Van Gogh was a voracious reader. According to Wouter van der Veen, his correspondence refers to at least 150 authors and eight hundred works of literature. “Books and reality and art are the same kind of thing for me” (312/2:268), Vincent writes to Theo in 1883, and he reflects often on the similarities between books and paintings, and on how the same creative process is shared by both.

In his period of religious enthusiasm, Van Gogh read religious writers such as Bunyan, Thomas à Kempis, and Fenelon, as well as the Bible, which he cites frequently and at length. But his references to these books disappear after his break with orthodox Christianity. Instead, he turned to the great nineteenth-century novelists, especially those whose work showed a high degree of social engagement. Among others, he was an enthusiastic reader of Dickens, Eliot, Balzac, Hugo, and Zola. Shakespeare was also an enduring favourite.

After his move to Paris in 1886, Van Gogh’s tastes moved towards lighter reading as he ceased to wrestle with the major ideological conflicts that had shaped his earlier career. He now preferred the likes of Verne, Loti, Voltaire, and Daudet, but in St. Rémy, he returned to his old favourites, especially Dickens and Shakespeare.
The close links that Van Gogh felt between writing and painting—the “sister arts,” as they were called—help to explain the strong tendency to vivid pictorialism throughout his letters. The idea that the “sister arts” shared the same goal was widespread in the nineteenth century and was reflected in the convention of so-called word-painting. The idea was, simply, to have writing achieve pictorial vividness by using strong visual descriptions and by drawing on terms and ideas about composition borrowed from the visual arts. Two of Van Gogh’s favourite novelists, George Eliot and Émile Zola, were self-conscious producers of these kinds of word-paintings, and Van Gogh’s correspondence is abundantly supplied with his own examples. Sometimes these are descriptions of landscapes and sometimes of landscape paintings, or even of landscapes that are compared to actual paintings or are composed as if they were paintings. But Van Gogh’s word-paintings are, for the most part, not just embellishments that add local colour to a letter. Frequently, an ideal expressed in spatial (visual) imagery stands in contrast to the temporal (auditory) narrative of the letter, thus setting up a contrast between the stability of the spatial image and the existential urgency of the narrative. This tension, in turn, imparts to Van Gogh’s writing a captivating vigour and complexity.

**Literature**

Van Gogh did not provide detailed discussions of the many literary texts that he cites. Rather, his voracious reading fed directly into the development of his own opinions, and he seized upon whatever aspects of his favourite authors seemed to confirm his favourite ideas. Mainly, he found confirmation among the great nineteenth-century novelists for his lifelong concerns about the
plight of the poor, but he also found validation among many of his admired writers for his own favourite theories about artistic production. For instance, he thought that distinguished authors (like painters) do not simply reproduce natural appearances; rather, they often use exaggeration and simplification to achieve imaginative power.

In his early letters, Van Gogh worries that literature will distract him from his religious vocation. Yet, even as he cautions Theo about the seductive power of poetry (1) and of certain novelists and moral philosophers (2), he simultaneously acknowledges their influence on him. In the Borinage, where he lost his enthusiasm for conventional religion, Van Gogh admits to an “irresistible passion” for books (3), a passion that was fuelled by a typically intense dedication to reading. For instance, he read Dickens’s Christmas stories every year (4), and in Arles, he declares that he wants to reread “all Balzac” (5)—no small undertaking.

Books exercised a strong influence on Van Gogh partly because of what he took to be their inherently moral and humanizing vision, as is the case with Zola’s *Le ventre de Paris* (6) and with Hugo’s *Les misérables* (7). Likewise, Van Gogh praises Carlyle’s prose treatise, *Sartor Resartus* because it is so convincingly “humane” (8), and Daudet’s *L’immortel* is “so beautiful and so true” that it shows up the emptiness of conventional civilized values (9). In Arles, he is convinced that reading will help to cure his mental illness (10), and he explains to Van Rappard that reading good books enables a person to work better and even influences the work itself (11). When he read *King Lear* in St. Rémy, he had to go out and look at a blade of grass to calm himself, so powerful was the effect of Shakespeare’s great tragedy (12). Even the lives
of great authors could provide strong moral examples, as is the case with Turgenev, for instance (13).

