"MY OWN PORTRAIT IN WRITING"

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The difference between subject and object slices through subject as well as through object.
Theodor W. Adorno

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"My Own Portrait in Writing": Self-Fashioning in the Letters of Vincent van Gogh
Patrick Grant

"My Own Portrait in Writing"

SELF-FASHIONING IN THE LETTERS OF VINCENT VAN GOGH

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For Gloria

Tomorrow morning I'll go to the little English church you know,
it lies there so peacefully in the evening in that quiet Begijnhof between
the thorn hedges, and seems to be saying, "In loco este dabo pacem,"
that is, "in this place will I give peace," saith the Lord. Amen, be it so.
VINCENT VAN GOGH, Amsterdam, 1877

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I'd also like to see if I can't make my own portrait in writing. First I start by saying that to my mind the same person supplies material for very diverse portraits.

VINCENT VAN GOGH, Arles, 1888

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PREFACE

Although the present book stands on its own, it can also be read as a companion to *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: A Critical Study* (Athabasca University Press, 2014). Together, these two books offer a response to the surprising fact that, despite many scholarly and critical acknowledgements of the extraordinary literary distinction of Van Gogh's collected correspondence, there has been no extended study of his letters as literature.

As a way of addressing this gap in the assessment of Van Gogh's work as a whole, my earlier book focused on the imaginative and conceptual coherence of the collected correspondence, but I made no attempt at any detailed consideration of Van Gogh's writing from a theoretical perspective. Yet if Van Gogh's literary achievement is to be adequately assessed, his correspondence needs to be read from both practical-critical and literary-theoretical points of view. Consequently, the present book approaches the letters by way of a set of ideas about dialogue and self-fashioning derived especially from Mikhail Bakhtin, and, in each chapter, I bring these ideas to bear while also engaging the reader in some hitherto undiscussed aspect of Van Gogh's writing.

Throughout, I deal only with the letters, together with their attendant sketches, and the tacit assumption (well, now not so tacit) is that Van Gogh's writing would be highly regarded even if the paintings and drawings had not survived. Yet, to date, commentary on the correspondence has reflected mainly the interests of art historians and biographers, whose principal focus is on Van Gogh the painter. But if the letters are to come into their own as literature, some separation of the domains of scholarly discourse is in order, if only to enable the foregrounding of both critical and theoretical modes of enquiry and analysis.

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All quotations from the correspondence are from *Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters* (2009). As the editors, Leo Jansen and Hans Luijten, say, this English translation is "the first truly integral and updated compilation of Van Gogh's correspondence available to an international readership" (*Editio: Internationales Jahrbuch für Editionswissenschaft* 15 [2001]: 53). Consequently, it makes good sense to work from the English version, and in the preface to my earlier book, I weighed some pros and cons of doing so. But then, as now, the central point is that I am writing mainly for English-speaking readers who will be reading the letters in English. Still, it is important not to let critical interpretation override what the original languages say, and I have checked the Dutch and French, as appropriate, to defend against interpretive transgressions.

I gratefully acknowledge help received from the Van Gogh Museum and from the staff of the Museum Library. Many thanks to Hans Luijten for expert help, advice, and encouragement all the way, and also to Teio Meedendorp, Sue Mitchell, Peter Stoepker, and Henry Summerfield. Permission to print excerpts and sketches from the letters has been gratefully received from the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. Citations are from the six volumes of Vincent Van Gogh, *The Letters,* edited by Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker (London: Thames and Hudson. 2009).

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"My Own Portrait in Writing"

INTRODUCTION

The Dialogical Structure of Self-Fashioning

Van Gogh Old and New: Reading the Letters as Literature

Van Gogh's letters have played a crucial role in the shaping of his reputation as a painter. This is so because the letters provide a wealth of information about not only his painterly practice but also his intensely lived, brief life. Consequently, it has been all too inviting to make connections between the dramatically tragic aspects of his biography and the incandescent paintings, which can readily be seen as his most heartfelt and revealing self-expression. One result is that Van Gogh's fame became rapidly associated with the legend of the painter as a romantically tragic figure — an isolated genius whose blazing individuality was prematurely extinguished, and he himself driven to madness by the hard realities of a philistine world.

The romantic legend remains very much alive today, but recent scholarship has also been concerned to recover a more thoughtful, learned, and strategically minded Van Gogh, who was closely connected to the art world of his time and who deliberated carefully about how he might best shape his career in relation to it. Again, the letters provide a wealth of information about these further dimensions of Van Gogh's character and professional endeavours, however much the

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more brightly illuminated portrait of the artist as isolated hero and victim has prevailed in the general view.

Yet, already in 1959, after reading a recent English translation of the letters, W. H. Auden pointed out that although "at first sight" the Van Gogh whom we encounter there "seems to fit the myth exactly," in fact, "the more one reads . . . the less like the myth he becomes," until, finally, "it is impossible to think of him as the romantic *artiste maudit,* or even as tragic hero."[1] Published fifty years later, the magnificent *Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters* (2009) does much to confirm Auden's observation.[2] This is the first fully annotated edition of the entire correspondence, and it is lavishly supplied with illustrations of virtually every work of art that Van Gogh mentions. It also provides detailed notes on the impressive range of his literary interests, and as we read the letters along with the scholarly apparatus provided by the 2009 editors, the view that gradually comes into focus is of a highly literate, dedicated practitioner working self-consciously within a broad and complex professional world.

A similar sense of Van Gogh as a knowledgeable and careful investigator of the ways and means of his craft emerges from a further major project recently published by the Van Gogh Museum, dealing with Van Gogh's material practice. As Sjraar van Heugten explains, Van Gogh "worked systematically and to a carefully thought-out plan, generally leaving little to chance," though he was also "innovative and intelligent" and adapted what he learned from other artists to suit his own temperament and abilities.[3] Likewise, in the keynote symposium address titled "Van Gogh's Studio Practice in Context" (Amsterdam, 24 June 2013), Sir John Leighton summarized how in "recent decades," the "standard image" of Van Gogh as an "untamed, passionate, intuitive artist" has gradually "shifted," as a "deeper understanding" of his life and work emerged. One result is that there is now a better appreciation of the "calculation, logic, rationale" of Van Gogh's way of working, so that his "underlying deliberate self-awareness and even control" appear as more "striking" than was previously the case. Still, Leighton correctly points out that Van Gogh's "intuition, passion, spontaneity" remain important and are not simply cancelled by the more recent emphasis on

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"method, logic," and "structure," although this new focus has opened up important new perspectives on Van Gogh's life and work.[4]

A variety of impressive studies has contributed to the shift Leighton describes, but I will not dwell on this interesting body of scholarship for the simple reason that the accounts rendered to date of Van Gogh's remarkable genius are marked by a significant omission, which, in a previous study as well as in this one, I am especially concerned to address. This omission has to do with how extraordinary the letters are in their own right, as literature.

Certainly, there is no shortage of acknowledgements, made in passing, of the high literary quality of Van Gogh's writing. For instance, the editors of the 2009 edition describe his correspondence as "a literary monument" that "attains the universality of all great literature" (1:9, 15). Leo Jansen places the letters "in the front rank of world literature," and Dick van Halsema points out that in 2010 the Museum of Dutch Literature ranked Van Gogh among "our hundred greatest dead writers."[5] Similar gestures are offered in a variety of critical and scholarly contexts but have remained unsupported by any extended study of the literary dimensions of Van Gogh's achievement.

In an attempt to address this gap in the assessment of Van Gogh's work as a whole, in *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: A Critical Study* (2014) I undertook an analysis of the collected correspondence, concentrating on key patterns of images and ideas that I held to be central to Van Gogh's creativity as a writer. But in so doing, I passed over an important question, which I acknowledged as needing further attention. This question asks, simply: By what criteria do we judge Van Gogh's letters to be, specifically, literary?

For the purposes of the critical enquiry conducted in the earlier book, I settled for a provisional answer to this question based on Heidegger's description of art as a form of disclosure enabling us to see familiar things in new ways, thereby expanding our perceptual and cognitive range of reference and understanding. As Van Gogh says, things are "put in a new light by the artist" (152/1:242), and I was concerned to show how Van Gogh's writerly imagination and imaginative thinking could disclose the world to us in fresh, sometimes

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challenging, but, in the end, life-affirming ways, informed throughout by a characteristic vision that evolved over time. I considered (and still consider) such a study to be foundational for the assessment of Van Gogh's creative imagination as a writer.

But under pressure from a rapidly developing interest in literary theory, especially during the 1980s and 1990s, assumptions about the internal unity and coherence of literary texts have been vigorously questioned. A wide range of new lines of enquiry deriving, for instance, from semiotics, poststructuralism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, and ethnic and gender studies, among others, has highlighted the embeddedness of literature in a wide variety of larger, often internally fragmented, cultural contexts. Attention consequently became focused on the gaps, elisions, and contradictions by which texts are riven, as well as on the tacit ideological and psychological agendas by which they are shaped, and on how unpredictably their semantic and cultural codes interact with the semantic and cultural codes of their readers. Under such scrutiny, the idea of literature itself was problematized, as its porous boundaries and flexible conventions made it especially vulnerable to assimilation into broader discussions of discourse in general. Within such a set of concerns, how, then, might we undertake to read Van Gogh's letters?

What Is Literature Anyway? Cultural Codes and Timeless Truths

Margaret Thatcher once famously declared that society doesn't exist. In the same sense, we might say that criminal negligence doesn't exist — except that you really can go to jail for it, sometimes with good reason. In fact, as non-Thatcherites everywhere understand, societies can be organized, and social programs can make a difference to people's lives even if "society," like "criminal negligence," eludes exact definition. I want to begin by suggesting that the same holds true of "literature," which is not an empty category, even though it also eludes precise definition.

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In *The Event of Literature,* Terry Eagleton addresses this point at some length, arguing that it is incorrect to say that if a concept has no definable essence, it is therefore vacuous.[6] To clarify the point, Eagleton looks to Wittgenstein's idea of "family resemblances" (20), the complex networks of overlapping similarities that bind our activities together in much the same way as a family is bound together by numerous overlapping affinities. Although the "essence" of a large extended family cannot be clearly described, it can nonetheless, for practical purposes, make sense to talk about such a family as an actual entity.

As Eagleton goes on to point out, however, one problem with family-resemblance theory is that, with a little ingenuity, we can find similarities among all kinds of randomly selected objects. Whatever attributes are held to be pertinent in any actual case must therefore be judged to have a specific significance, and this brings us back to the problem of, again, providing necessary and sufficient conditions along essentialist lines (23). That is, at some point, judgement has to intervene — to tie the knot, as it were, at the end of a thread that is otherwise endlessly drawn in the wake of an ever-inquisitive needle on the hunt for an ever-elusive definition. And so, although Eagleton agrees that there is no "essence" to literature, he looks for anchorage in certain "empirical categories, not theoretical ones" (25), based on what people generally have in mind when they talk about this topic:

> They mean by "literary" a work which is fictional, or which yields significant insight into human experience as opposed to reporting empirical truths, or which uses language in a peculiarly heightened, figurative or self-conscious way, or which is not practical in the sense that shopping lists are, or which is highly valued as a piece of writing. (25)

On the family-resemblance model, these criteria are interconnected by way of overlapping affinities and thereby provide a set of guidelines that "help cast light on the nature of literature-talk" (32). It is not hard to see how such criteria can map sufficiently well, for instance, onto a body of writing such as Van Gogh's. His letters frequently provide significant,

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fresh insights. They use language in a heightened and figurative manner. They are often imaginative. And his writing is frequently distinguished or arrestingly idiosyncratic. The acclaim that the collected correspondence has received from readers who recognize its literary distinction presumably reflects a set of responses that can be loosely accounted for by the above criteria, considered as a set of guidelines.

