Van Gogh returns often to the ambivalent position of human beings, who are simultaneously situated within nature and also called to reshape nature by the production of cultural values that are specifically human. As a way of approaching this topic, I focus in the first section of this chapter, “The Law of the Father,” on Van Gogh’s difficult relationship with his family, and especially with his father. On the one hand, families, insofar as they are rooted in nature, are defined by biology; on the other hand, they are socially and culturally organized to promote values that are not determined by biological necessity alone. Basically, Van Gogh’s difficulties with his parents reproduce this tension, which is inherent in the structure of families in general.

Despite a great many difficulties, Van Gogh did not make a complete break with his family, towards whom he continued to remain both appreciative and resentful. Even his bitter quarrels with his father failed to bring about a full emancipation from the paternal influence, and Vincent also sought alternative father-figures—for instance, his old boss Hermanus Tersteeg, Paul Gauguin, and even his brother Theo, to whom at one point, with some irritation, he refers as “Pa II” (482/3:204). In a similar fashion, the admired historian and philosopher Jules Michelet becomes
“père Michelet” and the painter Jean-François Millet, “père Millet” (414/3:84). In addition, Van Gogh longed for a family of his own, only reluctantly acknowledging that this would not happen. Then, as a substitute for his failed ambition to be a family man, he imagined creating a family of artists at the Yellow House in Arles.

The relationship between the family and nature leads readily to Van Gogh’s enduring interest in the analogous relationship between nature and art. From his early days in London, he believed that painters enable us to transfigure nature, and yet he never surrendered the conviction that artists should also stay rooted in nature. By expressing something humanly significant in and through (but not confined to) the natural appearances of things, art was, for Van Gogh, a powerful means of communication and mutual understanding. Like the biological family, nature is sustaining, but an artist must also endure a “terrible fight” in order to subdue it—to attain the “something on high” that is “above that nature” (403/3:59).

This “higher” significance, which art communicates both through and beyond nature, is addressed in another manner in the third section, “The Ineffable.” Chapter 1 of the present book deals with Van Gogh’s opinions about religion, by which I mean the God question in its traditional form. When he turned away from orthodox religion, Van Gogh did not entirely abandon what he had learned from it, and his resultant ambivalence reproduces something of his attitudes to the family and to the relationship between art and nature. That is, in order to go beyond the traditional God question and to describe a spiritual dimension that is “above,” Van Gogh resorts to a range of suggestive but vague terms (“infinite,” “Unnameable,” “it,” the “je ne sais quoi,” and so on). This language is intended not so much to be evasive as to evoke the felt sense of a transcendent value, which Van Gogh thought was communicated by great art and which he describes simply as “mysterious” and “magical.”
The Law of the Father

Van Gogh’s idealizing of his father was at its highest intensity when he undertook to follow in his father’s footsteps and to become a clergyman. But Vincent’s disillusionment with religion as an effective means of helping the Borinage miners, together with his love affairs with Kee and Sien, caused a serious rift between father and son. In the ensuing battle for authority, Vincent sought to replace the law of his clergyman father by adopting a new, free-thinking “father,” Jules Michelet, who, for Vincent, proclaimed the triumph of love over religious orthodoxy. In a similar spirit, Vincent turned also to “father” Millet—the painter, Jean-François Millet—who, especially through Alfred Sensier’s romanticized biography, seemed a heroic champion of art over conventional morality.

In light of these developments, the alienation between Vincent and his father deepened, and Vincent bitterly accused his parents of not understanding his vocation as an artist. By comparison with the values that Vincent sought through painting, his family seemed parochial and narrow. Yet Theo was also a member of that family, and throughout the letters, Vincent vacillates uncomfortably between relying on Theo as a brother and depending on him, as a like-minded friend and supporter, to understand what was entailed by an artistic vocation. Certainly, as an art dealer, Theo was a “friend,” as Vincent says, who shared Vincent’s interests. Yet Theo was also the “brother” who agreed with their parents in disapproving of many aspects of Vincent’s behaviour.

Vincent expresses a high degree of ambivalence about these various fraught relationships. Although he often felt alienated from his family, he was also strongly attached to it, and in his last years, in a spirit of reconciliation, he sought increased contact with several family members.
In Amsterdam, Van Gogh writes enthusiastically that he would thank God for the opportunity to become a clergyman like his father (1). Later, when his father left after a visit, Vincent admits to crying “like a child” (2). In the Borinage, he thanks Theo warmly for visiting, and confesses how much he needs family and friends (3). Throughout his early letters, as well as those written during his religious phase, Vincent is repeatedly solicitous about the welfare of family members; his close ties with his family are often at the forefront of his concern.

But when Vincent became disillusioned with his evangelical endeavours, his attitude to his family also changed (4). When he fell in love with Kee, he objected strongly to his parents’ religious conservatism (5). In a directly confrontational manner, he explains that he now attaches more value to Michelet than to his father (6). The choice, Vincent says, is between being an independent adult member of the new, modern generation and remaining captive to old and out-of-date beliefs (7). In addition, he maintains that a declaration of autonomy is necessary for his own development as an artist (8).