Van Gogh was also interested in the fact that painters and writers share the same creative process. Thus, Zola does not provide straightforward verisimilitude; rather, he “creates” (14), as a painter does. Maupassant confirms Van Gogh’s favourite idea about how exaggeration can be used for aesthetic effect, and Flaubert provides support for Van Gogh’s opinions about perseverance (15). Throughout, the letters supply numerous examples of similarities between painters and writers (16). Thus, Dickens uses perspective like a painter (17) and is unsurpassed as “a painter and draughtsman” in writing (18). Vermeer is to Rembrandt as Zola is to the French novelists (19), and books such as La terre and Germinal affected Van Gogh’s own painting (20). Shakespeare and Rembrandt produce similar heartbreaking effects (21), and colours have a kind of poetry (22). Drawing and writing are the same, and Van Gogh sets himself to learn to do one as easily as the other (23). He could scarcely have imagined that the symbiosis between writing and painting that he so admired would do so much to shape his own posthumous fame.

(1) One more thing, though, please forgive my saying it. You and I both liked the poems by Heine and Uhland, but watch out, old boy, it’s pretty dangerous stuff. The illusion won’t last long, don’t surrender to it. [62]

Paris, Monday, 13 December 1875. To Theo van Gogh

(2) All those French paintings about the days of the Revolution, such as The Girondists and Last victims of the terror and Marie Antoinette by Delaroche and Muller, and that Young citizen and other paintings by Goupil, and then Anker and so many others, what a beautiful whole they form with many books, such as those by Michelet and Carlyle and also Dickens
(Tale of two cities). In all of that combined there’s something of the spirit which is that of the Resurrection and the Life, which shall live though it seems dead, for it is not dead, but it sleepeth.

I’d so much like to read a lot, but I may not, though actually I needn’t yearn for it, for all things are in the words of Christ—more perfect and more glorious than in any other words. [132]

Amsterdam, Sunday, 21 October 1877.
To Theo van Gogh

(3) For example, to name one passion among others, I have a more or less irresistible passion for books, and I have a need continually to educate myself, to study, if you like, precisely as I need to eat my bread. [155]

Cuesmes, between about Tuesday, 22 June, and Thursday, 24 June 1880. To Theo van Gogh

(4) I find all of Dickens beautiful, but those two tales—I’ve re-read them almost every year since I was a boy, and they always seem new to me. [325]

The Hague, on or about Monday, 5 March 1883.
To Anthon van Rappard

(5) I’m reading Balzac, César Birotteau, I’ll send it to you when I’ve finished it—I think I’ll re-read all of Balzac. [636]

Arles, Thursday, 5 July 1888. To Theo van Gogh

(6) But what I find rather pleasing is that you too have read Le ventre de Paris recently. I’ve also read Nana. Listen, Zola is actually Balzac II.

Balzac I portrays the society of 1815–1848, Zola begins where Balzac leaves off and goes on to Sedan or rather to the present day.
I think it’s absolutely superb. Now I must ask you what you think of Mme François, who picks up poor Florent as he lies unconscious in the middle of the road where the vegetable carts are passing, and lets him ride with her. Although the other vegetable sellers shout: “Leave him lying there, the drunk! We’ve no time to pick up men lying in the gutter,” &c. The figure of Mme François stands against the background of the Halles throughout the book, contrasting with the brutal egoism of the other women, so calm and so dignified and so sympathetic.

You see, Theo, I believe Mme François’ act showed true humanity, and in relation to Sien I have done and will continue to do what I believe someone like Mme François would have done for Florent if he hadn’t cared more about politics than about her. So there you have it, and that humanity is the salt of life, without that I wouldn’t care about life. Enough. [250]

The Hague, Sunday, 23 July 1882. To Theo van Gogh

(7) You know Les misérables, don’t you?—and no doubt the illustrations Brion drew for it—very good and convincing.

