditions of the poor.

(1) Let us do our daily work, whatever the hand finds to do, with all our might, and let us believe that God will give good gifts, a part that shall not be taken away, to those who pray to Him for it. And let us trust in God with all our heart and lean not unto our own understanding. [50]

Paris, Saturday, 25 September 1875. To Theo van Gogh

(2) I cannot tell you how much I sometimes yearn for the Bible. I do read something out of it every day, but I’d so much like to know it by heart and to see life in the light of that word of which it is said: Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.

I believe and trust that my life will still be changed, and that that longing for Him will be satisfied. [108]

Dordrecht, Friday, 16 March 1877. To Theo van Gogh

(3) In our family, which is indeed a Christian family in the full sense of the word, there has always been a minister of the gospel as far back as one can see, from generation to generation. Why should that voice not be heard in this and in following generations? Why should a member of that family not now feel himself called to that office and think, with some reason, that he can and must declare himself and seek the means to achieve that goal? It is my prayer and deepest desire that the spirit of my Father and Grandfather may rest upon me, and that it may be given me to be a Christian and a Christian labourer, that my life may resemble that of them
whom I name—the more, the better—for behold, that old wine is good and I desire not the new. [109]

Dordrecht, Friday, 23 March 1877. To Theo van Gogh

(4) There is evil in the world and in ourselves, terrible things, and one doesn’t have to have gone far in life to dread much and to feel the need for unflinching hope in a life after this one, and to know that without faith in a God one cannot live—cannot endure. [117]

Amsterdam, Wednesday, 30 May 1877.

To Theo van Gogh

(5) How Jesus Christ is the Master who can strengthen, comfort and enlighten a man like the Macedonian, a workman and labourer who has a hard life. Because He himself is the great Man of Sorrows, who knows our diseases, who himself is called the carpenter’s son, even though He was the Son of God and the great physician of sick souls. Who worked for 30 years in a humble carpenter’s workshop to carry out God’s will; and God wants man to live and walk humbly upon the earth, in imitation of Christ, minding not high things, but condescending to men of low estate, learning from the gospel to be meek and lowly in heart.

I’ve already had the opportunity to visit a few sick people, for many people here are ill. [149]

Wasmes, Thursday, 26 December 1878.

To Theo van Gogh

When Van Gogh left Belgium and returned to live with his parents in Etten, tensions rapidly developed because of his infatuation with his widowed cousin, Kee. His parents’ disapproval escalated dramatically when Vincent subsequently moved to The
Hague and set up house with Sien. In asserting the claims of love against the interdictions of his parents’ religion, Vincent looked especially to the free-thinking Jules Michelet’s books, *La femme* and *L’amour* (6). But he also wrestled with the problem of how to maintain belief in God while declaring his unbelief in the God of conventional religion. Sometimes, he states the problem paradoxically (7, 8) in order to suggest how difficult it is. He also sought alternative ways to define God (9, 10), and he rejected the straightforward charge of atheism (7). However, disrespect for orthodox theology was another matter, and Van Gogh did not hold back from confrontation with the claims and attitudes of conventional believers, especially his father (11, 12).

During Van Gogh’s years in The Hague, Drenthe, and Nuenen, his dealings with orthodox religion remained consistently hostile (13, 14): he accuses conventionally religious people of being bourgeois, hypocritical, and oppressive, in contrast to the freedom of love, which he saw as the real truth preached by Christ. The religion of “respectable people” (15) turns the truth upside down, because true religion is based on love, even though love might scandalize those who remain bound by conventional proprieties (16).

In making these points, Van Gogh looks increasingly to morality as the expression of values he admires, which are measured by what one does rather than by adherence to religious dogma (17). Whether God exists or not, a person should not act in an ungodly manner, as many adherents of respectable religion—and especially the clergy—repeatedly do (18).

By the time Van Gogh went south, first to Paris and then Arles, his difficulties with the religion of his father had loosened their grip on him—which is not to say that religious questions ceased to be a matter of interest and concern. For instance, he registers a note of puzzlement to his sister Willemien on the topic
of providence (19), and he is satirically amused by the idea that God botched the creation of the world, as if making an artistic blunder (20). These passages suggest a general lightening of Van Gogh’s attitude to the God question, even though he continued to search for something to replace the Christianity of his youth (21). In doing so, he found help in Tolstoi’s humanist, non-supernatural vision of a renovated Christianity (22, 23).

Still, the old religious problems continued to haunt Van Gogh (24–26), partly as a consequence of his disturbed mental state in Arles and St. Rémy. But the important exchange became not so much the one between religion and morality (as it was during the Dutch years) as that between religion and art. That is, Van Gogh insists that artistic creativity is itself an expression of religious value (21, 24). Thus, in letters to Émile Bernard, Van Gogh describes Christ as the greatest of artists, making “living men” rather than paintings (27, 28). Despite his continuing opposition to conventional religion, therefore, he did not entirely discount it as a source of value, however much it might need to be reconstituted for its real worth to be realized.

(6) Michelet even says things completely and aloud which the gospel merely whispers to us germinally, and Stowe actually goes as far as Michelet. It should come as no surprise if I tell you, at the risk of your thinking me a fanatic, that I consider it absolutely essential to believe in God in order to be able to love. To believe in God—by that I mean (not that you should believe all those petty sermons of the ministers and the arguments and Jesuitry of the prudish, the sanctimonious, the strait-laced, far from it)—to believe in God, by that I mean feeling that there is a God, not a dead or stuffed God, but a living one who pushes us with irresistible force in the direction of “Love on.” That’s what I think. Proof of His
presence—the reality of love. Proof of the reality of the feeling of that great power of love deep within us—the existence of God. Because there is a God there is love; because there is love there is a God. Although this may seem like an argument that goes round in a circle, nevertheless it’s true, because “that circle” actually contains all things, and one can’t help, even if one wanted to, being in that circle oneself. [189]

Etten, Wednesday, 23 November 1881.

_To Theo van Gogh_

(7) And I don’t think it occurs to her that perhaps God only actually begins when we say those words with which Multatuli closes his prayer of an unbeliever: “O God, there is no God.” Look, I find the clergymen’s God as dead as a doornail. But does that make me an atheist? The clergymen think me one—be that as it may—but look, I love, and how could I feel love if I myself weren’t alive and others weren’t alive? And if we live, there’s something wondrous about it. Call it God or human nature or what you will, but there’s a certain something that I can’t define in a system, even though it’s very much alive and real, and you see, for me it’s God or just as good as God. [193]

Etten, on or about Friday, 23 December 1881.

_To Theo van Gogh_

(8) It wasn’t straightaway but still quickly enough that I felt that love _die_, to be replaced by a void, an infinite void. Now, as you know, I believe in God, I did not doubt the power of love. But then I felt something like, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? And nothing made sense any more. I thought, have I deluded myself? ……… O God, there is no God! [228]

The Hague, on or about Tuesday, 16 May 1882.