But in his ensuing discussion of the distinctive strategies of literary discourse, Eagleton quickly moves on to address some further, more theoretical issues. In so doing, he acknowledges the explanatory power of "Heidegger's concept of truth as disclosure or revelation" (65), and, as I have mentioned, Heidegger's account of how art can "make things new" was helpful in my earlier study of Van Gogh's writing. But in the present context, it is also worth noting that Heidegger's idea of truth as a disclosure and contemplation of Being remains largely untouched by such pressing concerns as historical contradiction, ideological struggle, and semantic ambiguity. And yet we need to recognize as well that the temptation to replace Heidegger's view of the aesthetic by a thoroughgoing historicism that focuses exclusively on such matters runs the opposite risk of causing the idea of literature to be absorbed into a description of the cultural conditions enabling the production of texts in general. For instance, in his influential book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning,* Stephen Greenblatt makes a strong case for texts being inextricably involved in "larger networks of meaning in which both the author and his works participate," so that neither literature nor the reader exists in a sealed-off universe of discourse.[7] For Greenblatt, self-fashioning (the idea that we have some autonomy in shaping the kind of person we want to be) is curtailed by the social and historical circumstances that shape us, beyond our full understanding. It is impossible, Greenblatt says, to reconstruct fully either the cultures of past ages or our own culturally coded interactions with them (5). Consequently, the process of self-fashioning, like the process of reading, is "resolutely dialectical" (1), and the "impurities," "indeterminacy and incompleteness" built into it are ineradicable, even as the "I" being fashioned takes on "characteristic modes of expression, recurrent narrative patterns," and the like (5–6).

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But an analysis, such as Greenblatt's, that insists on contradiction, incompleteness, and the interplay of cultural codes is likely to find that any text at all is interesting and relevant as grist for the analytical mill. The question of whether or not "literature" is a useful category is not especially pressing here, because a resolutely pursued historicism effectively absorbs the aesthetic into a discussion of cultural production, thereby leaving us with a problem that is the exact opposite of Heidegger's ahistoricism.

As accomplished thinkers, Heidegger and Greenblatt take steps to address the counter-case to their own predominant emphases. But I am mainly interested here in the predominant emphases themselves and in the gap with which they confront us between a resolute "hermeneutic of Being," on the one hand, and a resolute historicism, on the other. In attempting to bridge this gap, I have found Mikhail Bakhtin to be especially helpful because he presents strong arguments in support of the idea that although texts are indeed shaped by an endless interplay of cultural codes, nonetheless a high value can also be placed on the idea of literature. That is, for Bakhtin, the alternative to a single, clear meaning is not a merely chaotic relativism but a tension-fraught, dialogical exchange on the threshold, an exchange that he finds embodied in and exemplified by great literature. To clarify this point, in the following remarks I draw on some of Bakhtin's best-known ideas, though I do not deal with the several controversies occasioned especially by discussions of authorship and attribution. Throughout, I draw also on Michael Holquist, who has done much to explain and develop the epistemological foundations of Bakhtin's thought.

Bakhtin, Dialogue, and the Self Interrupted

In his study of Dostoevsky's poetics, Bakhtin argues that to be human is to be in communication, and thus "to be for another, and through the other, for one's self."[8] That is, as Holquist explains, for Bakhtin every "self" needs an "other" even to begin to chart a course in the world.[9] This is so because the self emerges only through relationships

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within specific historical situations. This is what Bakhtin means when he says that "through the other" one comes to a sense of "one's self."

But, as Holquist points out, the relationship between "I" and "other" is asymmetrical because the self is perpetually "open" and "unfinished," a work in progress, vulnerable to uncertainties and insecurities and yet called to shape itself meaningfully (26). By contrast, the space and time of the other are accorded a degree of stability and identity. That is, by encountering what I see as a stable value represented by the other, I am able to accord my own "open" and "unfinished" self-fashioning a sufficient degree of structure to shape a meaningful engagement with the world and with my historical situation within it.

Yet when the other is a person (rather than, say, an idea), the values that I see as relatively stable are in fact experienced subjectively by that other, who is also a project-in-the-making, likewise called to a self-fashioning that is perpetually in process. My encounters with the world thus confront me with a wide range of values in contention with one another, values that are often beset by insecurities even though called to objectivity and among which I must choose my allegiances.

Bakhtin's word for the endlessly complex and unobjectifiable multiplicity of dialogues that constitute the human quest for stability and meaning is "heteroglossia." In every individual case of self-fashioning, this multiplicity of dialogues affords the opportunities and constraints in terms of which a person can be "through the other, for one's self."[10] Personal identity is thus shaped by a process that is multi-directional rather than linear, entailing an array of dialogical relationships within some of which, for instance, I might well shift my persona, aims, and allegiances. But if my persona (the face that I present to the world, for practical purposes) becomes merely a kaleidoscope of expedient manoeuvres, my identity will volatilize accordingly, and instead of "making something of myself" (as the saying goes), I will "come to nothing." By contrast, a person's self-fashioning, amidst the all-but-infinite range of potential dialogues on offer, entails specific engagements, patterns of response, ways of imagining and thinking, which in turn can take on the shape of a narrative — "the story of my life." Still, this narrative is never complete, nor is it without discontinuities

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and contradictions, because the self is a provisional synthesis rather than a self-identical essence. The Buddha and David Hume were right about this — and so is Bakhtin.

In his book on Dostoevsky, Bakhtin develops these ideas about self-fashioning specifically in relation to literature, his main claim being that Dostoevsky's characters are given the status of "authentic" subjects independent of the author's own subjectivity.[11] That is, Dostoevsky renders the "unfinalizability" of the people whom he depicts, and, in so doing, his art "liberates and de-reifies the human being" (61, 63). Dostoevsky's novels thus provide special insight into the process whereby the self is shaped dialogically, and, in his writing, "referential meaning" is "indissolubly fused with the position of a personality" (93). The result is that the drama of self-fashioning is itself thematized through the multiple or "polyphonic" dialogical structures within the novel. Bakhtin points also to Dostoevsky's fondness for doubles and "paired characters" and for a dramatized sense of "*simultaneity*" and "*co-existence*" whereby people are inserted into relationships through which, in turn, they discover their own personal trajectories (28). The "double-voiced discourse" that characterizes this kind of dialogue is everywhere a driving force in Dostoevsky's novels, along with "hidden polemic, polemically colored confession, hidden dialogue," and "almost no word without an intense sideward glance at someone else's word" (203). Already, we might recognize here the very idiom of Van Gogh's letters, but before considering this analogy further, I want to return to Eagleton's discussion of literature and, in that light, to reconsider Bakhtin's ideas about how, as a novelist, Dostoevsky thematizes the process itself of dialogical self-fashioning. As a way of getting back to Eagleton, a little assistance from Maurice Merleau-Ponty will prove helpful.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological understanding of art follows upon his compelling account, in *The Phenomenology of Perception,* of how the human body is a source of signification in which sensuous perception is already laced through with a reflective dimension born out of the relationship between body and world. For Merleau-Ponty, seeing is always a *way* of seeing and is a means of organizing the world rather than an objective reflection on or replication of it.

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When Merleau-Ponty applies these ideas to language, he sounds very much like Bakhtin. For instance, in *Signs,* we learn that speech is "always only a fold in the immense fabric of language," with which we are taken up in a perpetual dialogical relationship that does not "leave a place for pure meaning." Within this dialogue, "at the moment of expression the other to whom I address myself and I who express myself are incontestably linked together."[12] Elsewhere, Merleau-Ponty goes on to explain that in such an "exchange," "there are never quite two of us and yet one is never alone."[13]

All of this is very much in harmony with Bakhtin's thinking on the same issues, but when Merleau-Ponty turns to literature, he has further points to make, especially about the relationship between dialogue and intent. Thus, in "Studies in the Literary Use of Language," he describes literature as something that "lives through an imposture" insofar as the sum total of the countless "accidents" that influence the production of a text are taken to reflect "the author's intention."[14] It is a cliché of literary criticism that the "intentional fallacy" should be avoided: in other words, that readers should realize that the effects of the artifact outreach what the author thought he or she was doing at the time. In *Signs,* Merleau-Ponty extends this principle to painting, arguing that a painter "is no more capable of seeing his paintings than the writer is capable of reading his work." Rather, "it is in others that expression takes on its relief and really becomes signification" — which is to say, the significance of the work is opened up by way of a dialogical relationship with the reader or viewer, thereby extending the significance of the work beyond the artist's specific intent, or "personal vibration" and "inner monologue" (52).

This is not to say that readers or viewers grasp the whole significance either. As we have seen, language does not give us "transparent significations" (41) and meaning is "never completed" (42). As Greenblatt observes throughout *Renaissance Self-Fashioning,* the individual reader's codes and the cultural codes of the text interpenetrate in endlessly complex ways. Consequently, in matters of value, what we take to be truth comes to us dialogically and by way of a continuing exploration. As Merleau-Ponty says, sounding much like Heidegger, art

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presents us with "a way of seeing" and of "inhabiting the world," offering "a certain relationship to being" (53–54). But Merleau-Ponty goes on to stress that the internal organization of the work of art achieves a certain "equilibrium," as a result of which the text is, as it were, in dialogue with itself, holding its own internal contradictions in suspension (43). In turn, this internal dialogue expresses a distinctive way of inhabiting the world, with which we are also invited to engage. Here, a Heideggerian understanding of the truth of art as disclosure joins with a dialogical view of the artifact as culturally situated and contested, reducible neither to the author's intent nor to a reader's interpretation.

Embodied Intentions: The Textual Dynamics of Self-Fashioning

These comments on intentionality and on the text being in dialogue with itself can return us now to Eagleton, who, on the topic of intention, offers an argument quite similar to Merleau-Ponty's, except that Eagleton also introduces what he describes as "a fruitful distinction" between asking what an author has in mind and what the "intention" of the text itself is (148). As we see in the work of Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty, a text cannot be reduced to the intentional utterance of a single person, the author, but a text nonetheless can have a high degree of coherence — through imagery, diction, constellations of ideas, and so on. Eagleton suggests that these can also be usefully described as "intentions," of which, again, "authors know little or nothing" (148). I am reminded here of a friend who was once involved with security at a racetrack. When undesirables were banned from the premises, security guards would try to remember not their faces but their gaits as the best way of recognizing them if they turned up again. Unconsciously, the body has a pattern of movement that is recognizable to others but not to the person whose body it is. Likewise, the body of a text can be the bearer of a significance of which the author is unaware. Eagleton describes this as the text being "faithful to the law of its own being" (60) — the embodiment of meanings, as in Merleau-Ponty's "way of seeing," that are unselfconsciously expressed or intended.

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It follows that the text is in dialogue not just with the reader but also with itself insofar as it attains a distinctive "equilibrium" in tune with "the law of its own being." For Eagleton, this internal dialogue is a fundamental "strategy" of the literary artifact, and here he is drawn to Fredric Jameson, who sees literature as raising from within itself the ideological issues and contexts to which it then also offers a response (177). As Eagleton says, "paradoxically, the literary work of art projects out of its own innards the very historical and ideological subtext to which it is a strategic reply" (170). In conducting a dialogue with itself, the text therefore puts on offer a way of "inhabiting the world" that engages with the reader, again dialogically: "there are never quite two of us and yet one is never alone."

My main aim in this study is to read Van Gogh's letters in the context of the ideas I have here broadly set out. Although, as we have seen, "literature" eludes precise definition, I follow Eagleton in maintaining that it is not an empty concept and that "literature-talk" can be valuable and productive, even if the domain itself is often contested. Throughout, I want to retain Heidegger's idea that the literary imagination reveals occluded aspects of familiar experiences and objects and that these disclosures can be valuable in extending our understanding of the world and of one another. But I want also to acknowledge that literature is a product of particular historical and cultural circumstances and is the site of contradictions, aporias, distortions, and irresolutions of various kinds. As Greenblatt says, its structure is "resolutely dialectical" (1) and, as he goes on to point out, is richly contaminated by the interaction between its codes, the codes of the culture within which it was produced, and the codes of its readers. Bakhtin's "heteroglossia" likewise draws attention to this perpetual negotiation of meaning, both in human culture as the site of our individual and communal self-fashioning and in how we engage with literary texts. In this negotiation, we have some degree of autonomy, even though the modes of production within which we find ourselves situated are the bearers of a significance that shapes our intent beyond our full understanding. Eagleton correctly talks about the text itself as having an "intention" that embodies a "way

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of seeing" in excess of the author's conscious awareness, as Merleau-Ponty affirms. Consequently, when I talk about self-fashioning in Van Gogh's letters, I do not just mean the descriptions that they offer of the events of his life. Rather, as with Bakhtin's reading of Dostoevsky, I mean that one key criterion relevant to the assessment of Van Gogh's letters as literature is that the process of self-fashioning is itself thematized by the internal dialogues that the letters conduct with themselves. That is, Van Gogh's letters raise, from within themselves, questions and issues to which they also respond. This is the central "strategy" by which they acquire the stylistic "equilibrium," the embodied "way of seeing" that invites our attention and engagement.