Yet there is something poignant in Vincent’s continuing appreciation of his parents’ virtues (9): his vulnerability is evident, for instance, when he reassures Theo that they are not only brothers but also “friends and kindred spirits” (10). Here, he acknowledges the family bond while hoping for Theo’s acceptance of his autonomy despite his parents’ disapproval. In The Hague, he goes on to explain that the inner lives of family members are more important than what is expressed outwardly, which might only be for show (11). Again, in this example, Vincent hints that Theo’s inner disposition could remain favourable despite the disapproval that he knew Theo shared with their parents.
Vincent’s ambivalence is again evident when his father sent a package containing a woman’s winter coat, thereby silently acknowledging Sien. Vincent feels gratitude, but his appreciation is immediately qualified in a not too gracious manner as his conflicted feelings prevail (12). Elsewhere, he acknowledges his ambivalence by declaring that he disagrees fundamentally with his father, even while accepting that there is a real bond between them (13).

In Nuenen, Vincent’s resentment of his family became increasingly strident (14). Shortly before, he had written of his father as a “black ray” (15), and now he repeats the charge (14, 16), going on to compare his father unfavourably to “the great père Millet” (17). He also accuses his mother (18), and even Theo (19), of being narrow-minded and of failing to understand his artist’s calling and way of life.

By the time Van Gogh went to Arles, his head-on struggles with his family were, for the most part, over. But his preoccupation with the family drama continued in his concerns about other people’s families. For instance, he bitterly criticizes Bernard’s family (20), and he sees the patients in the asylum at St. Rémy as a special kind of family, their forced confinement notwithstanding (21). Most importantly, he has fond recollections about his own family (22), and he is deeply touched by Theo’s impending fatherhood (23). He even recommends that Theo name his little boy after their father (24), although Theo insisted on naming him Vincent. An increased burden of anxiety about becoming a financial drain on Theo’s young family possibly contributed to Vincent’s decision to take his own life. If this is the case, his ambivalence about family ties clearly continued to be deeply troubling until the end.
(1) If I may become a clergyman, if I fulfil that position so that my
work is equal to that of our Father, then I shall thank God. [118]
Amsterdam, Thursday, 31 May 1887. To Theo van Gogh

(2) [...] the most pleasant memory of Pa’s visit is that morning we
spent together in my study, looking over my work and talking
about all sorts of things. You can imagine that those days flew
by and when, after bringing Pa to the station and watching
the train or even only the smoke for as long as it was in sight,
I came back to my room and Pa’s chair was standing there by
the little desk on which the books and notebooks were still
lying from the day before, even though I know that we’ll see
each other again quite soon, I broke down and cried like a
child. [140]
Amsterdam, Sunday, 10 February 1878.
To Theo van Gogh

(3) Like everyone else, I have need of relationships of friendship
or affection or trusting companionship, and am not like a
street pump or lamp-post, whether of stone or iron, so that I
can’t do without them without perceiving an emptiness and
feeling their lack, like any other generally civilized and highly
respectable man—and I tell you these things to let you know
what a salutary effect your visit had on me. [154]
Cuesmes, between about Monday, 11 August, and
Thursday, 14 August 1879. To Theo van Gogh

(4) Without wishing to, I’ve more or less become some sort of
impossible and suspect character in the family, in any event,
somebody who isn’t trusted, so how, then, could I be useful to
anybody in any way?
That’s why, first of all, so I’m inclined to believe, it is
beneficial and the best and most reasonable position to take,
for me to go away and to remain at a proper distance, as if I
didn’t exist. [155]
Cuesmes, between about Tuesday, 22 June, and
Thursday, 24 June 1880. To Theo van Gogh

(5) I also said something to Pa and Ma, namely that in the matter
of this love of mine they were very wrong and their heart was
very hardened and they seemed entirely insensible to a milder
and more humane view. That, in a word, their view seemed to
me to be bigoted and not broad-minded and generous enough,
also that it seemed to me that the word “God” would have
only a hollow ring to it if one had to conceal love and wasn’t
allowed to follow one’s heart’s promptings. [185]
Etten, Friday, 18 November 1881. To Theo van Gogh

(6) If, for example, Pa sees me with a French book by Michelet
or V. Hugo in my hand, he thinks of arsonists and murderers
and “immorality.” But that’s just too silly, and of course I
don’t let idle talk of that kind upset me. I’ve already said so
often to Pa: just read a book like this, even if only a couple of
pages, and you’ll be moved by it. But Pa stubbornly refuses to
do so. Just now, when this love was taking root in my heart,
I read Michelet’s books L’amour and La femme again, and so
many things became clear to me that would otherwise remain
a mystery. I also told Pa frankly that in the circumstances I
valued Michelet’s advice more than his, and had to choose
which of the two I should follow. [186]
Etten, Friday, 18 November 1881. To Theo van Gogh

(7) We now stand as adults, as soldiers in the ranks of our
generation. We don’t belong to the one Pa and Ma and J.P.S.
belong to, we must be more faithful to the modern than to
the old. Looking back at the old is fatal. We mustn’t get upset
if the older generation doesn’t understand us, and we must go
our own way, even going against their wishes. Later on they’ll say, yes, you were right after all! [187]

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

(8) But Pa has to stay out of it. Pa isn’t the right man to get mixed up in artistic matters. And the less I have to do with Pa in business matters, the better I’ll get along with Pa. But I have to be free and independent in many things, that goes without saying. [193]

Etten, on or about Friday, 23 December 1881.