_To Theo van Gogh_
(9) My intention with these two and with the first old man is one and the same, namely to express the special mood of Christmas and New Year. At that time, in both Holland and in England, there’s still always a religious element, everywhere in fact, at least in Brittany and Alsace too. Leaving aside whether or not one agrees with the form, it’s something one respects if it’s sincere, and for my part I can fully share in it and even feel a need for it, at least in the sense that, just as much as an old man of that kind, I have a feeling of belief in something on high even if I don’t know exactly who or what will be there. I like what Victor Hugo said: religions pass, but God remains. [294]

The Hague, between about Wednesday, 13 December, and about Monday, 18 December 1882.

To Theo van Gogh

(10) And should we be unable to use other arguments entirely to refute those that society customarily invokes against letting oneself be led by feeling and against acting impulsively—refuting isn’t the point, and he who has retained a belief in a God sometimes hears the gentle voice of conscience, which he would then be well advised to follow with the naïveté of a child. Without talking about it to the outside world more than one can help. [300]

The Hague, on or about Wednesday, 10 January 1883.

To Theo van Gogh

(11) At Christmas I had a rather violent argument with Pa, and feelings ran so high that Pa said it would be better if I left home. Well, it was said so decidedly that I actually left the same day.

Things actually came to a head because I didn’t go to church, and also said that if going to church was something forced and I had to go to church, I’d most certainly never go again, not even out of politeness, as I’ve been doing fairly
regularly the whole time I’ve been in Etten. But oh, there’s actually much more to it, including the whole story of what happened this summer between me and K.V.

I was angrier than I ever remember being in my whole life, and I told Pa plainly that I found the whole system of that religion loathsome, and precisely because I dwelled on those things too much during a miserable time in my life I don’t want anything more to do with it, and have to guard against it as against something fatal. [194]

The Hague, Thursday, 29 December 1881.

To Theo van Gogh

But perhaps you didn’t even know that theology has a resignation system with a side branch of mortification. And if this were but a matter that existed only in the imagination and in the writings and sermons of theologians, then I wouldn’t bother about it, but sadly it’s one of those burdens grievous to be borne which certain theologians place around people’s necks and do not touch with one of their fingers, so unfortunately such resignation belongs to the sphere of reality and causes many large and petty miseries of human life. But when they wanted to strap that yoke to me I said: go to hell! And they found that very disrespectful. Well then, so be it. No matter what the raison d’être of resignation, it, namely resignation, is for those who can resign themselves and faith for those who can believe. And what else can I do if I wasn’t born for the first, namely resignation, but for the second, namely faith and all it entails? [188]

Etten, Monday, 21 November 1881.

To Anthon van Rappard

Ministers are in fact among the wickedest people in society, and barren materialists. Not in the pulpit so much, but in private matters. [348]

The Hague, Sunday, 3 June 1883. To Theo van Gogh
(14) Well, one sees the same thing in Jesus too, who began as an ordinary labourer and worked his way up to be something else, whatever it may have been, a personality so full of compassion, love, goodness, seriousness, that one is still drawn to it. In many cases a carpenter’s boy becomes a carpenter’s boss, small-minded, dry, mean, vain, and whatever one thinks of Jesus his approach to things was different from my friend the carpenter’s from the yard behind here, who has worked his way up to become a slum landlord and is a lot more complacent and much more preoccupied with himself than Jesus. [368]

The Hague, on or about Friday, 27 July 1883.

To Theo van Gogh

(15) But what sort of a position is it, then, and what sort of a religion is it that these respectable people subscribe to? Oh, they’re simply absurd things and they make society into a sort of madhouse, into an upside-down, wrong world. [456]

Nuenen, on or about Tuesday, 16 September 1884.

To Theo van Gogh

(16) Oh—I’m no friend of present-day Christianity, even though the founder was sublime—I’ve seen through present-day Christianity only too well. It mesmerized me, that icy coldness in my youth—but I’ve had my revenge since then. How? By worshipping the love that they—the theologians—call sin, by respecting a whore etc., and not many would-be respectable, religious ladies. [464]

Nuenen, Thursday, 2 October 1884. To Theo van Gogh

(17) Our goal, first and foremost, is to reform ourselves through craft and contact with nature, believing that it’s our duty first and foremost, precisely so that we can remain straight with other people, and consistent.
Our goal is “walking with God”—as against living amid the affairs of the big cities.

We’ll do no one any harm by it. [401]

Nieuw-Amsterdam, on or about Wednesday,
31 October 1883. To Theo van Gogh

(18) Look here, brother, even if our mind is sometimes occupied by the question is there a God or does He not exist, this is no reason for us deliberately to commit a godless act, is it? [405]

Nieuw-Amsterdam, Sunday, 11 November 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

(19) [. . .] I feel uneasy about assuming for my own use or recommending to others for theirs the belief that powers above us intervene personally to help us or to comfort us. Providence is such a strange thing, and I tell you that I definitely don’t know what to make of it. [574]

Paris, late October 1887. To Willemien van Gogh

(20) I’m thinking more and more that we shouldn’t judge the Good Lord by this world, because it’s one of his studies that turned out badly. But what of it, in failed studies—when you’re really fond of the artist—you don’t find much to criticize—you keep quiet. But we’re within our rights to ask for something better. We’d have to see other works by the same hand though. This world was clearly cobbled together in haste, in one of those bad moments when its author no longer knew what he was doing, and didn’t have his wits about him. What legend tells us about the Good Lord is that he went to enormous trouble over this study of his for a world. I’m inclined to believe that the legend tells the truth, but then the study is worked to death in several ways. It’s only the great masters who make such mistakes; that’s perhaps the best consolation, as we’re then within our rights to hope to see revenge taken by the same creative hand. And—then—this life—criticized so much
and for such good, even excellent reasons—we—shouldn’t take it for anything other than it is, and we’ll be left with the hope of seeing better than that in another life. [613]

Arles, Saturday, 26 May 1888. To Theo van Gogh

(21) In life and in painting too, I can easily do without the dear Lord, but I can’t, suffering as I do, do without something greater than myself, which is my life, the power to create. And if frustrated in this power physically, we try to create thoughts instead of children; in that way, we’re part of humanity all the same. And in a painting I’d like to say something consoling, like a piece of music. I’d like to paint men or women with that je ne sais quoi of the eternal, of which the halo used to be the symbol, and which we try to achieve through the radiance itself, through the vibrancy of our colorations. [673]

Arles, Monday, 3 September 1888. To Theo van Gogh

(22) It seems that in the book Ma religion, Tolstoy suggests that whatever may occur in the way of a violent revolution, there will also be a private, secret revolution in people, from which a new religion, or rather, 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]

Arles, Sunday, 23 September, or Monday, 24 September 1888. To Theo van Gogh

(23) And what is it to us if there is or isn’t a resurrection, when we see a living man rise up immediately in a dead man’s place? Taking up the same cause, carrying on the same work, living the same life, dying the same death. [670]

Arles, on or about Saturday, 26 August 1888.

To Willemien Van Gogh
(24) And it does me good to do what’s difficult. That doesn’t stop me having a tremendous need for, shall I say the word—for religion—so I go outside at night to paint the stars. [691]

Arles, on or about Saturday, 29 September 1888.

To Theo van Gogh

(25) Victor Hugo says, God is a lighthouse whose beam flashes on and off, and so now, of course, we’re passing through that darkness.