As it happens, in Van Gogh's case, the process of self-fashioning through the interaction of self and other is especially intense because Van Gogh well knew the unusual fragility of his ego, the "I" called to shape itself in the image of an other. Throughout his life, his mental stability was a concern, and, in turn, this special vulnerability helps to explain why he was such a resolute idealist. For Van Gogh, that is, ideals had objective value and were strongly self-identical, offering thereby a counterweight and antidote to his personal instability. But, again, the literary quality of his writing lies not just in this kind of biographical description but also in how his letters reproduce the process of an unusually intense self-fashioning by way of their own internal structures.

Conclusion: Van Gogh's "Double-Voiced Discourse"

As a way now of bringing Van Gogh into the foreground, I would like to return to Bakhtin's remarks on Dostoevsky's "fondness for doubles" and for the kinds of "juxtaposition and counterpointing" by which the simultaneous co-existence of self and other is represented in the novels (28). These dialogical structures in turn engage us in the "inescapable open-endedness" of the self-fashioning to which we are committed by virtue of being human and which is accompanied always by contest

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and struggle (47). As any reader of Van Gogh's collected correspondence quickly recognizes, this is the very stuff also of his writing, and commentators on his letters — and, especially, on his paintings — often notice how fascinated he was by the idea of "simultaneous contrasts" and by binary oppositions in which differences merge or otherwise influence each other. For instance, Wouter van der Veen points out how, everywhere in his writing, Van Gogh searches for "contraries that complement" and is preoccupied with binaries.[15] Naifeh and Smith remark on how nature always had "a double edge" for Van Gogh, at once consoling and alienating. They also note how interested he was in theories about complementary and contrasting colour and how he favoured painting pairs of objects as part of an "obsession with pairings and partnerships."[16] Lubin remarks on how often Van Gogh paints couples and also pairs that overlap and merge, as, for instance, his paired cypresses, paired cottages, and other twinned structures.[17] Schama points to "optical opposites that were also complementaries" in Van Gogh's paintings, and how, in Arles, he especially exploited dramatic contrasts, juxtaposing "fruitful and barren worlds, fertility and self-destruction, comradeship and loneliness."[18] Callow notes how entranced Van Gogh was with Rembrandt's *Jewish Bride,* which, again, depicts a couple who are separate yet merged, and also how fond he was of depicting paired objects under strain, such as, for instance, the juxtaposed "death-throes and birth pangs" in *Wheatfield with Crows*.[19] Jansen reminds us that, throughout the entire shaping of Van Gogh's reputation, the letters have been "the written complement" of the paintings — the overarching binary opposite, as it were, in the dialogue between painting and writing by means of which his fame was established.[20]

Taken together, these comments point to a distinctive quality in Van Gogh's thinking and imagining, reflected in his strong attraction to binary structures, complementary oppositions, startling juxtapositions, vigorous contrasts, and dynamically interrelated pairs — the "friction of ideas" (396/3:36), as he himself says. I do not want to speculate about why this is so but rather to accept it as a point of entry into the kinds of readings I wish to provide in the following

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pages. Throughout, I focus on several varieties of internal dialogue, or "double-voiced discourse," that the letters conduct with themselves as they reproduce and thematize the process of self-fashioning. In turn, I locate this process in Van Gogh's responses to questions and issues that engage and exemplify a sustained, dynamic interrelationship throughout the correspondence between a questing, insecure "I" and a value-laden, often idealized "other." Considered as literature, Van Gogh's letters achieve (unevenly, to be sure, but with impressive consistency nonetheless) a tense, dialogically negotiated equilibrium between these opposites, which in turn shows forth and embodies a way of seeing and understanding that (as with his paintings) is at once disturbingly challenging and powerfully illuminating.

My aim here has been to introduce the concepts underpinning the readings of Van Gogh's letters in the chapters that follow, each of which deals with a specific topic. Thus, Chapter 1, "The Painterly Writer," considers how the letters reproduce the dialogue between painting and writing that was central to the shaping of Van Gogh's life and work as a whole. Chapter 2, "Van Gogh's Rhetorical Binaries," deals with how Van Gogh deploys strong oppositions, contrasts, and juxtapositions as a means of exploring the contradictions between his ideals and the difficulties of his actual self-fashioning. Chapter 3, "Reading Van Gogh's Letter-Sketches," deals with the 242 sketches contained in (or accompanying) the letters. The sketches work symbiotically with the texts, by way of complement and contrast, deepening and expanding our understanding of the process and dynamics of Van Gogh's development. Chapter 4, "Self-Knowledge — Who Has It?," deals with a pervasive, unresolved dialogue between Van Gogh's insistence on maintaining contact with an objective, recognizable material world and his acknowledgement that, in the heat of the creative moment, surrendering the stable structures of ordinary experience, and even of personal identity, is also necessary. In the conclusion, I offer a synthesis of the preceding arguments, while also drawing briefly on reader-response theory to suggest that there is a significant analogy between the dialogical structure of the letters and the reader's dialogical encounter with them.

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As I noted at the start of this introduction, a literary-critical approach to Van Gogh's collected correspondence needs to be responsive to the imaginative complexity, power, and coherence of his writing. But the letters also need to be read within the context of modern literary-theoretical discourse if we are to attend effectively to Van Gogh's writerly strategies and thereby open a path to the further discussions that his letters will surely elicit as they enter fully into their own domain, as literature. Consequently, in the following chapters, I make the case that Van Gogh's correspondence can be fruitfully interpreted by way of the ideas about dialogue and self-fashioning described in this introduction and, especially, by how the process of self-fashioning is thematized within the texts of the letters themselves.

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CHAPTER 1

The Painterly Writer

In 1892, two years after Van Gogh's death, excerpts from his letters were printed in a Dutch catalogue, and in 1893, several further passages were printed in Dutch and French in a Flemish magazine. In the same year, Émile Bernard published selections of the letters Van Gogh had sent to him, placing them in *Mercure de France,* the journal that, in 1890, had published a groundbreaking article by Alfred Aurier on Van Gogh as a painter.

Eventually, all the letters sent to Bernard were printed (1911), and in 1914, Vincent's sister-in-law, Jo Van Gogh-Bonger, published Vincent's letters to Theo. She had inherited these along with Theo's large collection of Vincent's paintings, and she recognized the value of both, though she probably waited until Vincent's mother had died before preparing his often highly personal correspondence for publication.[1]

After 1914, editions of the letters proliferated, culminating in *Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters* (2009). For the first time, with the 2009 edition, the collected correspondence is now completely annotated, and even a quick riffle through any of the six volumes immediately shows what more patient study confirms — namely, that a complex symbiosis between painting and writing runs throughout the entire course of Van Gogh's brief but extraordinary career. As Leo Jansen says, Van Gogh's paintings and letters were disseminated so closely together that they are nearly inseparable from the historical viewpoint.[2]

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Still, as I pointed out in the introduction, it has been all too easy to lose sight of the fact that Van Gogh's correspondence is distinguished in its own right, as literature. And so, with the specifically literary dimension of Van Gogh's writing in mind, I want to suggest that the letters themselves conduct a fascinating enquiry into the relationships between painting and writing, which in turn gives us special access to Van Gogh's struggles to shape his career. But the letters do not just describe Van Gogh's professional and personal development; they also present it as a set of contending ideas and issues that dramatize the self-fashioning process, in excess of the factual, biographical information they provide.

To explore how this is so, let me begin by suggesting that the dialogue between painting and writing that occurs virtually throughout the entire course of Van Gogh's correspondence can in turn be read as a variation on the I/other motif that is central to the process of self-fashioning. In the present chapter, I want also to argue that the connection between the I/other of self-fashioning and the writing/painting dialogue that runs throughout the letters can be analyzed fruitfully by way of an opposition between space and time that is a lynchpin in the aesthetic theory of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. In *Laocoön* (1766), Lessing called into question the close identity between painting and writing enshrined by the traditional *ut pictura poesis* (as in painting so in poetry) formula, which had reached a high point in Western painting during the Renaissance.[3] He argued that words and paint do different things, and consequently, the results they produce are different. In brief, painting deals with images in space, and poetry with words in time.

As Wendy Steiner notes, in questioning the *ut pictura poesis* dictum, Lessing exerted a considerable influence on nineteenth-century art, but, as Steiner goes on to show, there are problems with Lessing's central claim.[4] For instance, medieval painters express temporal sequence by way of triptychs and frescoes, and the eye in fact takes time to process what it sees depicted on any flat surface. Likewise, the text of a poem is a spatial object, and reading is a complex interaction between memorized and anticipated images rather than a simple temporal continuum.[5] Consequently, the absolute distinction between space and time does not hold up under scrutiny.

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Nevertheless, Steiner also concludes that it is hard to shake Lessing off altogether, and, despite the scruples that she mentions, "modern theory has not been able to overcome" the "spatial-temporal barriers between painting and literature," on which Lessing so forcefully insists.[6] That is, the broad distinction between what you see in a painting and what you hear in words holds at the centre, even though, as with many such distinctions, it is not water-tight. As noted in the introduction, because we can't define "literature" exactly does not mean that the concept is empty.[7] The same point can helpfully be applied to Lessing's alignment of painting and poetry with space and time.

Again in the introduction, we saw how Bakhtin's distinction between "I" and "other" corresponds, broadly, to an opposition between time and space. That is, the personal experience of the "I," in time, is unstable and open-ended, whereas the "other" is more readily perceived as a self-identical object in space. And so it is interesting now to notice that in exploring the dynamics of self-fashioning, Bakhtin has in fact deployed a Lessing-like distinction, even though the differences between "I" and "other" (as with the differences between space and time) are not without some degree of overlap. With this in mind, I want to suggest that throughout the letters, Van Gogh's discussions of painting and writing frequently resort to a space-time distinction (as in Lessing) as a means of exploring the process of self-fashioning (as in Bakhtin). One result is that the dialogical structures implicit in self-fashioning are reproduced and intensified by the space-time dialogue between painting and writing. But first, let us consider how pictorial Van Gogh's writerly imagination actually is.

Dissolving Boundaries: Word-Painting and the Sister Arts

As Judy Sund points out, throughout his career, Van Gogh had an "almost obsessive interest" in "comparing textual and pictorial images of similar subjects."[8] He frequently describes natural scenes as if they were paintings — either painterly in their appearance or evoking actual paintings. For instance, in a letter to the Van Stockum-Haanebeek

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family, written in London in 1873, Van Gogh notes that "the old painters almost never painted the autumn" (14/1:38), and as if to compensate for the omission, he encloses "another picture of autumn, by Michelet" (14/1:39). This "picture" is in fact composed of words: Van Gogh copies out the passage in which Michelet describes a woman in a garden, saying that the woman reminds him of paintings "in the museums of Amsterdam or The Hague" and, especially, of a painting by Philippe de Champaigne.

The boundaries here between words and visual art are effortlessly crossed, as Van Gogh begins with "the old painters" and then supplies a pictorial description from Michelet, which in turn refers back to a further set of paintings. Van Gogh is content to let these several analogies stand at face value, exemplifying how painters and writers have similar goals and achieve comparable results.

Many observations along such lines are recorded by Van Gogh from early on in the correspondence. For instance, writing from London in 1873, Vincent tells Theo that Keats is "the favourite of the painters here" (12/1:35) and that he himself has "enjoyed" reading Keats's poetry. Keats's ability to (apparently) arrest the moment by the captivating power of his visual imagination could readily confirm the idea that the "sister arts" indeed share the same goal. The idea of *ut pictura poesis* therefore had considerable staying power for Van Gogh, and certainly (despite Lessing's cold-water drenching), it remained vigorously alive in the widespread nineteenth-century convention of "word-painting," which, as Judy Sund notes, had become "a popular pan-European genre" by the end of the eighteenth century (15). The aim of word-painting was simply to have writing achieve pictorial vividness; among other things, this required writers to suggest spatial illusion, to frame scenes by using visual markers, and to redeploy terms borrowed from the visual arts (15). Among novelists, Van Gogh's early favourite, George Eliot, was a self-conscious producer of this kind of word-painting, as was his later favourite, Émile Zola, who once said that he wanted to translate the Impressionists into language (55).