To Theo van Gogh

(9) Now I wanted to tell you that I entirely agree with various things in your letter. Above all, that I absolutely concur that Pa and Ma, with all their pros and cons, are people who are very rare in this day and age—and all the more so as time passes—and perhaps the new is by no means better—and whom one therefore ought to appreciate all the more. For my part I do indeed appreciate them, only I fear that what you have now reassured them about for the time being would come back, especially if they saw me again. They’ll never be able to grasp what painting is, never understand that a figure of a digger—a few furrows of ploughed land—a bit of sand, sea and sky, are serious subjects and so difficult, but so beautiful too that it’s well worth the trouble of devoting one’s life to depicting the poetry that’s in them. [259]

The Hague, Saturday, 26 August 1882.

To Theo van Gogh

(10) For I’m right in thinking, am I not, brother, that we aren’t just brothers but also friends and kindred spirits [. . .]? [181]

Etten, Tuesday, 8 November, or Wednesday, 9 November 1881. To Theo van Gogh
(11) Many people pay more attention to the outward appearance of a family than to its inner life, and imagine they do good in that way. Society is full of that, seeming instead of being. Again, these people are not bad because of this, but they are foolish. [338]

The Hague, Monday, 30 April 1883. To Theo van Gogh

(12) The letter in question is Pa’s first since his visit and is very amiable and cordial and was accompanied by a package containing a coat, a hat, a packet of cigars, a cake, a money order.

In the letter was the outline of a sermon, by far the best part of which I thought was the biblical text, and which made less of an impression on me than a few words about the funeral of a farm labourer later on. [351]

The Hague, on or about Thursday, 7 June 1883.

To Theo van Gogh

(13) Just to return briefly to what you said on leaving: “I’m beginning to think more and more like Pa.” Well, so be it, you speak the truth, and I for my part, while as I said not thinking or doing exactly the same, respect this character and know of a weak side to it perhaps, but also a good side. And when I consider that if Pa knew anything about art I would doubtless be able to talk to him more easily and agree with him more; suppose you become like Pa plus your knowledge of art—fine—I believe we’ll continue to understand each other.

I’ve had repeated disagreements with Pa, but the bond has never been completely broken. [375]

The Hague, Saturday, 18 August 1883.

To Theo van Gogh

(14) Pa doesn’t know remorse as you and I and everyone who is human does. Pa believes in his own righteousness while you,
I and other human beings are permeated with the feeling that we consist of mistakes and forlorn attempts.

I pity people like Pa, *I can’t find it in my heart to be angry with them* because I believe that they’re unhappier than I am myself. Why do I think they’re unhappier? Because they use even the good in them wrongly so that it works as evil—because the light that’s in them is black—spreads darkness, gloom around them. [410]

Nuenen, on or about Friday, 7 December 1883.

To Theo van Gogh

(15) To me, Pa is someone who didn’t have any knowledge of the intimate lives of some great men when he should have had it. I mean that, in my view, Pa does not know, did not know nor ever will know what the soul of modern civilization is. What is it? The eternal, the very greatest simplicity and truth—Dupré, Daubigny, Corot, Millet, Israëls, Herkomer—not to mention Michelet, Hugo, Zola, Balzac, a host more from the more distant and more recent past. If prejudices, which Pa has carried with him throughout his life with an assiduousness worthy of a better cause, stand in his way—to me he’s a black ray. The only criticism I have of Pa is: why isn’t he a white ray? [403]

Nieuw-Amsterdam, on or about Monday, 5 November 1883. To Theo van Gogh

(16) My youth has been austere and cold, and sterile under the influence of the black ray. And, brother, your youth too, in fact. Old chap—I don’t want to flatter you this time. Anyway, but I don’t want to blame anyone for it but myself. All the same, the black ray is unspeakably cruel—unspeakably. And at this moment I feel as many pent-up tears about many things as there are in a figure by Mantegna!

But brother, my very sorrow about so much proves to me that I’ve *finished* dealing with those systems. I’ve suffered from
them, but at bottom I no longer belong on that side. And now, I say as brother to brother, as friend to friend, although our youth was austere and went against the grain, from now on let’s seek the gentle light, since I know no other name for it but the white ray or goodness. [403]  
Nieuw-Amsterdam, on or about Monday, 5 November 1883. To Theo van Gogh

(17) I don’t differ with Pa when I consider Pa in himself, but I do differ with Pa when I compare Pa with the great père Millet, say. [414]  
Nuenen, on or about Sunday, 16 December 1883.  
To Theo van Gogh

(18) Only it’s certain that Ma simply cannot comprehend that painting is a faith and that it brings with it the duty to pay no heed to public opinion—and that in it one conquers by perseverance and not by giving in. And—“I can’t give you faith” is also the case between Her Hon. and me—just as it was and remained with Pa too. [490]  
Nuenen, Monday, 6 April 1885. To Theo van Gogh