My only wish is that they could manage to prove something that would be calming to us, that would console us so that we’d cease to feel guilty or unhappy, and that just as we are we could proceed without getting lost in loneliness or nothingness, and without having at each step to fear or nervously calculate the harm which, without wishing to, we might cause others. [691]

Arles, on or about Saturday, 29 September 1888.

To Theo van Gogh

(26) And I insist on repeating it—I’m astonished that with the modern ideas I have, I being such an ardent admirer of Zola, of De Goncourt and of artistic things which I feel so much, I have crises like a superstitious person would have, and that mixed-up, atrocious religious ideas come to me such as I never had in my head in the north.

On the assumption that, very sensitive to surroundings, the already prolonged stay in these old cloisters which are the Arles hospital and the home here would be sufficient in itself to explain these crises—then—even as a stopgap—it might be necessary to go into a lay asylum at present. [805]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, on or about Friday, 20 September 1889. To Theo van Gogh
(27) Christ—alone—among all the philosophers, magicians, &c. declared eternal life—the endlessness of time, the non-existence of death—to be the principal certainty. The necessity and the raison d’être of serenity and devotion.

Lived serenely as an artist greater than all artists—disingnoring marble and clay and paint—working in living flesh. I.e.—this extraordinary artist, hardly conceivable with the obtuse instrument of our nervous and stupefied modern brains, made neither statues nor paintings nor even books...... he states it loud and clear .. he made .. living men, immortals.

That’s serious, you know, especially because it’s the truth. [632]

Arles, Tuesday, 26 June 1888. To Émile Bernard

(28) I tell myself that you may perhaps—be surprised to see how little I love the Bible myself, which I’ve nevertheless often tried to study a little—there is only this kernel, Christ—who, from the point of view of art, seems superior to me—at any rate something other—than Greek, Indian, Egyptian, Persian antiquity, which went so far. Now I say it again—this Christ is more of an artist than the artists—he works in living spirit and flesh, he makes men instead of statues, so ...... as a painter I feel good being an ox .... and I admire the bull, the eagle, the man, with a veneration—which—will prevent my being a man of ambition. [633]

Arles, Wednesday, 27 June 1888. To Émile Bernard

Morality

Van Gogh was highly sensitive to the exploitation and oppression of poor and marginalized people, and when he could no longer subscribe to his parents’ religion, he came to feel that “God wants
the world to be reformed by reforming morals” (187/1:321). Thus, the centre of gravity clearly shifted from religion to morality, which became for Van Gogh (as it would remain) the arbiter of acceptable religious belief. Thus, his main accusation against his father was not that he subscribed to a false religion but that he had wrongly understood Christ’s central moral teaching about love.

As Van Gogh’s moral idealism moved into the foreground, he looked to art, and specifically to drawing, as a means of publicizing the hard truths about the difficult lives of many working people. Throughout his Dutch years, a social gospel of art holds strongly at the centre of his correspondence, yielding gradually to a new understanding of the autonomy of art, which in turn reflects his developing, and then all-consuming, interest in colour.

I divide the following excerpts into two sections. The first deals with letters written before the beginning of 1886, when Van Gogh left Antwerp to stay with his brother in Paris. The main moral concern in these letters is with the working poor; in this context, Van Gogh expresses indignation at the obtuseness of the art establishment, including dealers who fail to see the significance of a new kind of art that not only depicts the poor but is also produced for them. Yet, at the same time as Van Gogh takes these firm moral positions, he acknowledges that morality does not reduce to clear distinctions between good and evil, right and wrong. Rather, it requires the kind of passionate but nuanced discernment that, in his view, is also required by art.

The second section deals with the letters written after Van Gogh went to Arles in 1888. Several motifs pertaining to morality carry over from the earlier letters, but the emphasis on social reform now shifts to reforming the art business, in which Van Gogh had taken a renewed interest as he developed plans with Theo to promote the Impressionists. Nonetheless, Vincent goes on complaining about the fickleness of public taste and the
high personal costs that artists pay in pursuing their careers. The marginalized workers are now replaced by marginalized artists, and, in Van Gogh’s own case, by an artist who is also a suffering outcast, confined to an asylum because of a serious mental illness. And so, for Van Gogh, the integrity of the artist’s vocation itself becomes a moral matter, even though he insists on the further moral truth that art is not a substitute for life.

Van Gogh’s passionate concern about suffering and deprivation is frequently declared in a forthright manner (1–3). In the Borinage, moral reform became of utmost importance to him, and he felt, in particular, that men should free women from the “terrible prejudices” by which they are confined and that every woman should be “a free, modern soul” (4). In this context, it is worth noting that Van Gogh had a special sympathy for prostitutes. He saw such women as the scapegoats of a hypocritical morality, and he felt that their often difficult lives gave them an authenticity for which he had a great deal of fellow-feeling (5–7). His concern for both the confined bourgeois wives and the marginalized prostitutes—as well as, for instance, a vulnerable little girl in a stable, shedding tears of compassion for a cow in painful labour (8)—is one aspect of Van Gogh’s enduring defiance of those who exercise social control by way of oppressive conventions and a willful neglect of compassion.

And so, when Van Gogh dedicated himself as an artist to depicting the lives of poor people, he was driven by a moral concern that combined compassion and defiance (9–11) in order to protest against the triumph of materialism over genuine human relationships (12). He was convinced also that strength lay in solidarity (13) and that the production of an art “of the people and for the people” (291/2:215) would promote the moral reforms he sought.
Still, Van Gogh distinguished between true morality and conventional moralizing, and a clearcut separation between right and wrong seemed to him often merely a means for confirming the comfortable certainties of a self-righteous majority. Although he himself sometimes took clear, uncompromising positions—as in opposing death sentences (14)—he did so on the grounds that what he opposed was radically life-denying and therefore an offense against what he liked to call the “eternal yea” (358/2:365). But on most matters of practical morality, he was convinced that things aren’t so clear (15–17). For instance, art dealers, who often do understand the human value of art, are frequently too much driven by the allure of profit (18, 19). The poor state of public taste (20) also results partly from an exploitation by dealers who “flatter the public in its worst and most barbaric” inclinations (21). The ironic fact that dealers are thought respectable and artists disreputable mirrors Van Gogh’s view of prostitutes in relation to the norms of bourgeois society (22). Still, he realized that artists are also often insufficiently supportive of one another (23), and in this regard, he calls for co-operation (24) and warns against the dangers of self-righteousness (25).

First and last, Van Gogh’s moral understanding was informed by compassion driven by indignation, about which he often writes touchingly (26, 27). Whether in drawing, painting, or writing, he attempted to express this combination of energies in a manner that people would find “consoling,” as he liked to say.