It’s good to read a book like that again, it seems to me, just to keep some feelings and moods alive. The love of man above all, and faith in and consciousness of something higher, in short of the something on High. [333]

The Hague, on or about Thursday, 29 March, and on Sunday, 1 April 1883. To Theo van Gogh

(8) Do you have the portrait of Carlyle—that beautiful one in The Graphic? At the moment I’m reading his “Sartor resartus” — the philosophy of old clothes—under “old clothes” he includes all manner of forms, and in the case of religion all dogmas. It’s beautiful—and honest—and humane. There’s been a lot of grumbling about this book, as with his other books. Many regard Carlyle as a monster. One nice comment on “the
philosophy of old clothes” is the following. Carlyle not only strips mankind naked but skins it too. Something like that. Well, that isn’t true, but it’s true that he’s honest enough not to call the shirt the skin—and far from finding a desire to belittle man in his work, I for one see that he puts man in a high position in the universe. At the same time, more than bitter criticism, I see love of mankind in him, a great deal of love. He—Carlyle—learned much from Goethe, but even more I believe from a certain man who wrote no books but whose words have survived nonetheless, although he didn’t write them down himself, i.e., Jesus. Before Carlyle he included many forms of all kinds under “old clothes.” [325]

The Hague, on or about Monday, 5 March 1883.

To Anthon van Rappard

(9) [. . .] I’m at last reading Daudet’s L’immortel, which I find very beautiful but hardly consoling.

I believe that I’ll have to read a book about elephant hunting, or a totally mendacious book of categorically impossible adventures, by Gustave Aimard for example, in order to get over the heartbreak that L’immortel will leave in me. Particularly because it’s so beautiful and so true, in making one feel the emptiness of the civilized world. [672]

Arles, Saturday, 1 September 1888. To Theo van Gogh

(10) I took advantage of my trip out to buy a book, Ceux de la glèbe by Camille Lemonnier. I’ve devoured two chapters of it—it’s so serious, so profound. Wait for me to send it to you. This is the first time for several months that I’ve picked up a book. That tells me a lot and heals me a great deal. [752]

Arles, Sunday, 24 March 1889. To Theo van Gogh

(11) I mean that while many regard, for instance, reading books or something else as what they’d call a waste of time, it seems to me on the contrary that—far from working less or less well
if one attempts to learn about another area that’s nonetheless directly related—one works more and better as a result—and at any rate the point of view from which one sees things and one’s approach to life is a matter of importance and a great influence on the work. [345]

The Hague, on or about Monday, 21 May 1883.
To Anthon van Rappard

(12) Have you ever read King Lear? But anyway, I think I shan’t urge you too much to read such dramatic books when I myself, returning from this reading, am always obliged to go and gaze at a blade of grass, a pine-tree branch, an ear of wheat, to calm myself. [785]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Tuesday, 2 July 1889.
To Willemien van Gogh

(13) The books of the present, since Balzac, say, are unlike anything written in other centuries—and better perhaps. I’m really looking forward to Turgenev just now because I’ve read a piece about him by Daudet in which both the man himself as a character and his work were analyzed—extremely good. For he’s an example as a person, and in his old age he was still young as regards continuing to work, as regards always being dissatisfied with himself, and trying to do it better and better all the time. [565]

Antwerp, on or about Monday, 22 February 1886.
To Theo van Gogh

(14) Zola creates, but doesn’t hold a mirror up to things, creates them amazingly, but creates, poetizes. [537]

Nuenen, on or about Wednesday, 28 October 1885.
To Theo van Gogh

(15) Am reading Pierre et Jean by Guy de Maupassant. It’s beautiful—have you read the preface explaining the freedom
the artist has to exaggerate, to create in a novel a more beautiful, simpler, more consoling nature, and explaining what Flaubert’s phrase might have meant, “talent is long patience”—and originality an effort of will and intense observation? [588]

Arles, Wednesday, 21 March, or Thursday, 22 March 1888. To Theo van Gogh

(16) I studied some of Hugo’s works a little this past winter. Namely Le dernier jour d’un condamné and a very beautiful book on Shakespeare. I took up the study of this writer a long time ago now. It’s as beautiful as Rembrandt. Shakespeare is to Charles Dickens or to V. Hugo what Ruisdael is to Daubigny, and Rembrandt to Millet. [158]

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

(17) I have my perspective books here and a few volumes of Dickens, including Edwin Drood. There’s perspective in Dickens too. By Jove, what an artist. There’s no one to match him. [238]