(19) [. . .] I’ll tell you straight out what I think about that—that in common with Pa, who often acts thus, you are cruel in your worldly wisdom. [418]  
Nuenen, on or about Friday, 28 December 1883.  
To Theo van Gogh

(20) Bernard is being pestered more and more by his father, it’s becoming even more of a hell in that house.  
And the worst is that there isn’t much one can do about it, as soon as you put your hand in there you put it into a real wasps’ nest. [738]  
Arles, Saturday, 19 January 1889. To Theo van Gogh
(21) I must say this, that the neighbours &c. are particularly kind towards me, everyone here suffering either from fever or hallucinations or madness, we get along like members of the same family. [745]

Arles, Sunday, 3 February 1889. To Theo van Gogh

(22) Certainly you joined up much earlier than I did, if we come to that, at the Goupils’, where all in all you spent some pretty bad moments often enough, for which you weren’t always thanked. And indeed you did it with zeal and devotion, because then our father rather had his back to the wall with the big family at the time, and it was necessary for you to throw yourself into it completely in order to make everything work. I’ve thought again with much emotion of all these old things during my illness.

And in the end the main thing is to feel ourselves closely united, and that hasn’t yet been disturbed. [768]

Arles, Friday, 3 May 1889. To Theo van Gogh

(23) So take your fatherhood as a good fellow from our old heaths would take it, those heaths that remain ineffably dear to us through all the noise, tumult, fog, anguish of the towns, however timid our tenderness may be. That’s to say, take your fatherhood there, from your nature as an exile and a foreigner and a poor man, henceforth basing himself with the poor man’s instinct on the probability of the real existence of a native country, of a real existence at least of the memory, even while we’ve forgotten every day. [790]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Sunday, 14 July, or Monday, 15 July 1889. To Theo van Gogh

(24) Now in thought I remain with you all as I finish my letter.
May Jo long remain for us all that she is. Now as for the little
one, why then don’t you call him Theo in memory of our father, that would certainly give me so much pleasure. [850]
Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Saturday, 1 February 1890.
To Theo van Gogh

Nature

Van Gogh repeatedly emphasizes the restorative and life-affirming power of nature. Although he warns that alienation from nature is dehumanizing, he also maintains that a fruitful relationship with nature involves struggle and contest. Art is one consequence of this struggle, and although art is grounded in nature, the artist must also strive to transcend nature. Van Gogh cites the seventeenth-century English philosopher Francis Bacon’s definition of art as “man added to nature,” as well as the closely allied notion derived from Émile Zola that art is “a corner of nature seen through a temperament” (361/2:373). That is, although people are in nature, they are not entirely of nature. Consequently, art does not merely reproduce the appearances of things; rather, it reveals something humanly significant in and through those appearances. To accomplish this revelation, artists exaggerate or simplify, or they foreground the medium of expression itself as a means of enabling us to see something newly significant in the familiar world that we might think we know well enough already. And yet Van Gogh also insists that an authentic work of art must make reference to the natural world. Excessive abstraction, for instance, cuts art off from the sustaining power of nature, without which art cannot survive.
In a letter from London in 1874, Van Gogh describes how art is rooted in nature, even though art also teaches us to see nature in new ways (1). Later, he states that the right kind of connection with nature enhances “the genuinely human” (2). But Van Gogh also returns often to the idea that nature “always begins by resisting” and must be actively engaged (3), because nature “demands that you struggle with her” (4). Although this struggle is difficult (5), without it an artist will not find success (6, 7). Rather, artists must labour like Robinson Crusoe (8), and in St. Rémy, Van Gogh recommends working as if one were making a pair of shoes, without any “artistic preoccupations” at all (9).

This unending struggle between art and nature is a consequence of the fact that art does not just reproduce natural appearances: Van Gogh explains how, in his work, he adds something distinctively human (10). In looking at nature, he sees “expression and a soul,” by which he means that human concerns can be seen and mirrored in natural objects (11). Art thus calls on us to reconfigure nature, though without losing contact with nature’s sustaining energy (12, 13). In short, one needs nature and pictures (14), since art is not just an exercise in imitation (15). Yet Van Gogh also warns consistently about the harmful effects of neglecting nature (16), and he describes nature as being restorative after the personal problems he has been experiencing (17). It is preferable, he writes, to be alienated from the “world of convention” than from nature, and at one point, he advises that we should follow the Japanese in going back directly to nature, despite education and convention (18).

In St. Rémy, Vincent suggests to Theo that his wife and child could be a way of bringing Theo back to nature, as an antidote to the alienating effects of Paris (19). But then he reminds himself that, in his own situation, too much attention to painting is also unhealthy, and nature will take revenge (20). In an evocative
passage, he describes how, as an artist, he turns away from nature in order to make a picture, but he fears turning away too far (21). And although he exaggerates for effect, he knows that what he wants is already there in nature, waiting to be disclosed (22). In The Hague, he writes that “nature or God” explains the mystery of our existence for many people (23), yet Van Gogh does not simply equate nature and God—he was not a pantheist. He acknowledges “something on high” but insists that it is impossible to find an adequate name for this transcendent dimension (24). The ways in which he attempts to deal with what he acknowledges as an encompassing mystery is the topic of the next section, “The Ineffable.”