On the simplest level, it is easy to see how Van Gogh's many verbal descriptions of landscapes draw on these conventions, represented for

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him especially by Keats, Michelet, Eliot, and Zola, among others. The letters afford many examples, the combined effect of which is to impart to Van Gogh's writing a strong sense of visual immediacy. For instance, here is a description of dawn, written from Ramsgate in 1876:

> The next morning in the train from Harwich to London it was beautiful to see in the morning twilight the black fields and green pastures with sheep and lambs, and here and there a hedge of thorn-bushes and a few large oak trees with dark branches and grey, moss-covered trunks. The blue twilit sky, still with a few stars, and a bank of grey clouds above the horizon. Even before the sun rose I heard a lark.
>
> When we arrived at the last station before London the sun rose. The bank of grey clouds had disappeared and there was the sun, so simple and as big as possible, a real Easter sun.
>
> The grass was sparkling with dew and night frost.
>
> And yet I prefer that grey hour when we parted. (76/1:96)

The passage begins by defining the moment — "the next morning" at "twilight" — and then focuses on what "was beautiful to see." Colours predominate: "black fields," "green pastures," "dark branches," "grey" trunks, a "blue" sky with stars still visible, and grass "sparkling" with dew. All of this leads us to the sun rising, "simple and as big as possible."

The writing here is effective first of all because of how the visual emphasis seems to arrest the moment. It is slightly surprising, then, to learn that the sun rose "at the last station before London," and that the scene was in fact being recorded during the time that the journey took place. Although there is a temporal marker in Van Gogh hearing the lark, this cue is pushed out of the frame, as it were, because the event had occurred "even before" the strongly emphasized, magisterial appearance of the sun. At the end of the passage, when Van Gogh declares, "I prefer that grey hour when we parted," he again provides an indicator of time. But in so doing, he also brings us back to the beginning of the passage and, by completing the circle, neutralizes the

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sense of time passing. The passage thus presents us with a temporal frame within which a pictorial scene is strongly foregrounded, with the visual details clearly rendered to create a sense of simultaneity.

Other passages like this occur throughout the correspondence; for our purposes, it will suffice to summarize a few examples, to which I will return later. For instance, in a letter from The Hague, Vincent asks Theo to imagine him looking out from an "attic window" at a scene of meadows, cottages, and red tile roofs. The description again is sharply visual, and Vincent frames the scene by looking at it through the window and then by using his "perspective frame" to double up on what the window frame already provides. The visual description is thus made to seem even more self-consciously painterly by the introduction of a technical device to ensure a correct framing of the composition (250/2:116).

Van Gogh's many striking descriptions of landscapes in Drenthe are likewise often cited as examples of his facility as a maker of word-paintings. Thus, from "the very back of beyond," he sends Theo a description of peat barges. We are told how the scene narrows towards the horizon, and local colour is provided by sheds, trees, and small farms. The description then focuses on two women on a barge, one dressed in mourning and the other with a baby. The receding view provided by the opening sentences throws into relief the brightly focused foreground figures, and again, we see how Van Gogh's painterly eye composes the scene, creating the impression of a single image, arrested in time (392/3:25).

While in Arles, Van Gogh visited Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, on the Mediterranean, and he wrote to Theo about taking "a walk along the seashore," which he found neither "cheerful" nor "sad" but simply "beautiful" (619/4:104). The passage is filled with colour and focuses on the different kinds of blue that the scene affords. The seascape shimmers also with the vividness of "precious stones" such as "opals, emeralds, lapis, rubies, sapphires." But in contrast to the previous examples, this passage does not describe perspective; rather, it presents us with a blaze of colour that we apprehend directly and immediately.

Finally, in a letter written in 1889 to his mother, Van Gogh again describes the beauty of the south (788/5:58). Once more, he focuses

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on colour, while also noting how the clear air extends his view of the countryside, which he then compares to Holland. In making this comparison, he describes the cottages, moss-covered barns, and tangled hedges of his homeland, and the account as a whole leaves us with two juxtaposed scenes, each vividly evoked through Van Gogh's pictorial imagination.

The above examples were written at different times during Van Gogh's career and can confirm his facility for composing word-paintings based on actual scenes before him. But he also frequently compares actual landscapes to painted ones or provides detailed descriptions of the landscapes that appear in paintings. In London, a picture by Thijs Maris reminds him of a poem by Heine, and he goes on to describe Maris's painting as if it were an actual scene (31/1:54). A walk in Amsterdam evokes Rembrandt's etchings (114/1:160), and a carefully described storm has a sky that "looked like a painting by Ruisdael" (120/1:177). The Borinage landscape reminds him of Brueghel, Maris, and Dürer (149/1:236), and in Etten, he describes a drawing by Mesdag, again as if the landscape depicted in the drawing were actually present (166/1:272). In The Hague, he compares Sien to a painting by Landelle (234/2:86), a point that he later repeats (246/2:106). And in comparing Montmartre to a painting by Michel, he mixes the description of the painting and the actual scene, so that it is difficult to tell which is which (312/2:269). The aftermath of a thunderstorm is "more like *Daubigny* than Corot" (356/2:359), and a landscape in Drenthe "can be as sublime as in a J. Dupré" (387/3:14). A description of weavers in Nuenen recalls Rembrandt (445/3:147), a colourful sunset in Arles is like a Monet (615/4:97), and in St. Rémy, "superb, autumnal effects, glorious in colour" are reminiscent of "Jules Dupré and Ziem" (810/5:118).

In these examples, when Van Gogh looks at landscapes, not only does he see them by way of the paintings that he thinks they resemble, but his verbal descriptions assume a fundamental affinity between the written words and painted images. The sister arts remain closely bonded here, and Van Gogh does not pause to question the differences between them. To the contrary, he often takes an engagingly reckless enjoyment in proclaiming what he sees as the mutually shared goals

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and practices of writers and painters together, beginning with that early account of how the London artists admired Keats. Later, he writes, "It's more or less the same with drawing as with writing" (265/2:155), and, later still, "Books and reality and art are the same kind of thing for me" (312/2, 268). In Amsterdam, he listened admiringly to the sermons of Eliza Laurillard, "because he paints, as it were" (121/1:178). Likewise, Zola's city views are "painted or drawn in a masterly, masterly fashion" (244/2:100), and in *Le Ventre de Paris,* "How *painted* those Halles are" (251/2:119). Again, Hugo's *Quatre-vingt-treize* is "painted, I mean written, like Descamps or Jules Dupré" (286/1:204). Here, the deliberate hesitation, apparently correcting "painted" to "written," does not so much sharpen a distinction as confirm the analogy between painters and writers. Likewise, a scene at sunset is "just like a page in Hugo" (333/2:318); Rappard draws like Zola writes (355/2:358); Zola and Voltaire are like Jan Steen and Ostade (657/4:222); Van Eeden's writing resembles "my style of painting in the manner of colour" (740/4:395). In a frequently cited passage from a letter written in Cuesmes in June 1880, Van Gogh declares that "the love of books is as holy as that of Rembrandt, and I even think that the two complement each other." In a previous paragraph, he argues that "there's something of Rembrandt in Shakespeare and something of Correggio or Sarto in Michelet, and something of Delacroix in V. Hugo," just as there's "something of Rembrandt in the Gospels or of the Gospels in Rembrandt" (155/1:247).

There is a fine abandonment in all these resemblances and analogies, and sometimes the boundaries are blurred, almost in the direction of synesthesia.[9] For instance, Alfred Aurier's article is "a work of art," and Van Gogh assures him, "you create colour with your words" (853/5:198). Again, Vincent tells Theo, "We can only make our paintings speak" (RM25/5:326), and he explains to his sister Willemien how "one can speak poetry just by arranging colours well, just as one can say comforting things in music" (720/4:360). In these examples, pictures have voices and words are coloured, and Van Gogh delights in the jouissance, the glorious interpenetrations of colour and sound. His embrace of the ancient trope *ut pictura poesis* seems here entirely without complications, recklessly unimpeded by Lessing-like scruples.

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Van Gogh's word-paintings do indeed demonstrate a remarkable and arresting descriptive facility, but it would be a mistake nonetheless to read them merely as enlivening patches of local colour for a reader's passing enjoyment. Rather, I want to suggest that they are part of a more complex story — a different picture, as it were. And here we can return to Bakhtin, whose ideas about self-fashioning can fruitfully be combined, as I have suggested, with Lessing's claim that painting is mainly spatial and words mainly temporal.

As we have seen, for Bakhtin, self-fashioning occurs by way of a many-sided dialogue between the "I," who negotiates the uncertainties of an open-ended temporal process and the spatially situated "other," who is perceived as a stable source of value. By analogy, in Van Gogh's correspondence, a sustained dialogue is conducted between a subject who is filled with inner resolve and anxiety and is following his "calling" by way of a narrative that unfolds uncertainly (in time) and the "visionary" painters (including Van Gogh himself) who aim to produce images (in space) that are consoling and inspiring centres of value. The differences between the mainly temporal medium of words and the mainly spatial medium of painting therefore give rise here to a special set of tensions, which in turn mirror and enact the dialogical process of the self-fashioning to which we are all both invited and condemned, as Bakhtin explains.

With these points in mind, let us return to the examples of Van Gogh's word-painting that I cited earlier in order to illustrate the visual, quasi-pictorial quality of his descriptive writing. In these examples, Van Gogh wanted language to approximate painting; he wished to create with his words the impression of a single image — a moment frozen in space. Yet the passages I have cited are not so straightforward as they might at first appear, and we can see how this is so by considering the narratives in which they are embedded.

For instance, the letter describing the sunrise observed on a train journey from Harwich to London is full of heartbreak and nostalgia, as Van Gogh recounts his "sorrow" on parting from his parents:

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"How much we long for each other," he writes (76/1:96). Then, in counterpoint, he describes the sun coming up, "so simple and as big as possible, a real Easter sun." As we have seen, Van Gogh's extended word-painting here seems to arrest the moment and suggests an enduring value represented by the sun and by its association with Easter. Yet the account of the train journey reminds us that in the temporal dimension, Van Gogh is being taken further away from his family, and the vividness of the passage about the sunrise stands in contrast to the grief recorded in the narrative. The letter as a whole is captivating because it engages us with both of these elements simultaneously, registering both a hopeful optimism and a burden of sadness and anxiety, the two emotional states held in dialogical suspension.

Again, in the passage about a scene observed through an attic window, Van Gogh provides a colourful description while framing the scene like a picture (250/2:116). Yet it is helpful to interpret this description within its context. Earlier in the letter, Van Gogh complains about being rejected by Hermanus Tersteeg, whose approval he had sought, and now Van Gogh's feelings of woundedness fuel a determination to keep working while also living in solidarity with others (such as the former prostitute Sien) who have likewise been rejected. In this context, he pauses to assure Theo that Sien will soon be able to earn money again by posing, and he looks to Zola for an example of the humane behaviour he wants to show to her, despite the disapproval he has encountered from Tersteeg, among others, because of this scandalous relationship.

The description of the scene through the attic window is therefore also part of Van Gogh's riposte to Tersteeg: it shows Vincent hard at work and defiant. Thus, he notices the exact time — "as early as 4 o'clock" in the morning — to mark the fact that his labour coincides with the workmen who are also getting ready for the day ahead. The contrast between the "flock of white pigeons" and the "black smoking chimneys" confirms his solidarity with the factory labourers who are likewise condemned to their daily grind, in contrast to the free-flying birds and the green meadows. And so the word-painting stands once more in counterpoint to the defiant and anxiety-fraught narrative

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dimension of the letter in a manner that engages us with the complexity of a highly personal struggle in the process of working itself out.

The striking description of the Drenthe landscape in which a receding view throws into relief the figures of two women on a barge again deepens in significance when we consider preceding events (392/3:25). Van Gogh had gone to Drenthe after breaking up with Sien and was suffering pangs of conscience about leaving her and her children . And so when he notices that one of the women on the barge is in mourning and another has a baby, we feel a resonance of his own guilt and of the loneliness that sets him apart from these women, whom he observes from a distance. On the one hand (especially for Theo's benefit), the word-painting presents a view of Drenthe as an ideal environment for a painter. On the other hand, the letter reminds us of the pain and sacrifice entailed by Van Gogh's lonely vocation. The narrative dimension of the correspondence thus contradicts and modifies the painter's visionary idealism and, in so doing, expresses a complex truth about Van Gogh's situation and experience.