The Hague, Friday, 9 June 1882. To Theo van Gogh

(18) In my view there’s no other writer who’s as much a painter and draughtsman as Dickens. He’s one of those whose characters are resurrections. [325]

The Hague, on or about Monday, 5 March 1883. To Anthon van Rappard

(19) You were fortunate to meet Guy de Maupassant—I’ve just read his first book, Des vers, poems dedicated to his master, Flaubert. There’s one, “Au bord de l’eau,” that’s already him. So you see, what Vermeer of Delft is beside Rembrandt among painters, he is among French novelists beside Zola. [625]

Arles, on or about Friday, 15 June, and Saturday, 16 June 1888. To Theo van Gogh
(20) [. . .] we’ve read La terre and Germinal, and if we paint a peasant we’d like to show that this reading has in some way become part of us. [663]

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

(21) I thank you also very cordially for the Shakespeare. It will help me not to forget the little English I know—but above all it’s so beautiful.

I’ve begun to read the series I know the least well, which before, being distracted by something else or not having the time it was impossible for me to read, the series of the kings. I’ve already read Richard II, Henry IV and half of Henry V. I read without reflecting on whether the ideas of the people of that time are the same as ours, or what becomes of them when one places them face to face with republican or socialist beliefs &c. But what touches me in it, as in the work of certain novelists of our time, is that the voices of these people, which in Shakespeare’s case reach us from a distance of several centuries, don’t appear unknown to us. It’s so alive that one thinks one knows them and sees it.

So what Rembrandt alone, or almost alone, has among painters, that tenderness in the gazes of human beings we see either in the Pilgrims at Emmaus, or in the Jewish bride, or in some strange figure of an angel as in the painting you had the good fortune to see—that heartbroken tenderness, that glimpse of a superhuman infinite which appears so natural then, one encounters it in many places in Shakespeare. [784]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Tuesday, 2 July 1889.

To Theo van Gogh

(22) I don’t know if you’ll understand that one can speak poetry just by arranging colours well, just as one can say comforting things in music. [720]

Arles, on or about Monday, 12 November 1888.

To Willemien van Gogh
It’s more or less the same with drawing as with writing. When one learns to write as a child, one has the feeling that one will never discover how to do it, and it seems to be a miracle when one sees the schoolmaster write so quickly. Nevertheless, in time one grasps it. And I really believe that one must learn to draw in such a way that it’s as easy as writing something down. [265]

The Hague, Sunday, 17 September, or Monday, 18 September 1882. To Theo van Gogh

Word-Painting

Given his vocation as a painter, it is not surprising that Van Gogh the writer should be drawn to the nineteenth-century fashion for “word-painting,” whereby writers—especially novelists—sought to produce a sense of vivid pictorial immediacy. The narrative contexts in which Van Gogh’s many word-paintings appear often reveal interesting tensions in his thinking, but this topic is beyond the scope of the present book. Still, his many passages of pictorial prose are often arresting in their own right, and they show how convinced he was that the “sister arts” of painting and poetry are mutually reinforcing.

Van Gogh’s detailed descriptions of actual landscapes are often compared to paintings, which, in turn, frequently influence how he writes about the scene in question. But he can also describe paintings as if he were looking directly at a scene in nature, and sometimes his verbal descriptions embody ideas that he favoured at the moment, such as his thinking about imperfection or his preoccupation with colour.
In The Hague, Van Gogh explains that “drawing in words” is an art that, like painting, releases a “hidden force latent inside” (1). The special power of words to which he alludes here is exemplified in a further passage in which he provides a detailed account of a cityscape, going on to say that he would try to draw it, but he hasn’t the time. Here, a word-painting replaces a drawing, and the care Van Gogh expends on the written description exemplifies his claim about the aesthetic effectiveness and power of language (2).