1. There’s something in Paris, though, that’s more beautiful than the autumn and the churches, and that is the poor people there. [92]
Isleworth, Tuesday, 3 October 1876. To Theo van Gogh

2. If one roams the streets there [Theo’s neighbourhood in Paris], whether in the morning or evening, or walks in the
direction of Montmartre, one is struck by many workshops and many rooms that recall “a cooper” or The seamstresses or other paintings by E. Frère, and it does one good sometimes to see such things, which are simple, as one occasionally sees a good many people who for various reasons have strayed a long way from everything that is natural, thereby throwing away their true and inner lives, and also many who are rooted in misery and loathsome things, because in the evening and at night one sees all manner of those dark figures walking about, both men and women, who personify, as it were, the terror of the night, and whose misery must be classified among the things that have no name in any language. [144]

Amsterdam, Monday, 13 May 1878. To Theo van Gogh

(3) And more and more I find something touching and even heart-rending in these poor and obscure workers, the lowest of all, so to speak, and the most looked down upon, which one usually pictures through the effect of a perhaps vivid but very false and unjust imagination as a race of criminals and brigands. [158]

Cuesmes, Friday, 24 September 1880. To Theo van Gogh

(4) The men and women who may be considered to stand at the forefront of modern civilization, for instance, Michelet and Beecher Stowe, Carlyle and George Eliot, and how many others, they call to us, “O man, whoever you are, who has a heart in his body, help us to establish something real, something enduring, something true, concentrate on one occupation and love one woman.

Let your occupation be a modern one, and create in your wife a free, modern soul, free her of the terrible prejudices that restrain her. Do not doubt the help of God if you do what God wants you to do, and in this day and age God wants the
world to be reformed by reforming morals, by renewing the light and the fire of eternal love.

By such means you will succeed, and you will also exert a good influence in your sphere, smaller or larger depending on your circumstances.” [187]

Etten, Saturday, 19 November 1881. To Theo van Gogh

(5) When I think of K.V., I still say “she and no other,” and I think exactly the same as I did last summer about “meanwhile looking for another lass.” But it’s not only recently that I’ve grown fond of those women who are condemned and despised and cursed by clergymen, my love for them is even somewhat older than my love for Kee Vos. Whenever I walked down the street—often all alone and at loose ends, half sick and destitute, with no money in my pocket—I looked at them and envied the people who could go off with her, and I felt as though those poor girls were my sisters, as far as our circumstances and experience of life were concerned. And, you see, that feeling is old and deeply rooted in me. Even as a boy I sometimes looked up with endless sympathy and respect into a half-withered female face on which it was written, as it were: life and reality have given me a drubbing. [193]

Etten, on or about Friday, 23 December 1881.

To Theo van Gogh

(6) Being exiled, a social outcast, as artists like you and I surely are, “outcasts” too, she [the prostitute] is surely therefore our friend and sister. And finding—in this position—of outcast—the same as us—an independence that isn’t without its advantages—all things considered—let’s not adopt a false position by believing we’re serving her through social rehabilitation, which is in any case impractical and would be fatal for her. [655]

Arles, on or about Sunday, 5 August 1888.

To Émile Bernard
[7] I too, not to mince words, think whores are bad, but I nevertheless feel something human in them that means I don’t have the slightest scruple about consorting with them, I see nothing particularly evil in them, I haven’t the slightest remorse about the acquaintance I have or have had with them. If our society were a pure and ordered one, oh yes, then they were temptresses, now—many times it seems to me they should be regarded more as sisters of charity than anything else. [388]

Hoogeveen, on or about Friday, 21 September 1883.

To Theo van Gogh

[8] There was a girl there, at night in that stable—in the Borinage—a brown peasant face with a white night-cap among other things, she had tears in her eyes of compassion for the poor cow when the animal went into labour and was having great difficulty. It was pure, holy, wonderfully beautiful like a Correggio, like a Millet, like an Israëls. [211]

The Hague, Saturday, 11 March 1882. To Theo van Gogh

[9] Do I lower myself by living with the people I draw, do I lower myself by frequenting the houses of workers and poor people or by receiving them in my studio? It seems to me that my profession involves that, and only those who understand nothing of painting or drawing are entitled to find fault with it. [220]

The Hague, on or about Sunday, 23 April 1882. To Theo van Gogh

[10] Once I nursed a poor burnt miner for six weeks or 2 months—I shared my food with an old man a whole winter long—and I don’t know what else, and now Sien. But to this day I don’t believe that this was foolish or bad, I see it as so natural and self-evident that I can’t understand how people
can be so indifferent to each other normally. Let me add that if I did wrong, you also did wrong in helping me so loyally—
that would be wrong too, but that would surely be absurd. I’ve always believed that “love thy neighbour as thyself” isn’t an exaggeration but the normal state of affairs. But anyway. [250]
The Hague, Sunday, 23 July 1882. To Theo van Gogh

(11) You’ve received my letter in which I wrote about how, while I was working, an idea came to me for making figures from the people for the people. How it seemed to me that it would be a good thing if several individuals joined together for this purpose, not for the bookshops but out of charity and duty. [291]
The Hague, between Monday, 4 December, and Saturday, 9 December 1882. To Theo van Gogh

(12) How hard-hearted they are, how mistaken, though, if they think they can fool everyone into believing that material greatness is of equal weight as moral greatness, and that without the latter anything good can be done. [293]
The Hague, on or about Monday, 11 December 1882. To Theo van Gogh

(13) And this stands as a truth once and for all, and those who wish can always draw energy from it.
The pity of it is partly that when several people care for the same cause and work on it together, unity is strength, and united they can do more than their separate energies can, each striving in a different direction.
People strengthen each other when they work together, and an entity is formed without personality having to be blotted out by the collaboration. [305]
The Hague, Friday, 26 January, or Saturday, 27 January 1883. To Theo van Gogh
(14) Ah! You see, when I sometimes have doubts I ask myself: would you like to be a judge passing a death sentence? And always, always I have only one answer: No, once and for all I am for the abolition of statutory and other death sentences, anathemas and other capital punishments. We’re called upon to preserve life, to respect it, and that is our duty, and we can always justify that even if the world says we’re wrong or even if it doesn’t bring us good fortune. [349]

The Hague, Sunday, 3 June 1883. To Theo van Gogh

(15) If one follows one’s conscience—for me conscience is the very highest form of reason—the reason within the reason—one is tempted to think one has acted wrongly or foolishly, one gets particularly upset if more superficial people are amused by thinking they’re so much wiser and are so much better at getting where they want. Yes, then it’s sometimes difficult, and if conditions are such that the difficulties rise to a spring flood, one can be led to regret that one is as one is and wish one had been less conscientious.

I hope that you don’t picture me in any other way than as constantly waging the same inner battle, and also often having tired brains, and in many cases also being unable to decide questions of whether it would be better or worse to do this or that. [368]

The Hague, on or about Friday, 27 July 1883.

To Theo van Gogh

(16) If life were as simple and things actually worked as in the story of dutiful Hendrik or an ordinary, routine sermon by a minister, it wouldn’t be all that hard to find one’s way. But the fact is they aren’t like that, they’re infinitely more complicated, and good and evil no more occur by themselves than black and white do in nature. [368]

The Hague, on or about Friday, 27 July 1883.

To Theo van Gogh
(17) I’m increasingly coming to see that it’s so terribly difficult to know where one is right and where one is wrong. [413]

Nuenen, on or about Saturday, 15 December 1883.