The passage from Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer on the beauty of "the deserted beach" differs from the previous examples in that it ignores perspective and other framing devices (619/4:104). Instead, Van Gogh allows the vivid descriptions of colour to affect the reader directly. In so doing, he confirms his intense interest in colour during his time in Arles and his commitment to the idea that colour has an emotional effect on the viewer of a painting, over and above the effect produced by the object depicted. In the following letter, Vincent refers back to the beach scene, explaining that "now that I've seen the sea here," he is convinced that "the colour" in his paintings "has to be even more exaggerated" (620/4:110). This interest in exaggeration and in not attempting to make a simply literal representation is part of a commitment to a more fully aesthetic understanding of the function of painting than had been the case in Van Gogh's earlier career, when aesthetic concerns were subordinate to religion and morality. Although the passage under consideration does not deal directly with these matters, it is in itself a telling example of the "exaggeration" (a bombardment of colour without perspective guidelines) that governed

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Van Gogh's evolving practice at the time, thereby showing us, again, the dialogical emergence of the values by which he sought to shape his direction forward.

Our final example is Van Gogh's letter to his mother from St. Rémy, in which he describes a vineyard "all purple, crimson and yellow and green and violet," again highlighting the immediacy of the colours. But the personal concerns expressed in the letter cause us also to see Van Gogh's description of things that "are beautiful in the south" as something other than straightforward celebration. Thus, the letter begins by commenting on the fact that although his mother is "approaching 70," she is holding up well. Vincent goes on to say that now that his brother Cor is about to leave for the Transvaal, the "sorrow . . . about parting and loss" will be painful for the whole family. Moreover, Theo's health is failing, another cause for concern. For his part, Vincent writes, he has been painting in the "mistral," the harsh winter wind that he often alludes to as a metaphor for his own disturbed "inner weather." Finally, interwoven with the colourful description of the southern vineyards is a set of reminders of what he *doesn't* see in the south — for instance, "the mossy peasant roofs on the barns or cottages like at home, and no oak coppices and no spurry and no beech hedges with their red-brown leaves and whitish tangled old stems. Also no proper heathland and no birches, which were so beautiful in Nuenen" (788/5:58).

This evocative little passage about Holland thus stands in counterpoint to the account of the sunny vineyard, and the juxtaposition suggests Van Gogh's ambivalence as he celebrates the Midi while also nostalgically recalling his homeland. While the word-painting of the vineyard shows something of what is "beautiful in the south," it also makes Van Gogh's nostalgia more poignant and his anxieties about his family more pressing. As the narrative of Van Gogh's life tells us, his vision of the south was found wanting, and he became increasingly concerned about his personal relationships with his family. The process of this realization, with its attendant complexities and ambivalence, is registered by this letter as a whole, within which, as we now see, the word-painting of the vineyards plays a part that is best understood when we read it in the context of the personal narrative that the letter also provides.

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I am suggesting, then, that there is a continuing dialogue in Van Gogh's correspondence between the existential concerns of the uncertain, alienated, often lonely man and the aspirations of the painter striving to catch, out of time, images of our shared human condition. These images are consoling (as he liked to say), and they enhance our understanding of ourselves and of one another. Mainly, Van Gogh's vision is expressed in his paintings and drawings, but the artist also makes his presence felt throughout the letters by way of his talent for pictorial prose. His letters are studded with vividly imagined scenes or descriptions that arrest the reader's attention, as the visionary moment provides a small epiphany, a showing forth of something beautiful with its own harmony and splendour of form. Yet Van Gogh's word-paintings are not merely ornamental distractions. Rather (much like the debunked notion of "comic relief" in Shakespeare's tragedies), they are a dynamic element in the letters in which they appear, showing as they do the inner trajectory of the unstable "I" attempting to follow its particular calling or vocation while encountering and engaging with the visionary world of the pictorial image and the values it represents. Admittedly, this dialogical exchange is not quite symmetrical. Despite its perilous uncertainty, the self forges ahead, not without confidence; despite its reassuring stability, the pictorial image is unsettling insofar as it draws our attention to the gap between the imaginary and the actual. Nonetheless, the dialogue between a relatively unstable self and a relatively stable ideal holds sufficiently at the centre, and, as I have been suggesting, the interplay between these poles does much to explain the captivating power of Van Gogh's writing.

So far, then, we have seen how enthusiastically Van Gogh conflates the world of books and the world of paintings, and how the many word-paintings in his letters celebrate the shared goals of the sister arts. But we have also seen that Van Gogh's writing is everywhere energized by the contrasts between temporal and spatial modes of discourse. The coalescence assumed by the *ut pictura poesis* motif thus stands in counterpoint to the differences insisted upon by Lessing, and I would like now to look at a further aspect of how important this dialogically structured discourse is throughout Van Gogh's writing.

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Drawing and Painting: From Morality to Aesthetics

In this section, I consider how Van Gogh's letters describe his vacillation between drawing and painting, especially during his Dutch period, when his drawing had a strong narrative dimension that reflected a desire to make his art socially relevant. My main point is that during these years, the contest recorded in Van Gogh's letters between drawing and painting reproduces the interplay between temporal sequence and spatial immediacy that I have already discussed with reference to his word-paintings.

Let me begin with an early letter, written when Van Gogh was twenty-two years old and living in London:

> I'm sending you herewith a small drawing. I made it last Sunday, the morning a daughter (13 years old) of my landlady died.
>
> It's a view of Streatham Common, a large, grass-covered area with oak trees and broom.
>
> It had rained in the night, and the ground was soggy here and there and the young spring grass fresh and green.
>
> As you see, it's scribbled on the title page of the "Poesies d'Edmond Roche."
>
> There are beautiful ones among them, serious and sad, including one that begins and ends
>
> Sad and alone, I climbed the sad, bare dune,
> Where the sea keens its ceaseless moaning plaint,
> The dune where dies the wide unfurling wave,
> Drab path that winds and winds upon itself again. (32/1:55)

As the letter goes on, Van Gogh cites some further verses by Edmond Roche, including Roche's description of an etching by Corot.

Here again, we see how easily Van Gogh conflates the visual arts and literature. Already at this early date, he was inserting his own drawings into letters, here providing Theo with "a view of Streatham Common" and also with a copy of an etching by Corot, the topic of

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Roche's poem. He creates a brief word-painting before going on to cite the atmospheric (if sentimental) lines from Roche. The mixture of elements here would remain characteristic of Van Gogh's writerly practice: citing his favourite literary texts, insisting on analogies between the sister arts, inserting drawings into his letters, and providing his own vivid pictorial descriptions. But one further aspect of this letter stands out in a manner that is difficult to ignore.

Van Gogh begins by talking about the "small drawing" that he has enclosed. He then recalls, in passing, that he made the drawing on the day when his landlady's thirteen-year-old daughter died. In the next sentence, he proceeds without further ado to the view of Streatham Common and to the verses from Roche. But it is hard not to feel an uncomfortable disjuncture here between the news about the death of the landlady's daughter and the casual aestheticism of the rest of the letter, in which Van Gogh describes a set of pleasing effects, whether in nature, drawing, poetry, or etching. In short, he seems unaware of how indifferently he passes off the young girl's death as apparently no more important than the enclosed letter sketch or the other impressions that he records in passing. This, we might conclude, is a young man's letter, uninformed by moral seriousness or by real engagement with the art to which he alludes.

In keeping with this example, Van Gogh's earliest letters are for the most part ingenuous and exploratory and are not yet engaged with the kinds of commitment that would drive him, in one way or another, during the rest of his career. His earliest writing frequently expresses a similar kind of wide-eyed curiosity and wonder; as he proclaims enthusiastically to Theo, "It's beautiful everywhere" (27/1:51). Thus, in the present example, the girl's death does not disturb the account of random moments of beauty in nature, verse, and pictorial art that the letter provides. But the developing intensity of Van Gogh's religious and moral concerns would soon change the direction of his thinking and of his writing alike.

As is well known, religion was the first powerful ideal to command Van Gogh's full attention, roughly from 1875 to 1880. But although worshipping God "in spirit and in truth" (49/1:74) was his

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first priority during these years, Van Gogh continued to value art, singling out Holbein (85), Boughton (89), Scheffer (116), Ruisdael (120), and Millais (122), among others. He admits, "I cannot help making a little drawing now and then" (120/1:177), even though he worries that doing so "would most likely keep me from my main work" (148/1:233), which is, as he says earlier, to be a "Christian labourer" (109/1:151).

And so Van Gogh does not repudiate art, even as he makes clear that it should remain subordinate to religion. Likewise, religion carried a burden of moral responsibility for him, expressed especially in the bond of sympathy that he felt for the poor and marginalized. For instance, he tells Theo that he wanted to minister to slum dwellers in London but was too young to qualify (85/1:104) and that when he went to the Borinage as an evangelist, he attended especially to the "many sickly and bedridden people, lying emaciated in their beds, weak and miserable" (151/1:239).

Eventually, Van Gogh would conclude that the physical needs of the sick people in the Borinage were more urgent than was their need for religion. By the end of his sojourn there, his letters no longer refer to the Bible or to his favourite religious writers, and, partly as a result of his experience among the miners, he abandoned his allegiance to institutional Christianity. Ironically, one main reason why he had needed religion in the first place was, as he tells Theo, that the moral problem of suffering was too overwhelming to deal with without God: "There is evil in the world and in ourselves, terrible things," he writes, and "without faith in a God one cannot live — cannot endure. But with that faith one can long endure" (117/1:164). The letters in which Van Gogh writes about the death of Susannah Gladwell (the seventeen-year-old sister of his friend, Harry Gladwell [88/1:109]) and about the drowning of a child in an Amsterdam canal (123/1:180) show how deeply moved he was by the pathos of the bereaved families. In both cases, he looks to religion to help him manage, writing of God and the Bible to Harry and, in the case of the little boy, ending with a spontaneous prayer: "God help us, struggling to stay on top" (123/1:181). Informed now by a more developed set of commitments, these letters stand in

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telling contrast to the earlier perfunctory notice paid to the death of the landlady's thirteen-year-old daughter.

Again as a reflection of his changing moral concerns, when Van Gogh became disillusioned with religion as the result of what he calls his difficult "moulting" (155/1:246) in the Borinage, he made drawings of the miners as a way of recording the harsh conditions of their daily lives: "I do hope to make some scratch," he writes tentatively, "in which there might be something human" (158/1:257). Art now compensates, as it were, for conventional religion as a means of expressing Van Gogh's growing commitment to the miners' well-being. Certainly, in the years after he left the Borinage, and particularly during his time in The Hague and Nuenen, moral concerns were very much at the forefront of both his life and his art. This was so not least because he found himself struggling with his disastrous relationships with Kee Vos and Sien Hoornik. At the same time, he was aspiring to be an illustrator and to develop his drawing as a vehicle for social commentary. In this context, a further highly interesting tension began to develop between Van Gogh's commitment to drawing and his discovery (somewhat to his own surprise) that he could paint. That is, the drawing at which he sought to excel had a strong narrative, or temporal, dimension that he hoped would appeal to the illustrated magazines. But when he turned increasingly to painting, he was impressed with how colour has a direct emotional impact that dispenses, by and large, with the kind of narrative that his socially engaged drawing required. In the upshot, the moral focus of Van Gogh's drawings yielded to an aesthetic understanding of the power of colour. His discussions of drawing and painting can therefore be read as part of a process by which his dominant ideology was itself being transformed as his career took shape. Let us now consider this process in more detail.