(1) Always continue walking a lot and loving nature, for that’s the real way to learn to understand art better and better. Painters understand nature and love it, and teach us to see. [17]

London, beginning of January 1874. To Theo van Gogh

(2) Do I say this because I despise refinement or something?—just the very opposite, because I regard and respect the genuinely human, living with nature—not going against nature—as refinement. [400]

Nieuw-Amsterdam, Sunday, 28 October 1883.

To Theo van Gogh

(3) Nature always begins by resisting the draughtsman, but he who truly takes it seriously doesn’t let himself be deterred by that resistance, on the contrary, it’s one more stimulus to go on fighting, and at bottom nature and an honest draughtsman see eye to eye. Nature is most certainly “intangible” though, yet one must seize it, and with a firm hand. And now, after spending some time wrestling and struggling with nature, it’s starting to become a bit more yielding and submissive, not
that I’m there yet, no one is less inclined to think so than I, but things are beginning to go more smoothly. [175]

Etten, between Wednesday, 12 October, and Saturday, 15 October 1881. To Theo van Gogh

(4) Matters of art soon become so serious that what people say about it is like the croaking of ravens. The heath speaks to you, you listen to that still voice of nature, and nature sometimes becomes a little less hostile; ultimately you are her friend. Then your work is beautiful and calm too. But nature demands some kind of submission, and she demands a period of wrestling with her. [396]

Nieuw-Amsterdam, on or about Monday, 15 October 1883. To Theo van Gogh

(5) It isn’t something soft, something sweet that you think you will find; no, you know that it will be a fight as if with a rock; no, you know that nature can’t be conquered or made submissive without a terrible fight, without more than the ordinary level of patience. [403]

Nieuw-Amsterdam, on or about Monday, 5 November 1883. To Theo van Gogh

(6) What I’m more persuaded of every day is that those people who don’t make wrestling with nature the main consideration do not get there.

I think that if one has tried to follow the masters attentively, one encounters them all at certain moments, deep in reality. I mean—what are called their creations—one will also see in reality to the extent that one—has—similar eyes—similar sentiment—to them. And so I also believe this—if the critics or connoisseurs were more familiar with nature, their judgement would be better than now, when it’s the routine to live only among paintings and to compare them with one another.
Which, of course, is right in its context as one side of the question, but lacks a solid basis if one forgets nature and doesn’t look deeply into it. [480]

Nuenen, on or about Monday, 26 January 1885.

To Theo van Gogh

(7) In any event—whether people like or don’t like what I do and how I do it, for my part I know no other way but to wrestle with nature until such time as she reveals her secret. [480]

Nuenen, on or about Monday, 26 January 1885.

To Theo van Gogh

(8) Contact with artists has, so to speak, completely ceased for me, without my being able to explain exactly how or why. I’m made out to be everything peculiar and bad. This means that I sometimes have a certain sense of being abandoned, but on the other hand it concentrates my attention on the things that aren’t changeable, namely the eternal beauty of nature. I often think of the old story of Robinson Crusoe, who didn’t lose heart because of his solitariness but organized things so that he created work for himself and had a very active and very stimulating life through his own searching and toiling. [267]

The Hague, on or about Tuesday, 19 September 1882.

To Anthon van Rappard

(9) As I said to Isaäcson, it’s really more and more my opinion that by working assiduously from nature, without saying to oneself in advance, I want to do this or that, by working as if one were making shoes, without artistic preoccupations, one won’t always do well, but on the days when one thinks about it the least one finds a subject that holds its own with the work of those who came before us. [823]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Tuesday, 26 November 1889.

To Theo van Gogh
(10) I’ve tried to imbue the landscape with the same sentiment as the figure. Frantically and fervently rooting itself, as it were, in the earth, and yet being half torn up by the storm. I wanted to express something of life’s struggle, both in that white, slender female figure and in those gnarled black roots with their knots. Or rather, because I tried without any philosophizing to be true to nature, which I had before me, something of that great struggle has come into both of them almost inadvertently. [222]

The Hague, Monday, 1 May 1882. To Theo van Gogh

(11) Sometimes I long so much to do landscape, just as one would for a long walk to refresh oneself, and in all of nature, in trees for instance, I see expression and a soul, as it were. A row of pollard willows sometimes resembles a procession of orphan men.

Young corn can have something ineffably pure and gentle about it that evokes an emotion like that aroused by the expression of a sleeping child, for example.

The grass trodden down at the side of a road looks tired and dusty like the inhabitants of a poor quarter. After it had snowed recently I saw a group of Savoy cabbages that were freezing, and that reminded me of a group of women I had seen early in the morning at a water and fire cellar in their thin skirts and old shawls. [292]

The Hague, Sunday, 10 December 1882.