Van Gogh frequently describes natural scenes in vivid detail—storms, seacoasts, dunes, cityscapes, gardens, groves of trees, and so on. Many of these descriptions allude to paintings to enhance the power of the written account, and in such passages, Van Gogh provides his own version of the ancient trope *ut pictura poesis* (as in painting so in poetry). But how much did Van Gogh’s recollection of a painting influence how he saw an actual scene before him? We can never know for sure. Still, the remarkable cross-fertilization of the pictorial and verbal in his word-paintings reminds us that perception itself is a process of configuration and not merely a neutral observation. Thus, for instance, Dürer helps us to see a storm in Ramsgate (3), and Daubigny, the sea along the French coast (4). In a vignette describing a flower market in Amsterdam, a little girl is like a portrait by Maris, but the description then switches, touchingly, to the point of view of the flowerseller, who inadvertently in praising his flowers includes the beauty that Van Gogh sees in the little girl, the flowerseller’s daughter (5). Millet, Israëls, and De Groux help us to see a stretch of dunes (6), and an extended description of a landscape in Drenthe is complemented by an analogous description of a painting by Daubigny, so that each reverberates with the influence of the other (7). Elsewhere, a careful description of a Mesdag drawing reads as if Van Gogh is looking at an actual scene (8). By contrast, in The Hague, a view observed from a window is described as if it were a pictorial composition, and
the “word-paintings” of the novelist Victor Hugo are adduced to enable us better to imagine it (9).

In some word-paintings, Van Gogh incorporates his ideas about the enlivening effects of imperfection. For instance, a “beautiful” heath in Drenthe is described as also being flawed—even, in some ways, unattractive (10). Likewise, a depressing prospect of black mud, bog oaks, and rotten roots can be made beautiful, in a manner comparable to a Dupré or a Ruysdael (11). Like actual paintings, word-paintings can thus also be more effective by not being perfect.

(1) But enough. There’s a certain je ne sais quoi in your description, a scent—a memory—of a watercolour by Bonington, for example, only it’s still faint as if in a mist. Do you know that drawing in words is also an art, and sometimes betrays a hidden force latent inside, just as the blue or grey cloud of smoke betrays the hearth? [244]

The Hague, Thursday, 6 July 1882. To Theo van Gogh

(2) At the moment a wonderful effect can be seen from the window of my studio. The city with its towers and roofs and smoking chimneys stands out as a dark, sombre silhouette against a horizon of light. The light, though, is only a broad strip; above it hangs a heavy shower, more concentrated below, above torn by the autumn wind into great tufts and clumps that float off. But that strip of light makes the wet roofs glisten here and there in the sombre mass of the city (in a drawing you would lift it with a stroke of body-colour), and ensures that, although the mass all has the same tone, you can still distinguish between red tiles and slates.

Schenkweg runs through the foreground as a glistening line through the wet, the poplars have yellow leaves, the banks of the ditch and the meadow are deep green, figures are black.
I would draw it, or rather try to draw it, if I hadn’t spent the whole afternoon toiling at figures of peat carriers which are still too much in my mind for there to be room for something new, and must remain there. [274]

The Hague, Sunday, 22 October 1882.

To Theo van Gogh

(3) Have I already written to you about the storm I saw recently? The sea was yellowish, especially close to the beach; a streak of light on the horizon and, above this, tremendously huge dark grey clouds from which one saw the rain coming down in slanting streaks. The wind blew the dust from the small white path on the rocks into the sea and tossed the blossoming hawthorn bushes and wallflowers that grow on the rocks.

On the right, fields of young green wheat, and, in the distance, the town with its towers, mills, slate roofs and houses built in Gothic style, and, below, the harbour between the 2 jetties running out into the sea, looking like the cities Albrecht Dürer used to etch. [83]

Ramsgate, Wednesday, 31 May 1876. To Theo van Gogh

(4) There are curious things in other countries, such as the French coast which I saw at Dieppe—the chalk cliffs with green grass on top—the sea and sky—the harbour with old boats like Daubigny paints them, with brown nets and sails, the small houses including a couple of restaurants with little white curtains and green pine branches in the window—the carts with white horses with big blue halters decorated with red tassels—the drivers with their blue smocks, the fishermen with their beards and oiled clothing and the French women with pale faces, dark, often somewhat deep-set eyes, black dress and white cap, and such as the streets of London in the rain with the street-lamps, and a night spent there on the steps of an old, small grey church, as happened to me this summer after that journey from Ramsgate—there are certainly
curious things in other countries, too—but last Sunday when I was walking alone on that dyke, I thought how good that Dutch soil was. [102]