After his sojourn in the Borinage and Brussels, Van Gogh stayed with his parents in Etten, where he persisted in his self-directed apprenticeship as an artist. His former boss, Hermanus Tersteeg, had sent him Charles Bargue's *Exercises au fusain* and *Cours de dessin,* and Van Gogh had also acquired Armand Théophile Cassagne's *Traité d'aquarelle* (157/1:253; 168/1:274). He studied these books carefully and also visited

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his cousin by marriage, Anton Mauve, in The Hague. Mauve was a well-respected painter associated with the flourishing Hague School, and Van Gogh was an enthusiastic student. "He wants me to start painting" (171/1:278), Vincent tells Theo, going on to describe his first attempts at watercolour (173/1:288): "How marvelous watercolour is for expressing space and airiness" (192/1:332), and "what a great thing tone and colour are!" Mauve "has taught me to see so many things I didn't see before" (193/1:336); Mauve even gave Vincent a paintbox (177/1:299), as his uncle C.M. had also done (173/1:288). Moreover, Vincent assures Theo that Mauve had provided a good report to their parents about Vincent's progress, adding, "Pa is pleased with what M. himself said to him" (193/1:336). Vincent was also convinced that his watercolours would "become saleable" (199/2:17), a point that he repeats, insistently (201/2:24; 204/2:28). In short, the discovery of watercolours greatly energized him: "I've been working all this time with watercolour only, and it's giving me more pleasure every day" (201/2:24). Mauve and Tersteeg even came to visit, looking on approvingly. "I'm glad about that" (201/1:24), Vincent writes, both pleased and confident.

And so things were looking promising, as Van Gogh made progress with the support of a range of admired authority figures: Mauve, Tersteeg, his uncle C.M., and, not least, his father. Still, in the background, the disruptive affair with Kee had caused a serious rift between Vincent and his family, and when he took up with Sien, his supporters wasted no time in abandoning ship. They did so on moral grounds: the embarrassing infatuation with Kee had been bad enough, but the affair with Sien was outrageous — because of it, Vincent's father even thought about confining Vincent in an insane asylum. One result was that Van Gogh's moral sense, already so strongly evident in his compassion for the ill and deprived miners in the Borinage, resurfaced in vigorous protest against his parents' religious conservatism and against the petty bourgeois vindictiveness of those who condemned his relationship with Sien. She was, after all, a woman of the people and a tragic figure — like a character invented by Zola, whose novels, as it happened, Van Gogh had just recently discovered. Sien was also the model for "*Sorrow,*" which, in expressing her dejection and

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long-suffering, makes a demand on the viewer's compassion while also protesting against the social conditions that had brought her to such a state.

As in the Borinage, drawing remained Van Gogh's main vehicle for expressing his newly energized moral concerns, which in turn fuelled his desire to make illustrations for magazines that would get the word out to a broad audience, promoting his message of solidarity with the poor. But as the letters show, Van Gogh was conflicted about how much he should privilege drawing over his new enthusiasm for painting. On the one hand, drawing was a means of social protest and had a quasi-narrative dimension in how it represented the daily lives of working people. On the other hand, Van Gogh's main backers wanted him to paint rather than draw, so that his insistence on drawing became, in itself, a repudiation of their narrow standards, both artistic and moral. In short, the people who wanted Van Gogh to paint were also the people who had little sympathy for the moral agenda that informed his drawing.

An opposition thus declares itself in the letters between the quasi-narrative, socially engaged language of drawing and the language of colour, which registers an emotional impact over and above the thing depicted. The difference is, broadly, between a predominantly moral and a predominantly aesthetic understanding of the function of art, and the years in The Hague and Nuenen mark a major shift in Van Gogh's career as he gradually relinquishes the first of these in favour of the second.

Something of these concerns can be seen, for instance, when Theo admires a watercolour, saying that it is the best work that Vincent has so far done. Vincent replies curtly, "That isn't true," going on to say that some pen drawings are better. He then complains that Tersteeg, who also favoured the watercolours, is encouraging him "to adopt a procedure that's actually only half suited to the rendering of what I want to express" (206/2:30).[10] Watercolours are here seen by Vincent as a link between Theo and Tersteeg, neither of whom really understands what Vincent wants to express "according to my own character and according to my own temperament" (206/2:30). The words "character"

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and "temperament" have a moral dimension, and the direction that Vincent is being advised to take seems wrong to him because it is based on a misunderstanding of his real values. His response is to align these values with drawing, which, he says, Tersteeg dismissed as "a kind of opium daze you administer to yourself so as not to feel the pain you suffer at not being able to make watercolours" (210/2:36). Van Gogh's reaction to this high-handedness is to resolve "that I must draw more seriously" (210/2:36).

Yet Van Gogh liked making watercolours, and he did continue to paint. But he gave drawing priority on the grounds that it should precede painting as part of a proper apprenticeship. And so he explains that he is devoting himself "specifically to *drawing* things" because "one can more easily go from drawing to painting than the other way round: making paintings without drawing the necessary studies" (218/2:55). Van Gogh's progress in making watercolours, he believed, would therefore depend on his skill as a draughtsman (250/2:115; 251/2:118), but Mauve and Tersteeg, "whose sympathy I more or less thought I could count on" (218/2:55), did not see things this way and, to the contrary, seemed to be advising him to paint prematurely.

On the one hand, it does make sense that Van Gogh would want to learn to draw before moving on to painting, and he vigorously declares his dedication to draughtsmanship: "I want to be concerned with one thing only, drawing" (228/2:75); "drawing is becoming a passion with me, and I'm becoming increasingly absorbed in it" (222/2:63); "pure drawing" is "the foundation of all the rest" (246/2:107). On the other hand, the letters show how drawing was interconnected for Van Gogh with a broader set of moral issues, and we can now detect the lineaments of a complex discourse in which the prescriptivist Tersteeg, whose moral disapproval happens to be bound up with his advice about painting, stands opposed to Van Gogh, whose moral integrity is bound up with the socially responsible narratives that his drawings provide.

But the line between drawing and painting was not as clear-cut as we might think. Van Gogh sometimes tried his hand at mixing watercolour and drawing (350/2:347) and sometimes made watercolours of

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the lives of working people (324/2:292). Also, he occasionally drew a scene and then made a painting of it (323/2:290), and sometimes he used a brush in a painterly fashion to apply ink to a drawing (348/2:342). At one point, he even says that the practice of painting might help to make him a better draughtsman: "I also firmly believe my drawing would be strongly influenced if I were to paint for a while" (254/2:128). And so painting and drawing should not be seen, hard and fast, as exclusive opposites. Nonetheless, the fact remains that during his time in The Hague, Van Gogh emphasized the special efficacy of drawing in response, specifically, to the moral issues that weighed heavily upon him. "It's precisely because I have a draughtsman's fist that I can't keep myself from drawing" (220/2:57), he writes, and he goes into "the houses of workers and poor people," partly to emulate "the draughtsmen for The Graphic, Punch etc." who likewise go among the people, even in "the poorest alleyways of London" (220/2:59). His choice of "fist" suggests Van Gogh's combative attitude; indeed, he explicitly declares that he is "keen to do battle" and "I hope to do battle" (220/2:57, 59). And so he writes as if he shares directly in the workers' struggles, even though he is in fact talking about drawing. As is well known, he liked using carpenter's pencils and crayons, which were workmen's tools, so that his "draughtsman's" practices and attitudes would resemble those of the working people. But "when I go to see Mauve or Tersteeg," he writes, "I can't express myself as I'd like" (220/2:59): again, a discussion of drawing merges with Van Gogh's personal struggle to shape his own life authentically.

Van Gogh's emphasis on drawing therefore carries considerable ideological significance. "I want to be concerned with one thing only, drawing" (228/2:75), he says, and his aim in so doing is to "*move* some people" (249/2:113). He wants to emulate the "scenes of factory work" (262/2:151) in *Harper's Monthly,* and he "would be really pleased" if he "could supply drawings for illustrated magazines" (264/2:154) and make art "for the people" (278/ 2:188). He expresses "love and respect for the great draughtsmen," hoping to emulate them by making "something from what one sees every day on the streets" (278/2:189). The idea of "making figures *from the people for the people*" seemed a

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matter "of charity and duty" (291/2:215). He looks to "magazines like *British Workman*" and to Charles Dickens for inspiration (291/2:215), but "making the drawings themselves is my main preoccupation" (294/2:222), and, again, "working on the drawings is the main thing" (295/2:224). He even acquires a vast collection of *The Graphic* (331/2:311) and considers going to London to pursue his career as an illustrator there (348/2:343). In these examples, Van Gogh's remarks about drawing remain closely linked to a moral agenda, an interest in narrative content, and an emphasis on social engagement.

Yet, as we have seen, when Mauve introduced Van Gogh to colour, the impact was immediate — "How marvellous watercolour is" (192/1:332) — and despite his ambition to become an illustrator, Van Gogh continued to explore this new "marvellous" world. Although drawing was the way he said he wanted to go, he was also, paradoxically, discovering that colour was the way he had to go. And as colour became increasingly important to him, his overriding moral concerns were gradually usurped by a new understanding of the primacy of "the absolute necessity of a new art of colour" (585/4:26). He did not entirely abandon his earlier moral convictions, just as he did not entirely abandon his religious idealism, but morality was increasingly subsumed by and became increasingly implicit in the work of art itself. He left Sien and her children, literally, when he went to Drenthe, but in a further sense, especially after he arrived in Arles, he did not return to the moral battles of his earlier years and to the wars of truth he had fought over religion, his relationships with Kee and Sien, and his attempts to have a family life and to become a socially progressive illustrator. His experience in the Borinage was indeed a "moulting" time, but his years in The Hague, Drenthe, and Nuenen were also a period of transformation from which, as it were, a richly coloured butterfly emerged from its black-and-white cocoon, to take flight in Paris and Arles.

After Mauve introduced him to watercolours, Van Gogh continued to declare his preference for drawing, but the degree to which his attitude towards his own practice was conflicted is evident, for instance, in a letter to Theo from The Hague in April, 1882: "One fine day when

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people start to say that I can in fact draw but not paint, perhaps I'll appear with a painting just when they least expect it, but as long as it looks as though I *must* do it and *may not* do anything else, then I certainly won't do it" (214/2:50). Van Gogh's contrarian disposition is in full display here, as he primes himself, simply, to do the opposite of what is expected of him. So long as (for example) Mauve, Tersteeg, and C.M. favour painting, he will draw instead. But as soon as people start admiring his drawings, he will surprise them with a painting. The operative words in the passage — "*must* do it" ("*moeten* doen") and "*may not*" ("*mogt ik niet*") — show Van Gogh taking his bearings from others not so much by emulating them as by opposing them.

The choice between drawing and painting is therefore not straightforward; rather, it is the site of dialogically contending values and of emergent re-evaluations. Interestingly, the discovery that he could paint took Van Gogh himself by surprise, as he tells Theo on more than one occasion. "It surprises me," he writes about his first painted studies, going on to say that "they do look like something, and that rather amazes me" (257/2:135). He writes as if he has upon something that was latent but is now declaring itself: "I feel that things with colour are becoming apparent in my painting that I didn't use to have" (257/2:135), and "A certain feeling for colour has been aroused in me of late when painting, stronger than and different from what I've felt before" (371/2:399). It is as if colour starts to take over, almost of its own accord, but the full acknowledgement of this fact was not easy because it entailed the relinquishment of Van Gogh's ambition to become an illustrator, which in turn meant a revision of the moral idealism that had informed that ambition since his sojourn in the Borinage.

Still, Van Gogh knew that something important was happening. Powerful energies were involved, and he struggled to contend with them. Painting "opens up a much broader horizon," he writes, and "in the past I often had to restrain myself" (255/2:130). "I've been made deeply happy by painting these last few days," he tells Theo, but "I've really restrained myself and stuck to drawing" (259/2:144). Finally, he seems to have yielded to the irresistible attraction to colour:

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"I'm immersing myself in painting with all my strength — I'm immersing myself in colour — I've held back from that until now, and don't regret it" (260/2:146).

The main reason Van Gogh gives for his self-restraint is that good drawing technique is a necessary foundation for painting; he thought he should not paint before he had learned to draw well. He also knew that painting was much more expensive than drawing, and throughout his career, financial constraint imposed limitations on the amount of painting he could do (252/2:124; 258/2:138; 266/2:158; 363/2:383; 366/2:388). Still, these prudential reasons do not account for Van Gogh's admissions of surprise and his acknowledgements that colour had an almost autonomous power that was "aroused" in him despite his desire to repress it. Rather, the centre of gravity was shifting, and an interesting indication of this shift occurs when Van Gogh casually mentions that he needs to paint to improve his drawing (363/2:383). In another telling passage, he writes: "I'm curious as to how this will continue and where it will lead. It has sometimes surprised me that I'm not more of a colourist, because my temperament would certainly lead me to expect that, and yet up to now that has hardly developed at all" (371/2:399–400). Here, Van Gogh is still "curious" about where his new adventure with colour will lead, but now he begins to wonder why he did not set out on this adventure earlier, because his "temperament" inclines him so much in that direction. The surprise now is not that he is discovering colour but that his ability as a colourist "has hardly developed at all." This is a different emphasis from his initial sense that he was discovering something new, almost despite himself.