To Theo van Gogh

(18) In a relatively short space of time, everything that is the art trade developed in rapport with art itself. But it became all too much a sort of bankers’ speculation and it still is—I do not say entirely— —I simply say much too much. Why, in so far as it’s a bubble company, shouldn’t it go the same way as, for instance, the tulip trade? You’ll point out to me that a painting isn’t a tulip. Of course there’s a universe of difference, and naturally I, who love paintings and tulips not at all, am very well aware of this. [409]

Nuenen, on or about Thursday, 6 December 1883.

To Theo van Gogh

(19) I put it bluntly, more strongly than before, because I believe so firmly that the large-scale art trade is, in many respects, too much like tulip mania. [527]

Nuenen, on or about Monday, 17 August 1885.

To Theo van Gogh

(20) [. . .] anyone who really wants to accomplish something good or useful should neither count on nor wish for general approbation or appreciation, but on the contrary should expect nothing other than that only a very few hearts—and even then only maybe—will sympathize and join in. [493]

Nuenen, Monday, 13 April 1885. To Theo van Gogh

(21) Pleasing, Saleable are horrible words to me. And I’ve never met a dealer who wasn’t steeped in that, and it’s a plague. Art has no greater enemies, although the managers of the big art firms have a reputation for performing a useful service by taking artists under their wing.
They don’t do it right; although matters are such that, with the public coming to them, not to the artists themselves, the artists are persuaded to resort to them—yet there’s not a single artist who doesn’t have a spoken or silent complaint against them in his heart. They flatter the public in its worst and most barbaric tendencies and bad taste. Enough. [279]

The Hague, Wednesday, 1 November 1882.
To Anthon van Rappard

(22) Of course, the rich dealers are the good, honest, genuine, loyal, sensitive characters, and we poor devils who sit there drawing, whether out of doors, on the street, or in the studio, sometimes in the early morning, sometimes deep at night, sometimes in the heat of the sun, sometimes in the snow, we’re the people without sensitivity, with no understanding of practical matters, without “manners” above all. Fine by me! [236]

The Hague, Tuesday, 6 June 1882.
To Anthon van Rappard

(23) We should help and trust each other, for there are hostilities enough in society anyway, and in general we’d do better if we did no harm to each other. Envy drives many to malign others, systematically. And what is the result?—instead of one large entity, a body of painters where unity is strength, everyone withdraws into his shell and works by himself. Those who are now cock of the walk create a kind of desert around them just because of their envy, and that’s very unfortunate for themselves, it seems to me. [307]

The Hague, on or about Sunday, 4 February 1883.
To Anthon van Rappard

(24) I don’t have the least desire for exhibitions &c. to stop, but I do desire a reform or rather renewal and strengthening of the
associations and the collaboration between painters, which would certainly have the kind of influence that would make even exhibitions beneficial. [332]

The Hague, on or about Wednesday, 21 March 1883.

To Anthon van Rappard

(25) In my view, the worst evil of all evils is self-righteousness, and eradicating it in oneself a never-ending weeding job.

All the more difficult for us Dutchmen, because so often our upbringing itself must inevitably make us become self-righteous to a very high degree. [433]

Nuenen, on or about Sunday, 2 March 1884.

To Anthon van Rappard

(26) However, I’d rather paint people’s eyes than cathedrals, for there’s something in the eyes that isn’t in the cathedral—although it’s solemn and although it’s impressive—to my mind the soul of a person, even if it’s a poor tramp or a girl from the streets, is more interesting. [549]

Antwerp, Saturday, 19 December 1885.

To Theo van Gogh

(27) I see just as clearly as the greatest optimist the lark ascending in the spring sky.

But I also see the young girl of barely 20, who could have been healthy and has contracted consumption—and perhaps will drown herself before she dies of a disease.

When one is always in respectable company and among reasonably well-to-do citizens, one may perhaps not notice it so much—but when, like me, one has been through very hard times, then it’s impossible to ignore the fact that great hardship is a factor that weighs in the balance. [562]

Antwerp, Sunday, 14 February 1886. To Theo van Gogh
In Arles, Van Gogh continued to lament the poor state of public taste (28) and to regret a widespread indifference among the public to the difficulties painters encounter (29). He responded partly by attempting to stand above the fray, and he did so by adopting two interlinked strategies. The first was to declare his indifference to success or failure (30, 31). The second was to remind himself that there are more important things than being a successful artist—such as loving other people (32). In short, art is not “real life,” however grateful Van Gogh himself remained for being able to pursue a career in it (33, 34). He commends humility because pride intoxicates; it is better, then, to work at home without praise (35), remembering that good and bad are relative (36) and that self-knowledge is limited (37).

In Arles and St. Rémy, Van Gogh’s moral concerns were directed increasingly towards the plight of the artist, though he also felt a special camaraderie with the unfortunate inmates at St. Rémy (38). Still, he nowhere depicted the inmates in painting or drawing. Instead, his own struggle to survive as an artist became a central concern, although he found some reassurance in the conviction that painters were often neglected during their lifetime and that, for his own part, he did not crave fame and reputation. After all, he tells Willemien, it is best to attain serenity without bitterness (39) and to accept the cost of the choices he has made (40).

(28) [. . .] the public will never change and only likes soft and smooth things. With a more austere talent, you can’t depend on the product of your labours. [660]

Arles, on or about Monday, 13 August 1888.

To Theo van Gogh
(29) Myself, I only have the choice between being a good painter or a bad one. I choose the former. But the things needed for painting are like those of a ruinous mistress; you can do nothing without money, and you never have enough of it.

And so painting should be done at society’s expense, and the artist shouldn’t be overburdened by it.

But there you are, we should keep quiet once again, because nobody is forcing us to work, indifference towards painting being, inevitably, fairly general, fairly eternal. [663]

Arles, Saturday, 18 August 1888. To Theo van Gogh

(30) But for ourselves let’s keep a total indifference regarding success or failure. [660]

Arles, on or about Monday, 13 August 1888.

To Theo van Gogh

(31) When I heard that my work was having some success and read that article I was immediately afraid that I’d regret it—it’s almost always the case that success is the worst thing that can happen in a painter’s life. [864]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Tuesday, 29 April 1890.

To Anna van Gogh-Carbentus and Willemien van Gogh

(32) You’re kind to painters, and be sure that the more I think about it the more I feel that there’s nothing more genuinely artistic than to love people. You’ll say to me that then we’d do well to do without art and artists. That’s true on the face of it, but after all, the Greeks and the French and the old Dutchmen accepted art, and we see art always recover after inevitable periods of decline—and I don’t believe that we’d be more virtuous for this reason, that we had a horror of artists and their art. [682]

Arles, Tuesday, 18 December 1888. To Theo van Gogh
(33) But with my temperament, to lead a wild life and to work are no longer compatible at all, and in the given circumstances I’ll have to content myself with making paintings. That’s not happiness and not real life, but what can you say, even this artistic life, which we know isn’t the real one, seems so alive to me, and it would be ungrateful not to be content with it. [602]

Arles, Tuesday, 1 May 1888. To Theo van Gogh

(34) But during the harvest my work has been no easier than that of the farmers themselves who do this harvesting. Far from my complaining about it, it’s precisely at these moments in artistic life, even if it’s not the real one, that I feel almost as happy as I could be in the ideal, the real life. [635]

Arles, on or about Sunday, 1 July 1888.