Dordrecht, Wednesday, 7 February, and Thursday, 8 February 1877. To Theo van Gogh

(5) Went past the flower market on Singel today, I saw such a nice thing there. A farmer was standing there with lots and lots of pots, all kinds of flowers and shrubs, the ivy was at the back, and in between sat his little girl, a child like Maris would paint, so simple, wearing a black cap, and with a pair of eyes so lively and really so friendly, she sat there knitting, the man was hawking his wares, and if I’d been able to I would gladly have bought something, and he said, also pointing unintentionally at his little daughter, “Doesn’t it look good?” [119]

Amsterdam, Monday, 4 June, and Tuesday, 5 June 1877. To Theo van Gogh

(6) I particularly enjoyed doing these two. Just as much as something I saw at Scheveningen.

A large expanse in the dunes in the morning after rain—the grass is very green, relatively speaking, and the black nets are spread out on it in huge circles, creating tones on the ground of a deep, reddish black, green, grey. Sitting, standing or walking on this sombre ground like strange dark ghosts were women in white caps, and men who spread out or repaired the nets.

In nature it was as compelling, distinctive, sombre and severe as the finest one could imagine by Millet, Israëls or Degroux. Above the landscape a plain grey sky with a light band above the horizon. [258]

The Hague, Sunday, 20 August 1882. To Theo van Gogh

(7) Flat planes or strips differing in colour, which grow narrower and narrower as they approach the horizon. Accentuated here
and there by a sod hut or small farm or a few scrawny birches, poplars, oaks. Stacks of peat everywhere, and always barges sailing past with peat or bulrushes from the marshes. Here and there thin cows of a delicate colour, often sheep—pigs. The figures that now and then appear on the plain usually have great character, sometimes they’re really charming. I drew, among others, a woman in the barge with crepe around her cap brooches because she was in mourning, and later a mother with a small child—this one had a purple scarf around her head.

There are a lot of Ostade types among them, physiognomies that remind one of pigs or crows, but every so often there’s a little figure that’s like a lily among the thorns. In short, I’m very pleased about this trip, for I’m full of what I’ve seen. The heath was extraordinarily beautiful this evening. There’s a Daubigny in one of the Albums Boetzel that expresses that effect precisely. The sky was an inexpressibly delicate lilac white—not fleecy clouds, because they were more joined together and covered the whole sky, but tufts in tints more or less of lilac—grey—white—a single small rent through which the blue gleamed. Then on the horizon a sparkling red streak—beneath it the surprisingly dark expanse of brown heath, and a multitude of low roofs of small huts standing out against the glowing red streak. [392]

Nieuw-Amsterdam, on or about Wednesday, 3 October 1883. To Theo van Gogh

(8) Then there was a Mesdag that one had to imagine wasn’t there in order to see any of the other drawings, at least that’s how it was with me.

The beach at twilight, stormy weather, sky with grey clouds with a ruddy glow from the sun, which had set.

In the foreground a fisherman on a horse, a tall, singular, dark silhouette standing out against the white, foaming waves. This figure is speaking with people on board a pink floating in the middle ground. On deck people are busy
with a lantern, and they’re evidently speaking to the man on horseback about the anchor, which he must come and fetch. It was a large, important drawing, broadly done and so powerful that, as I said, nothing else could hold a candle to it. [166]

Etten, on or about Saturday, 30 April, or Sunday, 1 May 1881. To Theo van Gogh

(9) From the window I looked out on a broad, dark foreground—dug-over gardens and soil, mostly warm black earth, very deep in tone. Running obliquely across that is the little road of yellowish sand with green edges of grass and the thin, spindly poplars. A background of a grey silhouette of the city with the round roof of the station and towers and chimneys. And, by the way, the backs of houses still everywhere—but in the evening everything is brought together by the tone. And so, overseeing the whole, simply a foreground of black, dug-over earth, a road crossing that, a grey silhouette of a city with towers behind, just above that and almost on the horizon the red sun.