And so, in the conversation between the draughtsman and the painter, colour gradually gains ascendancy. Vincent tells Theo that he paints a figure with "no more than a few patches" of colour, but "there's a kind of life that isn't due to accuracy of drawing, for it isn't drawn, so to speak." Rather, a certain "mysteriousness" is captured, as "the forms simplify themselves" into "patches of colour" (371/2:400). Painting, then. had all but usurped drawing, but even so, Van Gogh did not abandon drawing, just as he never lost his concern for poor and

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marginalized people, which remained very much alive, for instance, towards the end of his life, in his sympathy for the hospital inmates at St. Rémy. And so in Drenthe, where he went after leaving The Hague, he recorded the working conditions of the local peasants, even though he now drew mainly because he had run out of paints. "I'm drawing," he explains to Theo, because the paint supply is low, "but you know very well that painting must be the main thing as far as possible" (387/3:16). When he makes pen drawings, he says, he does so "with a view to painting" (388/3:18), and the pressure on Theo to supply paints increases markedly in the Drenthe letters.

In Nuenen, Van Gogh experimented with combining watercolours and pen drawings in depicting the local weavers, but again, colour was his overriding concern. He even sent Theo some pen and ink drawings done *after* his painted studies and based on them (430/3:107). Several times in his letters, he reproves himself for this focus on painting: "I've been so busy painting that recently I haven't made a single drawing" (446/3:149), and "I've devoted myself almost exclusively to *painting* for more than a whole year" (485/3:210). Although he continued to make drawings in Nuenen, his preoccupation with colour intensified greatly: "my colour is becoming sounder and more accurate" (468/3:185); "I can safely say that I've progressed in painting technique and in colour" (469/3:186); "there *has* been a change in my colour since you were here" (470/3:188); "my grasp of colour is becoming sounder" (470/3:188); and so on.

Later in this chapter, I will return to the contrast between the temporal-narrative and spatial-pictorial aspects of Van Gogh's development, which I have so far described by way of the opposition in his letters between drawing and painting. But for now, I want to keep the focus on Van Gogh's rapidly intensifying interest in colour because of what it tells us not only about his own development but also about the inherently dialogical structure of the account of his progress that the letters provide.

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Thinking About Colour and Seeing Beyond It

One main catalyst for Van Gogh's fascination with colour was his discovery of the theories of Eugène Delacroix, which he came across in Nuenen through Charles Blanc's *Les artistes de mon temps* (1876) (449/3:154). The two main aspects of Delacroix's thinking that captured Van Gogh's attention were his ideas about complementary colours and his conviction that painters should not aim to reproduce "local" colour (the actual colours of nature) because the internal dynamics of the colours within a painting were more important.

Vincent explains these ideas to Theo in a letter in which he cites a long passage about Delacroix, quoted from Blanc. The passage focuses on the idea that "the great colourists don't do local tones" (449/3:154). Vincent goes on to explain that a colour appears more or less intense "depending on the colours that are next to it," and the laws governing such contrasts "always apply" (449/3:155). In a later letter, he comes back to these topics by way of explaining "the great verities in which Delacroix believed" (494/3:226), especially the laws of complementary and simultaneous contrast (494/3:227).

Briefly, what Van Gogh read about Delacroix was based on research by the industrial chemist Michel-Eugène Chevreul, who was employed by the Gobelins tapestry works.[11] Chevreul was asked to investigate customer complaints about the lack of liveliness in the colours of some tapestries. The results of his investigation were published in *De la loi contraste simultané de couleur* (1859), in which he set out the laws of simultaneous and successive contrast. In simultaneous contrast, when two colours are juxtaposed, each tints the other so that the contrast is heightened. In successive contrast, when we focus on a colour and then look at something else, our vision will be influenced by a shadow-image of the first colour.

Chevreul's book is detailed and technical, but it exerted considerable influence on nineteenth-century painters. Certainly, his main ideas about the effects of colours on one another, and how the interrelatedness of colours affects a viewer, were taken up enthusiastically by Van Gogh. "The breaking and opposing of colours," he tells Theo,

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is something about "which I think every day" (506/3:248). Elsewhere, he gives a detailed account of colour contrasts and colour mixing (536/3:300), and he explains "complementary colours," "simultaneous contrast," and "the way complementaries neutralize each other" (536/3:301). Although Van Gogh cautions that painters should try "to remain reasonable" and not depart too far from the natural appearances of things, he nonetheless stresses that the colours on a palette take precedence over the colours of nature: "I don't really care whether my colours are precisely the same," he writes, "so long as they look good on my canvas" (537/3:302). He explains that "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" (537/3:302). The main point is that "COLOUR EXPRESSES SOMETHING IN ITSELF," and "one can't do without it" (537/3:303).

In the wake of these discoveries, Van Gogh came to realize that his own palette needed to change, and such a change did in fact take place in Paris under the influence of the Impressionists and of the Japanese prints that Van Gogh had begun to acquire in Antwerp and of which he became an avid collector. In Paris, he celebrates "COLOUR seeking LIFE" and declares that "true drawing is modelling with colour" (569/3:364). Writing from Arles, he especially admires the Marseillais painter Adolphe Monticelli, stating that "you have to go straight to Delacroix to find such an orchestration of colours" (589/4:32) and filling his letters with descriptions of the colours that he is using, as, for instance, in this description of a painting of his bedroom:

> 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.
>
> The walls are of a pale violet. The floor — is of red tiles.
>
> The bedstead and the chairs are fresh butter yellow.
>
> The sheet and the pillows very bright lemon green.
>
> The bedspread scarlet red.

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> The window green.
> The dressing table orange, the basin blue.
> The doors lilac.
> And that's all — nothing in this bedroom, with its shutters closed.
> (705/4:330)

"The colour has to do the job here," Van Gogh explains, and then goes on to give a detailed account of the colours in question. But we notice that he draws attention also to a "simplified" style, which — along with a complementary exaggerated, or "grander," effect — became part of his painterly practice as a consequence of his discovery that he need not slavishly imitate nature. Colour here makes its own emotional impact, and the effectiveness of the painting is, to a great extent, a result of the contrasts within the composition — violet and red, yellow and green, orange and blue. Clearly, Van Gogh has now moved well away from the project to which he had committed himself in his desire to become an illustrator. As noted earlier, the narrative aspect of his drawings in The Hague was a means of engaging with social issues, but when colour emerged as his overriding concern, the aesthetic displaced the ascendancy of the moral, and this reordering of priorities led Van Gogh to attempt (for instance) to establish an artists' commune in Arles, at the Yellow House. His earlier desire for a wife and children was now transformed into a desire for a family of artists — a community joined by an understanding of the high value of art and inspired by a desire to live accordingly. "I have such a passion to make — an artist's house" (685/4:278), he writes, where like-minded people would "live as a family, as brothers and companions" (682/4:273).

After he went to Arles, Van Gogh continued to draw (often extremely well), but because of his increasing enchantment with colour, he developed a distinctive style in which complementary and powerfully contrasting colours were foregrounded, even though they were also organized by a strong sense of line. But as a result of both the failure to establish an artists' colony and his debilitating illness, towards the end of his life Van Gogh became disenchanted with the idea that aesthetic value was sufficiently sustaining. "Making paintings," he writes to

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Theo in 1888, is "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" (602/4:73). Elsewhere, he explains to his mother that although making a painting is like having a child, he would prefer real children (885/5:260), a point that he repeats (898/5:289), evoking again his earlier forlorn desire for a wife and family of his own. "The more I think about it," he tells Theo, "the more I feel there's nothing more genuinely artistic than to love people" (682/4:272). Here, the aesthetic yields ground to a newly revived moral sense, as Van Gogh realizes his own solitariness and acknowledges that human relationships, not art, offer a last best hope. But he also understood that art was now, in a sense, all he had, and his desire was to not be "ungrateful," despite the difficult realization that art is not enough. And so, in St. Rémy and Auvers, he continued to make beautiful paintings, altering his palette yet again and returning in part to the colours of his Dutch period.[12]

Conclusion: Dialogical Means and Personal Ends

In this chapter, I have looked at how the letters thematize within their own discourse the dialogue between writing and painting that is central to Van Gogh's career and reputation as a whole. In so doing, I have argued that throughout the correspondence, the interrelationships between writing and painting are analogous to the interactions between the temporal experience of the "I" of the subject and the spatially situated "other." To support this argument, I have suggested that Bakhtin's dialogical model of self and other can helpfully be read in parallel to Lessing's theory that the distinction between time and space is a main marker of the differences between literature and painting.

Yet we began this chapter by noting an apparently opposite, glorious abandon in Van Gogh's conflation of his favourite books and paintings. Also, his lifelong habit of including word-paintings in his letters shows his interest in a widespread nineteenth-century

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convention whereby the imagistic aspects of language were seen as analogous to painting. Throughout the letters, he often goes out of his way to blur the differences between the sister arts, on the grounds that they both seek similar ends.

One way to understand this aspect of Van Gogh's writing is to read it in the context of the high value he attached to personal relationships despite (and perhaps because of) the fact that they were so difficult for him. His persistent utopianism is based mainly on a desire for human community, whether religious, or within the family, or among artists. And so I want to suggest that his word-paintings, together with his celebration of the free-running analogies between verbal and visual art, are likewise a way of declaring an aspiration to an ideal convergence of opposites that transcends differences.

Yet such an aspiration needs to be read in the context of the negative contrasts that experience inevitably puts in the way of ideals. And so I have focused especially on how the letters present us with a tension between Van Gogh's existential quest (his "vocation") and the visual aspects of his word-paintings, which express harmony and stability in contrast to the uncertainties and doubts of the author as subject. Thus, the dialogue between the unformed, temporally situated "I" of the narrator and the spatially imagined, well-formed verbal picture captured, as it were, in a still moment enacts within the texts themselves the drama of a captivating, personal self-exploration.

In this context, I have also considered the counterpoint between drawing and painting, which the letters describe in some detail. In the Borinage, Van Gogh turned to drawing as a way of expressing his moral concerns and of supplying the deficiency caused by his turning away from orthodox religion. These moral concerns continued to influence his development as an artist, as he sought to become an illustrator and to use his drawing as a means of social commentary. But in The Hague, he discovered that he had a talent for colour, and his letters record a highly charged contest between drawing and painting, especially during his Dutch period. On the one hand, drawing locates Van Gogh in the quasi-narrative world of the illustrator and is the vehicle for his overriding moral concerns. On the other hand, painting (especially

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the colour theories that commanded his attention) downplays the significance of narrative and is a means of giving primacy to the aesthetic rather than the moral. Although the interplay here is complex, in the upshot, for Van Gogh, drawing yields to colour, and this change of emphasis marks an important shift in the drama of his own self-fashioning. It is as if the narrative (temporal) concerns of the draughtsman yield to the interests of the colourist, whose effects are achieved by the immediate (spatial) interactions of colours within the frame of the painting. And so, as a subcategory of the space-time contrast with which this chapter has been concerned, the drawing-painting contrast also enacts, within the texts themselves, the dialogical process of the self-fashioning that they describe.

Towards the end of his life, Van Gogh came to believe that human relationships are more important than art, despite the fact that life and art can and should enhance each other. Throughout his career, even despite his incurably rebarbative inclinations, he sought ways to overcome divisive separations and to engage in dialogue that would bridge the gap between self and other, body and world. Throughout, the letters record his struggle to achieve this, but my main point in the present chapter is that the letters also open up within themselves a dialogical exchange between words and paintings, time and space, insecurity and stability, which, as a deep structure or "intention" of the texts, engages us with the core dialogue itself between "I" and "other" that lies at the heart of what self-fashioning entails for all of us.