To Theo van Gogh

(35) And pride intoxicates like drink, when one is praised and has drunk one becomes sad, or anyway I don’t know how to say how I feel it, but it seems to me that the best work one could do would be that carried out in the family home without self-praise. [856]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Wednesday, 19 February 1890. To Willemien van Gogh

(36) Anyway, let’s not think too deeply about good and bad, that always being very relative. [707]

Arles, Wednesday, 17 October 1888. To Theo van Gogh

(37) Speaking of self-knowledge—who has it? Here again “the knowledge—no one has it.” Some knowledge—concerning oneself, concerning one’s own bad or good tendencies, everyone—and I begin with myself—is certainly in the utmost need of it. But—don’t think that you never deceive yourself for lack of it—don’t think that you never hurt others cruelly and undeservedly with superficial judgements.
I know—everyone does that—and people have to manage to get on together all the same. [516]

Nuenen, on or about Wednesday, 15 July 1885.
To Anthon van Rappard

(38) Although there are a few people here who are seriously ill, the fear, the horror that I had of madness before has already been greatly softened.

And although one continually hears shouts and terrible howls as though of the animals in a menagerie, despite this the people here know each other very well, and help each other when they suffer crises. They all come to see when I’m working in the garden, and I can assure you are more discreet and more polite to leave me in peace than, for example, the good citizens of Arles. [772]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Thursday, 9 May 1889.
To Theo and Jo van Gogh-Bonger

(39) I don’t want to be one of the melancholics or those who become sour and bitter and morbid. To understand all is to forgive all, and I believe that if we knew everything we’d arrive at a certain serenity. Now having this serenity as much as possible, even when one knows—little—nothing—for certain, is perhaps a better remedy against all ills than what’s sold in the chemist’s. [574]

Paris, late October 1887. To Willemien van Gogh

(40) I detest writing about myself and I don’t know why I do it. Perhaps to give you answers to your questions. You see what I’ve found, my work, and you also see what I haven’t found, everything else that’s part of life. [626]

Arles, between Saturday, 16 June, and Wednesday, 20 June 1888. To Willemien van Gogh
Art

From the time of his first job working at Goupil and Cie in The Hague (1869–73), Van Gogh maintained a passionate interest in painting and drawing. He quickly acquired an encyclopedic knowledge of Goupil’s holdings, which he later expanded when he was transferred to London and Paris. In both cities, he visited museums, and in London, he took an interest in socially engaged illustrated magazines such as The Graphic and The London Illustrated News. Art, therefore, was important to Van Gogh well before he decided to become an artist himself.

During his religious phase, Van Gogh felt that art could serve the purposes of religion—that art had its own kind of sacredness. Still, he was concerned not to allow his interest in art to usurp his dedication to becoming an evangelist. In a letter to Theo from Laken in 1878, he explains that making a sketch has caused him concern because it will “keep me from my real work” (148/1:233).

Art also had a strong moral dimension for Van Gogh, not least because it could be used effectively to record the condition of marginalized people. As we have seen in the previous section, when he decided to become an artist (1880–81), Van Gogh focused on the working poor and committed himself to learning to draw well enough to be able to publish his depictions of their lives in illustrated magazines. To this end, he sought not only to master the technical aspects of drawing but also to produce drawings that would be expressive of his own moral concerns. The rigour of his apprenticeship as a draughtsman is thus accompanied by a conviction that the most successful drawings and paintings do not depend on technique alone, however difficult it is to acquire technique as a necessary foundation.

When Van Gogh found, to his surprise (257/2:135), that he had a special aptitude for painting, he gradually came to see how the means of expression in a work of art contributes to its aesthetic...
effect. In Nuenen, he discovered how complementary and contrasting colours have, in themselves, an emotional impact on a viewer. These ideas about expressive technique and colour enabled the full emergence of Van Gogh’s ideology of the aesthetic, which subsumes within itself a quasi-religious sense of the sacred as well as a conscientious moral understanding. The internal dynamics of a work of art, rather than its illustrative aspects, are in themselves acknowledged as a source of power, and personal style is the bearer of the work’s most enduring meaning and significance.

As anxiety and illness took hold of Van Gogh during the last year of his life, he became increasingly aware that the aesthetic in itself does not meet all our human needs. Rather, the personal is fundamentally shaped and sustained by actual direct engagement with others.

From his earliest letters, Van Gogh connects art to the sacred (1, 2). But he maintains also that art should be rooted in nature, even though art takes us beyond nature (3, 4) by expressing something within the artist that, in turn, participates in the transcendent mystery by which we are brought into existence within nature in the first place. By such means, art seeks to discover the human “soul” (5). In the years after he left the Borinage, Van Gogh explored these ideas repeatedly. He acknowledged that he had learned by difficult experience that although beauty comes from within the artist (6), it is found only by having “slaved away” (7) in order to achieve a refinement of technique that captures the essential lines in a drawing and the hidden harmonies of colour in a painting (8, 9). Art thus becomes a vehicle for “something on high,” as he says (10), and he explains to Anthon van Rappard that painting takes him beyond the appearances of things, however disconcerting this might be for viewers who don’t understand
how art works (11–13). Yet in the end, the aim of art is to be pleasing and thought provoking and to be a sincere expression of real feelings (14, 15).

Van Gogh does not hesitate to express gratitude for having found his life’s work as a painter (16), even though people might not recognize its merits straightaway (17). As always, he insists on the importance of foundational study and on the insufficiency of spontaneity or “instinct” alone in producing a painting (18). In Nuenen, when he discovered the laws of complementary and contrasting colours, he took a step beyond his earlier conviction that the aim of art is to express “honest human feeling” (15). This further step followed upon his growing understanding of how the internal dynamics of a painting communicate independently of the artist’s sincerity and good intentions.

(1) Yes, that painting by Millet “The evening angelus,” “that’s it.” That’s rich, that’s poetry. How I’d like to talk to you about art again, but now we can only write to each other about it often; find things beautiful as much as you can, most people find too little beautiful. [17]

London, beginning of January 1874. To Theo van Gogh

(2) I don’t know whether I’ve already written to you about it. When I entered the room in Hôtel Drouot where they were exhibited, I felt something akin to: Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground. [36]

Paris, Tuesday, 29 June 1875. To Theo van Gogh

(3) I know no better definition of the word Art than this, “Art is man added to nature,” nature, reality, truth, but with a meaning, with an interpretation, with a character that the artist brings out and to which he gives expression, which he sets free, which he unravels, releases, elucidates.
A painting by Mauve or Maris or Israëls speaks more and more clearly than nature itself. [152]  
Wasmes, on or about Thursday, 19 June 1879.  
To Theo van Gogh

(4) The dramatic effect of these paintings is something that helps us to understand “a corner of nature seen through a temperament” and that helps us understand that the principle of “man added to nature” is needed more than anything else in art, and one finds the same thing in Rembrandt’s portraits, for example—it’s more than nature, more like a revelation. And it seems good to me to respect that, and to keep quiet when it’s often said that it’s overdone or a manner. [361]  
The Hague, on or about Wednesday, 11 July 1883.  
To Theo van Gogh