It was just like a page in Hugo—and something that would certainly have struck you and that you could describe better than I. [333]

The Hague, on or about Thursday, 29 March, and on Sunday, 1 April 1883. To Theo van Gogh

(10) Everything is beautiful here, wherever one goes. The heath is much vaster than it is in Brabant, near Zundert or Etten at least—rather monotonous, particularly when it’s afternoon and the sun’s shining, and yet it’s that very effect, which I’ve already vainly tried to paint several times, that I shouldn’t want to miss. The sea isn’t always picturesque either, but one has to look at those moments and effects as well if one doesn’t want to deceive oneself as to its true character. Then—the heath is sometimes far from pleasant in the heat of midday. It’s as irritatingly tedious and fatiguing as the desert, just
Reading Vincent van Gogh

as inhospitable, and as it were hostile. Painting it in that blazing light and capturing the planes vanishing into infinity is something that makes one dizzy. So one mustn’t think that it has to be conceived sentimentally; on the contrary it’s almost never that. That same irritatingly tedious spot—in the evening as a poor little figure moves through the twilight—when that vast, sun-scorched earth stands out dark against the delicate lilac tints of the evening sky, and the very last fine dark blue line on the horizon separates earth from sky—can be as sublime as in a J. Dupré. [387]

Hoogeveen, Sunday, 16 September 1883.

To Theo van Gogh

(11) Yesterday I drew decaying oak roots, so-called bog trunks (being oak trees that have been buried under the peat for perhaps a century, over which new peat has formed—when the peat is dug out these bog trunks come to light).

These roots lay in a pool in black mud. A few black ones lay in the water, in which they were reflected, a few bleached ones on the black plain. A little white track ran alongside it, behind it more peat, black as soot. Then a stormy sky overhead. That pool in the mud with those decaying roots, it was absolutely melancholy and dramatic, just like Ruisdael, just like Jules Dupré. [393]

Nieuw-Amsterdam, on or about Sunday, 7 October 1883. To Theo van Gogh

After Van Gogh moved to Arles, the brilliant word-paintings in his letters reflect his intense interest in colour. For instance, he cites the colourist extraordinaire, Claude Monet, while recalling a sunset at Mont Majour, which is itself described in language evoking a blaze of colour (12). Likewise, Van Gogh describes a seashore
with a cataract of colour images (13), as he does his own paintings of a starry night (14), the Yellow House (15), and olive trees at St. Rémy (16). An interesting variation occurs in an account of an olive grove in Arles, which Van Gogh says is “too beautiful for me to dare paint” and which is evoked instead by way of a vivid word-painting. This same passage alludes to painters who produce effects analogous to those that Van Gogh himself will not attempt to capture in a picture (17). His aim here is to provide an account of what the olive grove looks like and also to give some sense of the mysterious atmosphere of the place. Again, in a remarkable description of his painting of the asylum garden in St. Rémy, Van Gogh explains how colour communicates the “sensation of anguish” that the asylum patients feel. But we then realize also that his verbal description reproduces a felt sense of that same emotion (18).

Throughout the letters, Van Gogh’s exceptional ability to compose word-paintings is deployed on the underlying assumption that the “sister arts” mutually reinforce one another. His facility with descriptive language frequently allows us a new, felt knowledge of the fact that art does more than record the appearances of things; rather, it reconfigures the common world in perpetually surprising new ways.

(12) It’s funny that one evening recently at Montmajour I saw a red sunset that sent its rays into the trunks and foliage of pines rooted in a mass of rocks, colouring the trunks and foliage a fiery orange while other pines in the further distance stood out in Prussian blue against a soft blue-green sky—cerulean. So it’s the effect of that Claude Monet. It was superb. The white sand and the seams of white rocks under the trees took on blue tints. What I’d like to do is the panorama of which you have the first drawings. [615]

Arles, Monday, 28 May 1888. To Theo van Gogh
(13) I took a walk along the seashore one night, on the deserted beach. It wasn’t cheerful, but not sad either, it was—beautiful.

The sky, a deep blue, was flecked with clouds of a deeper blue than primary blue, an intense cobalt, and with others that were a lighter blue—like the blue whiteness of milky ways. Against the blue background stars twinkled, bright, greenish, white, light pink—brighter, more glittering, more like precious stones than at home—even in Paris. So it seems fair to talk about opals, emeralds, lapis, rubies, sapphires. The sea a very deep ultramarine—the beach a mauvish and pale reddish shade, it seemed to me—with bushes.