To Theo van Gogh

(12) Copying nature absolutely isn’t the ideal either, but knowing nature in such a way that what one does is fresh and true—that’s what many now lack. [291]

The Hague, between Monday, 4 December, and Saturday, 9 December 1882. To Theo van Gogh
(13) One never finds oneself exactly in a book, only some things from nature in general that one finds vague and ill-defined in one’s own heart. [309]

The Hague, on or about Thursday, 8 February 1883.
To Anthon van Rappard

(14) It’s just that one needs both nature and paintings. [506]

Nuenen, on or about Tuesday, 2 June 1885.
To Theo van Gogh

(15) But—be it in the figure—be it in landscape—how painters have always striven to convince people that a painting is something other than nature in a mirror, something other than imitation, that’s to say re-creation. [539]

Nuenen, on or about Saturday, 7 November 1885.
To Theo van Gogh

(16) I tell you, I choose the said dog’s path, I’ll remain a dog, I’ll be poor, I’ll be a painter, I want to remain human, in nature.

To my mind, anyone who turns away from nature, whose head always has to be full of keeping this up or keeping that up, even if things like that take him away from nature, to such an extent that he can’t help saying it—oh—in this way one so easily arrives, in my view, at a point where one can no longer distinguish white from black—and—and one becomes precisely the opposite of what one is taken to be or thinks oneself to be. [414]

Nuenen, on or about Sunday, 16 December 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

(17) But, again, anyone who works with love and with intelligence has a kind of armour against people’s opinion in the sincerity of his love for nature and art.
Nature is severe and hard, so to speak, but never deceives
and always helps you to go forward.

So I don’t count it a misfortune if I find myself out of
favour with HGT or anyone else, however much I regret it.
That can’t be the direct cause of unhappiness—if I felt no love
for nature and my work, then I would be unhappy. But the less
I get on with people the more I learn to trust nature and to
concentrate on it. [251]

The Hague, Wednesday, 26 July 1882.

To Theo van Gogh

(18) Just think of that; isn’t it almost a new religion that these
Japanese teach us, who are so simple and live in nature as if
they themselves were flowers?

And we wouldn’t be able to study Japanese art, it seems to
me, without becoming much happier and more cheerful, and
it makes us return to nature, despite our education and our
work in a world of convention. [686]

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

(19) The fact that one takes on a kind of second nature in Paris,
that moreover preoccupations with business and art make one
less strong than the peasants, doesn’t prevent one, through
the bonds of having wife and child, from reattaching oneself
all the same to that simpler and truer nature whose ideal
sometimes haunts us. [789]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Sunday, 14 July, or Monday,
15 July 1889. To Theo van Gogh

(20) And then—yes there’s something in life other than paintings,
and this something else one neglects and nature seems to
avenge itself then, and besides, fate is bent on thwarting us.
I think that in these circumstances one must keep to the paintings as much as duty demands but no more. [820]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, on or about Tuesday, 19 November 1889. To Theo van Gogh

(21) I’m not saying that I don’t flatly turn my back on reality to turn a study into a painting—by arranging the colour, by enlarging, by simplifying—but I have such a fear of separating myself from what’s possible and what’s right as far as form is concerned. [698]

Arles, on or about Friday, 5 October 1888.
To Émile Bernard

(22) But in the meantime I’m still living off the real world. I exaggerate, I sometimes make changes to the subject, but still I don’t invent the whole of the painting; on the contrary, I find it ready-made—but to be untangled—in the real world. [698]

Arles, on or about Friday, 5 October 1888.
To Émile Bernard

(23) Sometimes there’s something indescribable in those effects—it’s as if the whole of nature is speaking—and when one goes home one has the same feeling as when one has just finished a book by Victor Hugo, for example. For my part I can’t understand that not everyone sees and feels it—after all, nature or God does it for everyone who has eyes and ears and a heart to perceive. I think that a painter is happy because he’s in harmony with nature as soon as he can depict, to some extent, what he sees.

And that’s a great deal. One knows what one has to do; there’s an abundance of subjects and Carlyle rightly says, Blessed is he who has found his work. [288]

The Hague, Sunday, 26 November, and Monday, 27 November 1882. To Theo van Gogh
What I think is the best life, oh without even the slightest shadow of a doubt, is a life made up of long years of being in touch with nature out of doors—and with the something on high—unfathomable, “awfully Unnameable,” because one can’t find a name for it—above that nature. [403]

Nieuw-Amsterdam, on or about Monday, 5 November 1883. To Theo van Gogh

The Ineffable

As we saw in the first section of chapter 1, Van Gogh sought an alternative kind of understanding—“something altogether new” that “will have no name” (686/4:282)—to replace the traditional Christianity that he had rejected in the Borinage. Yet he did not cease to be preoccupied by the questions that he first encountered through Christianity, questions having to do with the meaning of suffering, the mysteries of the universe and of our conscious selves, and the affirmation of what he calls (drawing on Thomas Carlyle) the “eternal yes.” His address to these matters developed from his early religious upbringing in much the same way as his creative autonomy as an artist developed from the family that he did not entirely reject, despite often being at loggerheads with it. In both cases, his solution to the problem on hand was personal and distinctive. As in his painting, so in his personal search for the elusive “something altogether new,” the transcendent mystery remained immanent in the familiar objects of the world. In the last year of his life, he described Christ as the greatest of artists. In so doing, he was not making a conventionally religious statement, but we are reminded that his “spiritual but not religious” sensibility cannot be well understood.
without reference to his observations in the section on religion with which this book began.