(5) C.M. asked me if I didn’t find the Phryné by Gérôme beautiful, and I said I would much rather see an ugly woman by Israëls or Millet or a little old woman by E. Frère, for what does a beautiful body such as Phryné’s really matter? Animals have that too, perhaps more so than people, but animals don’t have a soul like the one that animates the people painted by Israëls or Millet or Frère, and hasn’t life been given to us to become rich in our hearts, even if our appearance suffers from it? I feel very little sympathy for that statue after Gérôme, for I see not one sign of reason in it, and a couple of hands that bear the signs of work are more beautiful than such as are seen on that statue. [139]  
Amsterdam, Wednesday, 9 January, and Thursday, 10 January 1878. To Theo van Gogh

(6) [. . .] I want the fine appearance to come from me and not from my material. [222]  
The Hague, Monday, 1 May 1882. To Theo van Gogh
(7) When I hear Tersteeg talking about agreeableness and saleability I can only think: work one has slaved away at and done one’s best to imbue with character and sentiment can be neither disagreeable nor unsaleable. And perhaps it’s better that one doesn’t immediately please everyone. [215]

The Hague, on or about Thursday, 6 April 1882.

To Theo van Gogh

(8) A little drawing like the enclosed is simple enough in line, but it’s difficult enough to capture those simple, characteristic lines when one is sitting in front of the model. Those lines are now so simple that one can outline them with the pen, but I repeat, the problem is finding those broad outlines, so that one can say what’s essential with a couple of strokes or scratches. Choosing the lines in such a way that it’s obvious, as it were, that they must run thus, that’s something that isn’t obvious, however. [215]

The Hague, on or about Thursday, 6 April 1882.

To Theo van Gogh

(9) There’s something infinite about painting—I can’t quite explain—but especially for expressing a mood, it’s a joy. In the colours there are hidden harmonies or contrasts which contribute of their own accord, and which if left unused are of no benefit. [259]

The Hague, Saturday, 26 August 1882.

To Theo van Gogh

(10) It seems to me that a painter has a duty to try to put an idea into his work. I was trying to say this in this print—but I can’t say it as beautifully, as strikingly as reality, of which this is only a dim reflection seen in a dark mirror—that it seems to me that one of the strongest pieces of evidence for the existence of “something on high” in which Millet
believed, namely in the existence of a God and an eternity, is the unutterably moving quality that there can be in the expression of an old man like that, without his being aware of it perhaps, as he sits so quietly in the corner of his hearth. At the same time something precious, something noble, that can’t be meant for the worms. [288]

The Hague, Sunday, 26 November, and Monday, 27 November 1882. To Theo van Gogh

(11) Once I feel—know—a subject, then I usually make it in 3 or more variations, whether it’s a figure or a landscape, but—every time I always involve reality for each one. And I even do my best not to give any details THEN—because then the reverie goes out of it. If Tersteeg and my brother &c. then say: so what’s that, grass or cabbages?—I say: glad YOU can’t make it out. [437]

Nuenen, on or about Thursday, 13 March 1884.
To Anthon van Rappard

(12) But for my part, I intend to tell people consistently that I can’t paint, even when I’ve mastered my brush much better than now. You understand?—especially then, when I really will have an individual manner, more finished and even more concise than now. [439]

Nuenen, on or about Tuesday, 18 March 1884.
To Anthon van Rappard

(13) What I’m saying in this letter amounts to this—let’s try to get the hang of the secrets of technique so well that people are taken in and swear by all that’s holy that we have no technique. [439]

Nuenen, on or about Tuesday, 18 March 1884.
To Anthon van Rappard
(14) I feel such a need to make something pleasing, something that makes one think. [347]

The Hague, on or about Wednesday, 30 May 1883.

To Theo van Gogh

(15) I’m concerned with the world only in that I have a certain obligation and duty, as it were—because I’ve walked the earth for 30 years—to leave a certain souvenir in the form of drawings or paintings in gratitude. Not done to please some movement or other, but in which an honest human feeling is expressed. Thus this work is the goal—and concentrating on that thought, what one does and does not do simplifies itself in that it’s not a chaos, but everything one does is one and the same aspiration. [371]

The Hague, on or about Tuesday, 7 August 1883.

To Theo van Gogh

(16) I have a certain faith in art, a certain trust that it’s a powerful current that drives a person—although he has to cooperate—to a haven, and in any case I consider it such a great happiness if a person has found his work that I don’t count myself among the unfortunate. [327]

The Hague, Sunday, 11 March 1883. To Theo van Gogh

(17) And as for how I think about selling, I wanted to say this again. I believe that the best would be if we carry on working until, instead of having to praise or explain it to art lovers or say something to go with it, they feel drawn to it of their own accord. At any rate, if it’s refused or doesn’t please, one must remain dignified and calm as far as possible. [375]

The Hague, Saturday, 18 August 1883.

To Theo van Gogh

(18) And I think moreover that colour, that chiaroscuro, that perspective, that tone, that drawing, everything in short—
certainly also have fixed laws that one must and can study like chemistry or algebra.

This is by no means the easiest view of things, and anyone who says—oh, it must all come naturally—is making light of it.

If that were enough— —But it’s not enough, because however much one knows instinctively, it’s precisely then that one must redouble one’s efforts, in my view, to get from instinct to REASON. [465]

Nuenen, Thursday, 9 October 1884. To Theo van Gogh

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One result of Van Gogh’s discovery of the colour theories of Eugène Delacroix was that the internal dynamics of the work of art became central to his thinking about painting. As he realized increasingly that colour in itself makes an impact on the viewer, he was more than ever convinced that academic correctness doesn’t answer the “urgent needs” of art (19). The arrangement of colours trumps accuracy of description (20), and Van Gogh’s palette became front and centre in descriptions of his own painterly practice. This is not to say that excellent technique doesn’t matter, as he assures Theo from Arles, in an interesting reflection on Monet (21).

In Antwerp, Van Gogh acknowledges that making art for art’s sake is sufficient motivation (22), and he describes himself as a true believer in the ideas about colour that he is now exploring (23, 24). In this context, he confirms how he looks within the work itself to discover its impact rather than to its narrative or referential elements. The aesthetic effect is now seen to be implicit in the style (25) rather than in the artist’s intent to be expressive. Colour is a powerful means of communication in itself (26, 27), and its effectiveness in a painting resides in the artist’s distinctive use of contrast and complementarity (28, 29). Later, Van Gogh states this idea repeatedly, often with specific reference to his own paintings
(30, 31). For instance, he claims that qualities such as anguish and gratitude are communicated directly through a painting rather than imparted to it by the artist’s strength of feeling, as he once maintained (32, 33).

As ever, Van Gogh continued to look to art for consolation (34, 35), which he says he has received also from the (relatively few) people who share a true feeling for painting (35). And with consolation comes serenity, on which he also placed a high value. In his final letter to Theo, he repeats his belief in the power of art to bring “calm” even “in calamity” (36).

(19) My assertion is simply this—that drawing a figure academically correctly—that an even, reasoned brushstroke have little—at least less than is generally thought—to do with the needs—the urgent needs—of the present day in the field of painting. [514]

Nuenen, on or about Monday, 13 July 1885.