Les-Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, on or about Sunday, 3 June, or Monday, 4 June 1888. To Theo van Gogh

(14) Included herewith little croquis of a square no. 30 canvas—the starry sky at last, actually painted at night, under a gas-lamp. The sky is green-blue, the water is royal blue, the fields are mauve. The town is blue and violet. The gaslight is yellow, and its reflections are red gold and go right down to green bronze. Against the green-blue field of the sky the Great Bear has a green and pink sparkle whose discreet paleness contrasts with the harsh gold of the gaslight.

Two small coloured figures of lovers in the foreground. Arles, on or about Saturday, 29 September 1888. To Theo van Gogh

(15) My house here is painted outside in the yellow of fresh butter, with garish green shutters, and it’s in the full sun on the square, where there’s a green garden of plane trees, oleanders, acacias. And inside, it’s all whitewashed, and the floor’s of red bricks. And the intense blue sky above. Inside, I can live and breathe, and think and paint. And it seems to me that I should go further into the south rather than going back up north, because I have too great a need of the strong heat so that my
blood circulates normally. I’m in really much better health here than in Paris. [678]

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

(16) The effect of daylight, of the sky, means that there is an infinity of subjects to be drawn from the olive tree. Now I looked for some effects of opposition between the changing foliage and the tones of the sky. Sometimes the whole thing is wrapped in pure blue at the time when the tree bears pale blossoms and the numerous big blue flies, the emerald rose beetles, finally the cicadas, fly around it. Then, when the more bronzed greenery takes on riper tones the sky is resplendent and is striped with green and orange; or even further on in the autumn, the leaves take on the violet tones vaguely of a ripe fig, the violet effect will be displayed in full by the oppositions of the large whitening sun in a halo of clear, fading lemon. Sometimes, too, after a shower, I have seen all the sky coloured in pink and bright orange, which gave an exquisite value and coloration to the silvery greenish greys. In there, there were women, also pink, who were picking the fruit. [RM21]

Auvers-sur-Oise, Sunday, 25 May 1890.

To Joseph Isaäcson

(17) Ah, my dear Theo, if you could see the olive trees at this time of year ... The old-silver and silver foliage greening up against the blue. And the orangeish ploughed soil. It’s something very different from what one thinks of it in the north—it’s a thing of such delicacy—so refined. It’s like the lopped willows of our Dutch meadows or the oak bushes of our dunes, that’s to say the murmur of an olive grove has something very intimate, immensely old about it.

It’s too beautiful for me to dare paint it or be able to form an idea of it.
The oleander—ah—it speaks of love and it’s as beautiful as Puvis de Chavannes’ Lesbos, where there were women beside the sea. But the olive tree is something else, it is, if you want to compare it to something, like Delacroix. [763]

Arles, Sunday, 28 April 1889. To Theo van Gogh

(18) Here’s description of a canvas that I have in front of me at the moment. A view of the garden of the asylum where I am, on the right a grey terrace, a section of house, some rosebushes that have lost their flowers; on the left, the earth of the garden—red ochre—earth burnt by the sun, covered in fallen pine twigs. This edge of the garden is planted with large pines with red ochre trunks and branches, with green foliage saddened by a mixture of black. These tall trees stand out against an evening sky streaked with violet against a yellow background. High up, the yellow turns to pink, turns to green. A wall—red ochre again—blocks the view, and there’s nothing above it but a violet and yellow ochre hill. Now, the first tree is an enormous trunk, but struck by lightning and sawn off. A side branch thrusts up very high, however, and falls down again in an avalanche of dark green twigs.

This dark giant—like a proud man brought low—contrasts, when seen as the character of a living being, with the pale smile of the last rose on the bush, which is fading in front of him. Under the trees, empty stone benches, dark box. The sky is reflected yellow in a puddle after the rain. A ray of sun—the last glimmer—exalts the dark ochre to orange—small dark figures prowl here and there between the trunks. 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. [822]

Arles, on or about Tuesday, 26 November 1889.

To Émile Bernard