In a letter from Paris, written in 1875, Van Gogh uses the pronoun “it” (1) to indicate the mysterious power of art. He returns often to this pronoun, which he applies not only to painting but also to poetry (17/1:41), love (183/1:312), and religion (90/1:115–16). The deliberate vagueness of “it”—which seems specific but has no clear referent—is meant to spark an acknowledgement of the many dimensions of experience beyond the reach of language.

For Van Gogh, these further dimensions are part of both external nature and our inner selves. Although he did not have a post-Freudian concept of the unconscious, he maintained that each of us is linked from within to the mystery of the cosmos and that the wellsprings of our inner lives are as far beyond our understanding as is the infinite itself. Thus, we can be touched more deeply than we are aware (2), and we might tap into powers that we don’t know we have (3) but that cause “an irresistible urge” (4) to rise up within us. Communication can take place beyond reason by way of the heart (5) and through the “human soul” (6). By such means, we are connected to something that Van Gogh simply calls “Spirit” (6). In a complex passage, he finds this transcendent “ray from on high” in the eyes of a baby, thereby identifying the encompassing mystery with the mystery of the inner self. In this context, he also introduces the word “God” (7), not so much to deploy the traditional religious term for explanatory purposes but to help to redefine the traditional religious term itself.

In addition to “it,” Van Gogh uses various, similarly vague terms to catch a sense of the “something altogether new” that he hoped would replace Christianity and of which, for him, art was a harbinger. Thus, he refers to “Something on high” (8), a “je ne
sais quoi” that is infinitely above us (9), a “white ray” that he hopes to see when he dies (10) and that, meanwhile, is reflected in great painters such as Millet and Corot (11). Likewise, Rembrandt and Delacroix go “into the very highest,” the “infinite” (12), and there are no words in any language for how deeply “mysterious” (13) Rembrandt is. Van Gogh himself attempts to paint “the infinite” and to create a “mysterious effect” (14), reaching for something “almost magical” (15). In communicating a sense of “something on high” that is also “familiar,” Millet restores the human “soul” (16), as do Corbet and Degas in making “the infinite tangible” (17).

In these last examples, Van Gogh indicates that the universal mystery is made present through the special experience of felt participation that great art provides, however incompletely and imperfectly. At one point he writes to Theo, “I myself will never think my own work finished or ready” (499/3:234), and in a letter to Émile Bernard about a painting of a reaper, Van Gogh admits, ruefully, that “it” is not quite “there yet” (18). The mystery that both contains us and is contained within us thus remains the wellspring of a desire for meaning and communion, the “it” to which we aspire, the “something new” that is never fully present to the languages by which we try to grasp it.

(1) Michel, though, isn’t nearly so beautiful as that landscape described in that passage in Adam Bede, which we both found so moving. Bonington, too, almost painted it, and yet that isn’t it either. [44]

Paris, Saturday, 4 September 1875. To Theo van Gogh

(2) Uncle told me that Daubigny has died, I freely admit that it made me sad to hear it, just as it did to hear that Brion had died (his Saying grace is hanging in my room), because the
work of such men, if one understands it, moves one more deeply than one is aware of. [142]

Amsterdam, Sunday, 3 March 1878. To Theo van Gogh

(3) Something similar—a kind of fixed law of nature—seems to exist as regards working, in the sense that when one is engaged in it, one feels more capacity for work than one knew one had, or rather actually did have. [291]

The Hague, between Monday, 4 December, and Saturday, 9 December 1882. To Theo van Gogh

(4) This is my ambition, which is based less on resentment than on love in spite of everything, based more on a feeling of serenity than on passion.

Even though I’m often in a mess, inside me there’s still a calm, pure harmony and music. In the poorest little house, in the filthiest corner, I see paintings or drawings. And my mind turns in that direction as if with an irresistible urge. [249]

The Hague, on or about Friday, 21 July 1882.

To Theo van Gogh

(5) Got up quite early and went in the morning to the French church, where a minister from the vicinity of Lyon was preaching, he’d come to collect money for an evangelical mission. His sermon consisted mainly of stories from the lives of factory workers there, and although he wasn’t especially eloquent as far as ease of expression goes, and though one even noticed how difficult it was for him and a little awkward, as it were, his words were moving nonetheless, because they came from the heart, and that alone has the power to make an impression on other hearts. [141]

Amsterdam, Monday, 18 February, and Tuesday, 19 February 1878. To Theo van Gogh
Meryon, even when he’s drawing bricks, granite, the iron bars or the parapet of a bridge, puts something of the human soul, shaken by I know not what heartache, into his etching. I’ve seen drawings of Gothic architecture by V. Hugo. Well, without having Meryon’s powerful and masterly execution, there was something of the same sentiment. What is this sentiment? It has some kinship with that which Albrecht Dürer expressed in his Melancholy, which in our times James Tissot and M. Maris also have (however different these two may be one from the other). Some profound critic rightly said of James Tissot “He’s a soul in need.” But in any event, there’s something of the human soul there; it’s for that reason that that is great, immense, infinite, and put Viollet-le-Duc beside it, it’s stone, and the other (namely Meryon), that’s Spirit.