To Anthon van Rappard

(20) A man’s head or a woman’s head, looked at very composedly, is divinely beautiful, isn’t it? Well then—with painfully literal imitation one loses that general effect of looking beautiful against one another that tones have in nature; one preserves it by re-creating it in a colour spectrum PARALLEL to, but not necessarily exactly, or far from the same as the subject.

Always and intelligently making use of the beautiful tones that the paints form of their own accord when one breaks them on the palette, again—starting from one’s palette—from one’s knowledge of the beautiful effect of colours, isn’t the same as copying nature mechanically and slavishly. [537]

Nuenen, on or about Wednesday, 28 October 1885.

To Theo van Gogh
(21) It’s very good that Claude Monet found a way of making these ten pictures between February and May. To work quickly isn’t to work less seriously, it depends on the confidence and experience one has. In the same way, Jules Gérard the lion-hunter says in his book that at the beginning young lions have a lot of trouble killing a horse or an ox, but old lions kill with a single well-judged strike from a claw or a tooth, and have an amazing sureness for that job. [630]

Arles, Saturday, 23 June 1888. To Theo van Gogh

(22) More and more, though, I imagine that in the end art for art’s sake—working for the sake of working—energy for energy’s sake—really becomes very important to all the good fellows. [557]

Antwerp, on or about Tuesday, 2 February 1886.

To Theo van Gogh

(23) I believe in the absolute necessity of a new art of colour, of drawing and—of the artistic life. And if we work in that faith, it seems to me that there’s a chance that our hopes won’t be in vain. [585]

Arles, on or about Friday, 16 March 1888.

To Theo van Gogh

(24) The cab we drag along must be of use to people we don’t know. But you see, if we believe in the new art, in the artists of the future, our presentiment doesn’t deceive us. When good père Corot said a few days before he died: last night I saw in my dreams landscapes with entirely pink skies, well, didn’t they come, those pink skies, and yellow and green into the bargain, in Impressionist landscapes? [611]

Arles, on or about Sunday, 20 May 1888.

To Theo van Gogh
(25) When the thing depicted is stylistically absolutely in agreement and at one with the manner of depiction, isn’t that what creates the quality of a piece of art? [779]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Sunday, 9 June 1889.

To Theo van Gogh

(26) What a mistake that Parisians haven’t acquired sufficient taste for rough things, for Monticellis, for barbotine. Well, I know that one shouldn’t be discouraged because utopia isn’t coming about. It’s just that I find that what I learned in Paris is fading, and that I’m returning to my ideas that came to me in the country before I knew the Impressionists. And I wouldn’t be very surprised if the Impressionists were soon to find fault with my way of doing things, which was fertilized more by the ideas of Delacroix than by theirs.

Because instead of trying to render exactly what I have before my eyes, I use colour more arbitrarily in order to express myself forcefully. [663]

Arles, Saturday, 18 August 1888. To Theo van Gogh

(27) I definitely want to paint a starry sky now. It often seems to me that the night is even more richly coloured than the day, coloured in the most intense violets, blues and greens.

If you look carefully you’ll see that some stars are lemony, others have a pink, green, forget-me-not blue glow. And without labouring the point, it’s clear that to paint a starry sky it’s not nearly enough to put white spots on blue-black. [678]

Arles, Sunday, 9 September, and about Friday, 14 September 1888. To Theo van Gogh

(28) There you have basics that one can subdivide further, can elaborate, but enough to show you without a painting that
there are colours that make each other shine, that make a couple, complete each other like man and wife. [626]

Arles, between Saturday, 16 June, and Wednesday, 20 June 1888. To Willemien van Gogh

(29) So I’m still between two currents of ideas, the first, material difficulties, turning this way and that to build up an existence, and then the study of colour. I still have hopes of finding something there. To express the love of two lovers through a marriage of two complementary colours, their mixture and their contrasts, the mysterious vibrations of adjacent tones. To express the thought of a forehead through the radiance of a light tone on a dark background. To express hope through some star. The ardour of a living being through the rays of a setting sun. That’s certainly not trompe-l’œil realism, but isn’t it something that really exists? [673]

Arles, Monday, 3 September 1888. To Theo van Gogh

(30) In my painting of the night café I’ve tried to express the idea that the café is a place where you can ruin yourself, go mad, commit crimes. Anyway, I tried with contrasts of delicate pink and blood-red and wine-red. Soft Louis XV and Veronese green contrasting with yellow greens and hard blue greens. All of that in an ambience of a hellish furnace, in pale sulphur.

To express something of the power of the dark corners of a grog-shop. [677]

Arles, Sunday, 9 September 1888. To Theo van Gogh

(31) This time it’s simply my bedroom, but the colour has to do the job here, and through its being simplified by giving a grander style to things, to be suggestive here of rest or of sleep in
general. In short, looking at the painting should rest the mind, or rather, the imagination. [705]

Arles, Tuesday, 16 October 1888. To Theo van Gogh

(32) Thinking like this, but very far off, the desire comes over me to remake myself and try to have myself forgiven for the fact that my paintings are, however, almost a cry of anguish while symbolizing gratitude in the rustic sunflower. [856]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Wednesday, 19 February 1890. To Willemien van Gogh

(33) You’ll understand that this combination of red ochre, of green saddened with grey, of black lines that define the outlines, this gives rise a little to the feeling of anxiety from which some of my companions in misfortune often suffer, and which is called “seeing red.” And what’s more, the motif of the great tree struck by lightning, the sickly green and pink smile of the last flower of autumn, confirms this idea. Another canvas depicts a sun rising over a field of new wheat. Receding lines of the furrows run high up on the canvas, towards a wall and a range of lilac hills. The field is violet and green-yellow. The white sun is surrounded by a large yellow aureole. In it, in contrast to the other canvas, I have tried to express calm, a great peace.

I’m speaking to you of these two canvases, and especially the first, to remind you that in order to give an impression of anxiety, you can try to do it without heading straight for the historical garden of Gethsemane; in order to offer a consoling and gentle subject it isn’t necessary to depict the figures from the Sermon on the Mount. [822]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, on or about Tuesday, 26 November 1889. To Émile Bernard

(34) Gauguin, Bernard or I will all remain there perhaps, and won’t overcome but neither will we be overcome. We’re
perhaps not there for one thing or the other, being there to console or to prepare for more consolatory painting. [782]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, on or about Tuesday, 18 June 1889. To Theo van Gogh

(35) [. . .] it consoles painters a little to be able to imagine that really there are souls who have a feeling for paintings. [804]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Thursday, 19 September 1889. To Willemien van Gogh

(36) Ah well, really we can only make our paintings speak.

But however, my dear brother, there’s this that I’ve always told you, and I tell you again once more with all the gravity that can be imparted by the efforts of thought assiduously fixed on trying to do as well as one can—I tell you again that I’ll always consider that you’re something other than a simple dealer in Corots, that through my intermediacy you have your part in the very production of certain canvases, which even in calamity retain their calm. [RM25]

Auvers-sur-Oise, Wednesday, 23 July 1890.

To Theo van Gogh