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

How much good it does a person if one is in a gloomy mood to walk on the empty beach and look into the grey-green sea with the long white lines of the waves. Yet if one has a need for something great, something infinite, something in which one can see God, one needn’t look far. I thought I saw something—deeper, more infinite, more eternal than an ocean—in the expression in the eyes of a baby—when it wakes in the morning and crows—or laughs because it sees the sun shine into its cradle. If there is a “ray from on high,” it might be found there.

The Hague, Sunday, 10 December 1882. To Theo van Gogh

I’m not saying that one must expect the something on High to do absolutely everything, no, but the Something on high exists, nonetheless; at least if Millet believed in it you’ll
obviously want to trust him in this—that he wasn’t sitting
dozing when he knew that it existed. [397]

Nieuw-Amsterdam, on or about Tuesday, 16 October
1883. To Theo van Gogh

(9) Now take all the prearranged airs, the conventional, how
hugely priggish it actually is, how absurd it is, a person who
thinks that he knows it all and that things go as he thinks—as
if there wasn’t always a je ne sais quoi of almighty good and
also an element of evil in all things in life, which one feels as
something infinite above us, infinitely bigger, more powerful
than us. A person who doesn’t feel small—who doesn’t realize
that he’s a speck—what a fundamental mistake he makes. [400]

Nieuw-Amsterdam, Sunday, 28 October 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

(10) Well, left to my own devices I haven’t achieved the light and
what I want, very well, so be it, but precisely since abandoning
their systems outright, I yet have a degree of hope that my
efforts won’t be in vain.

And that I shall see the white ray before my eyes close.

Whatever the inner struggle about not having found it
yet, I’ve never regretted having said that I considered black
ray black ray, and having abandoned that outright, save for
not arguing about it, which, if I have argued about it, was a
mistake. [403]

Nieuw-Amsterdam, on or about Monday, 5 November
1883. To Theo van Gogh

(11) But I’ve also tried to explain to you since that, for my
part, I haven’t been able to find any peace in Pa’s way of
thinking (and H.G.T.’s, which I find much the same), and was
increasingly beginning to realize that there’s such a thing as
black ray and white ray, and that I found their light black and
a convention compared with the lightness of Millet and Corot, for instance. [403]

Nieuw-Amsterdam, on or about Monday, 5 November 1883. To Theo van Gogh

(12) The Syndics is perfect—the finest Rembrandt—but that Jewish bride—not reckoned so much—what an intimate, what an infinitely sympathetic painting, painted—with a glowing hand. You see, in The syndics Rembrandt is true to life, although even there he still goes into the higher—into the very highest—infinite. But yet—Rembrandt could do something else—when he didn’t have to be true in the literal sense, as he did in a portrait—when he could—make poetry—be a poet, that’s to say Creator. That’s what he is in the Jewish bride. Oh how Delacroix would have understood that very painting! What a noble sentiment, fathomlessly deep. [534]

Nuenen, on or about Saturday, 10 October 1885.

To Theo van Gogh

(13) Rembrandt goes so deep into the mysterious that he says things for which there are no words in any language. It is with justice that they call Rembrandt—magician—that’s no easy occupation. [534]

Nuenen, on or about Saturday, 10 October 1885.

To Theo van Gogh

(14) But the painting isn’t finished like that. To finish it, I’m now going to be an arbitrary colourist.

I exaggerate the blond of the hair, I come to orange tones, chromes, pale lemon. Behind the head—instead of painting the dull wall of the mean room, I paint the infinite.

I make a simple background of the richest, most intense blue that I can prepare, and with this simple combination,
the brightly lit blond head, against this rich blue background achieves a mysterious effect, like a star in the deep azure. [663]

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

(15) If you’re well, you should be able to live on a piece of bread, while working the whole day long, and still having the strength to smoke and to drink your glass; you need that in these conditions. And still to feel the stars and the infinite, clearly, up there. Then life is almost magical, after all. Ah, those who don’t believe in the sun down here are truly blasphemous. [663]

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

(16) I think you were lucky to see Degas at his home.

I have a portrait of an Arlésienne on the go in which I’m seeking an expression different from that of Parisian women.

Ah Millet! Millet! How that fellow painted humanity and the “something on high,” familiar and yet solemn.

These days, to think that that fellow wept as he started painting, that Giotto, that Angelico painted on their knees, Delacroix so utterly sad and moved ... almost smiling. Who are we Impressionists to act like them already? Soiled in the struggle for life ... “who will give back to the soul that which the breath of revolutions has taken away”—that’s the cry of a poet of the other generation who seemed to have a premonition of our present weaknesses, our sicknesses, our confusions. [856]

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

(17) But there you are; I’m so far from eccentric. A Greek statue, a peasant by Millet, a Dutch portrait, a nude woman by Courbet or Degas, these calm and modelled perfections are the reason that many other things, the primitives as well as the Japanese,
seem to me .... like writing with a pen; they interest me infinitely .. but something complete, a perfection, makes the infinite tangible to us.

And to enjoy such a thing is like coitus, the moment of the infinite. [649]

Arles, Sunday, 29 July 1888. To Émile Bernard

(18) Have you seen a study of mine with a little reaper? A field of yellow wheat and a yellow sun. It isn’t there yet—but in it I’ve again attacked this devil of a question of yellow. [822]

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