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CHAPTER 2

Binaries, Contradictions, and "Arguments on Both Sides"

As I mentioned in the introduction, Van Gogh was fascinated by binary oppositions, in which the interplay of differences produces the kind of dialogical "open-endedness" that Bakhtin finds to be fundamental in Dostoevsky's representation of self-fashioning. Certainly, on the simplest level, Van Gogh's letters show that dramatic juxtapositions, dynamically paired opposites, and the like are a favoured means for expressing his unusually combative opinions as he seeks to shape a place for himself in a difficult world — a world in which his loyalties were often divided and even his closest friendships were subjected to sudden squalls of animosity. According to Vincent's sister-in-law, his brother Theo thought of Vincent as very much a self-divided person — indeed, as a sort of walking contradiction. Quoting from a letter by Theo to his sister Willemien, she writes: "It seems as if he were two persons: one, marvelously gifted, tender and refined, the other, egoistic and hard-hearted. They present themselves in turns, so that one hears him talk first in one way, then in the other, and always with arguments on both sides."[1]

The contending voices described here by Theo are very much in evidence throughout Vincent's correspondence, where they do indeed often appear as a set of opposites with "arguments on both sides."

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But in the letters, Vincent's contending voices embody a further clash of values, in the manner suggested by Theo when he says that the "tender and refined" side of his brother is at loggerheads with the "egoistic and hard-hearted side." This opposition is not so much a matter of contradictory propositions and opposing arguments as of incompatible feeling-states, which in turn reflect and embody Vincent's continuing struggle to evaluate his relationships with others while shaping his own beliefs and commitments. With these points in mind, I would like to consider, in the following pages, how Van Gogh's rhetorical use of binary oppositions — contradictions, paradoxes, forceful juxtapositions, and the like — confronts a reader with the combined boldness and insecurity of the questing "I" in relation to the simultaneous invitation and rebuke of the "other" with whom any self-in-the-making finds itself inextricably bound up. The tensions imparted by this interplay of competing elements are not encountered by readers mainly as problems to be resolved; they are, rather, a means of enacting the core drama of an unfinalizable process of self-fashioning.

Contradiction, Paradox, and the Shaping of Commitment

From early in his correspondence, Van Gogh resorts to a strategy whereby he confronts his reader with a set of juxtaposed opposites that are frequently paradoxical or bordering on paradox. "When we are weak, we are strong," he tells Theo, and "Being ill sanctifies being well and teaches us to be well" (95/1:125). These sentences were written in 1876, from Isleworth, at a time when Van Gogh's religious idealism was ascendant and he was eagerly absorbing the advice offered by Thomas à Kempis's "wonderful book," *The Imitation of Christ* (97/1:130). During this period, his opinion of his preacher father was uncritically affirmative ("men like Pa are purer than the sea," he tells Theo [87/1:107]); he admired his father as a paramount example of the good Christian life.

But some troubling events were also intruding on his life at this time. The sister of Van Gogh's friend Harry Gladwell had recently died, at age seventeen, and Van Gogh was much affected by her death, as his

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account of her funeral shows (88/1:109). He was also deeply concerned about the plight of the London poor, with whom he had come in contact both directly and, for instance, by reading Dickens (98/1:131; 94/1:122). Vincent's faith in God's goodness and his admiration for his father's religious vocation were therefore offset by an awareness of the problems of suffering and oppression — problems that would eventually, in the Borinage, lead Van Gogh away from institutional Christianity. But in Isleworth, reflecting Thomas à Kempis's advice about imitating Christ, Van Gogh asserts with confidence that, paradoxically, weakness makes us strong and illness "teaches us to be well."

The brevity of this statement and the compression of Van Gogh's language stand in direct confrontation to whatever doubts a nonbeliever (or a believer who is aware that faith can be challenged) might experience, faced with the proposal that weakness is actually strength. As with St. Paul, paradox is deployed to push the question of faith dramatically to the fore, even though not every reader is likely to go along with Van Gogh's rhetorical gambit: weakness, after all, can be debilitating, and serious illness can (or should) give pause to facile moralizers. Still, we do not so much feel that Van Gogh is arguing here about faith in itself, but rather that he is stating a commitment, and paradox becomes a vehicle for expressing the force and direction of his will.

Throughout the letters, the persuasive power of Van Gogh's frequently deployed paradoxes varies considerably. An example of how a reader might feel somewhat less than convinced occurs in a letter to his sister Willemien, written from Arles in 1889, in which Vincent discusses cancer:

> Ivy loves the old lopped willows each spring, ivy loves the trunk of the old oak tree — and so cancer, that mysterious plant, attaches itself so often to people whose lives were nothing but ardent love and devotion. So, however terrible the mystery of these pains may be, the horror of them is sacred, and in them there might indeed be a gentle, heartbreaking thing, just as we see the green moss in abundance on the old thatched roof. However, I don't know a thing about it — I have no right to assert anything. (764/4:435)

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Here, Vincent is commiserating with his sister, who has agreed to nurse a seriously ill woman. He admires Willemien's courage: "you're very brave, my sister, not to recoil before these Gethsemanes," he writes, and then goes on to develop the parallel between cancer and ivy on an old oak and moss on a thatched roof and to suggest that there is a "gentle, heartbreaking" and even "sacred" quality about these natural processes. But a reader will surely want to hold back from the idea that cancer is sacred, gentle, and as pleasing to the eye as moss and ivy. Even Vincent becomes uncomfortable with his own suggestion, and at the end of the passage, he pulls back: "I don't know a thing about it — I have no right to assert anything." Although he is trying to reassure Wil, we feel that he also wants to reassure himself — later in the same letter, he cites Voltaire's Pangloss: "everything is always for the best in the best of worlds" (764/4:436). When his own illness was progressing, Van Gogh resorted on a number of occasions to this famous Panglossian dictum, but without ever pausing to consider Voltaire's satirical intent. In *Candide,* Pangloss's optimism is escapist and irresponsible and is not without its own kind of cruelty because of how Pangloss glibly refuses to acknowledge the actual facts of suffering. In the letter to Wil, when Vincent resorts to Pangloss, we might therefore feel a protective manoeuvre, an attempt to convince himself in the face of suffering and uncertainty that things are not so bad after all.

The confident paradox in the letter from Isleworth, stating that weakness is strength and illness is good for us, is significantly modified in the later letter from Arles even though the core issues stay the same. In both cases, Van Gogh tries to define an attitude towards unjust suffering — the problem of pain, to which he was highly sensitive and about which he was indignant throughout his life. The brisk paradox in the Isleworth letter is a means of expressing a confident religious faith, even though the boldness of the assertion in itself might suggest that Van Gogh's faith depends not so much on argument as on the force of will, of which paradox is the vehicle. By contrast, in the Arles letter, the claim that cancer is beautiful is diffused, along with Van Gogh's confidence, in the midst of the attempt to reassure Willemien that disease really isn't so bad. Still, it is worth noting that the mixture of

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fraternal solicitude, horror, reassurance, discomfort, escapism, and embarrassed disavowal in the later letter make it a good deal more interesting than the earlier one.

To summarize, in these examples we can see how, on the topic of suffering, the shift from paradox, deployed as an expression of faith, to contradiction, which is allowed to be disturbing (even to the author), tells us quite a lot about how Van Gogh's understanding had evolved. It also shows us something of the contrasting effects often achieved by his binary rhetoric. Let us now consider some further examples.

During his early religious phase, Van Gogh frequently cites St. Paul's directive that Christ's crucifixion should cause us to be "sorrowful yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor. 6:10). For St. Paul, this juxtaposition of opposites generates insight into Christ's redemptive act by maintaining a tension between defeatism and escapism, thereby encouraging us to avoid both extremes. Given Van Gogh's proclivity for rhetorical binaries, it is not surprising that he favoured this particular New Testament verse. But Van Gogh also supplies a variety of analogous examples of his own. For instance, he assures Theo that "dry wood *gives* more heat, bright fire and light" than "green wood does" (90/1:114). The word translated as "dry" is "dor," which means "withered," "arid," "barren." And so Van Gogh draws attention to the fact that although the "green wood" is fresh and vigorous and there is loss and grief in becoming dry and withered, nonetheless there is also compensation in the special warmth and light (comfort and understanding, that is) that the difficult seasoning process enables. This is another version of St. Paul's phrase "sorrowful yet always rejoicing," which is, in fact, cited a couple of lines earlier.

Elsewhere, Van Gogh talks about throwing a pail of water on a drawing to produce "delicate tones" and describes how the process is a "dangerous method" that might turn out well or badly (300/2:232). Here, the key point depends much less on an explanation of the "method" than on the juxtaposition of the reckless and forceful act of throwing the pail of water, on the one hand, and the idea of "delicacy," on the other. What strikes us is the incommensurability between the flung water and the result it is supposed to produce. It is as if one

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should undertake to hit someone with a hammer in order to refine that person's table manners.

Something of the same use of contradiction to express the risks of commitment and the will to endure occurs in a description of Sien. "It's strange how pure she is despite her corruption" (376/2:407), Vincent writes, offering Theo some paradoxical reassurance. Here again, the interplay of opposites expresses both Vincent's understanding of the risk involved in taking up with Sien (she is depraved) and his trust in the fact that his commitment will pay off (she is pure, really). Vincent threw himself into this relationship with the same recklessness as when he pitched the pail of water onto the drawing, in each case looking for a redemptive (and refining) result — against the odds, one might think. But, as ever, he insists that it is worthwhile to take a chance. As he writes later about his commitment to painting: "I'll throw myself into it not because I'm already there *now,* but because I believe 'I will mature in the storm'" (406/3:67). Van Gogh's writerly imagination returns often to this idea of hardship producing joy, sorrow yielding to happiness, deprivation becoming fruitful. The strategy of juxtaposed opposites, of binaries in contradiction, is an effective way to express such concerns, partly because the differences between the terms strike us all but simultaneously, thereby reminding us how the opposites are problematically bound up with one another in actual experience.

Thus, for instance, Vincent describes his father as "the most gentle of cruel men" (415/3:86), and himself as both "placid abbot" and "mad painter" (650/4:200). He has "something of a dual nature," he says, partly "monk" and partly "artist" (709/4:337). In St. Rémy, he returns, hopefully, to the idea that "illnesses sometimes cure us" (787/5:56) and that "illness" is "a means of getting us back on our feet" (849/5:193). In Auvers, the wheat fields express "sadness, extreme loneliness," but they are also part of "what I consider healthy and fortifying about the countryside" (898/5:287).

In these examples, the contrasting binaries cause us to attend to the conflicted nature of Van Gogh's experience as he invokes an ideal, even as we simultaneously discover the imperfections that prevent

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him from reaching it. In the face of this challenge, Van Gogh typically sets himself on an affirmative path, often against the odds, and from a variety of perspectives at different points in his career, his use of condensed juxtaposition and paradox expresses the concentration and direction of his will and the force of his desire. Thus, in the examples that we have so far considered, the effectiveness of Van Gogh's writing depends on the force fields generated by the paradoxes and juxtapositions themselves, as his aspirations are countered by the uncertainties of the "I" under pressure to shape a stable place for itself in a difficult world. As always, this struggle is structured dialogically through a conflict of opposites. My main point is that Van Gogh's binary rhetoric is deployed in a way that is in itself a mimesis, in concentrated form, of a dynamic self-fashioning; that is, anxieties and aspirations are communicated as a quality of the writing in excess of the factual information that the letters also provide.

Half-Measures and Negative Contrasts

As Michael Holquist explains, according to Bakhtin, "it is only the other's categories that will let me be an object of my own perception." Consequently, "in order to forge a self, I must do it from *outside*. In other words, *I author myself*." In this undertaking, the self is not "unitary" but develops through a variety of dialogical relationships of the kind that Bakhtin especially admires in Dostoevsky's "polyphonic" writing.[2]

Van Gogh understood very well that self-authoring is "polyphonic" in such a sense. For instance, he explains to his sister Willemien, "To my mind the same person supplies material for very diverse portraits" (626/4:132). Just so, the authored self in the letters is illuminated from several directions by way of various intersecting relationships and different types of "double-voiced discourse" that rely heavily upon strong juxtapositions, contrasts, and binary oppositions. In this view, the (always provisional) self is best seen as a force field of contending traits and appetites held in relation by the tensions among them and by the gaps and fissures that the tensions entail.

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For instance, the early letters are full of exhortations recommending the Christian ideal, which in turn is frequently affirmed by contrast with its negative opposite. God's "Spirit and Love" is a "Power" "against the dark and evil and terrible things of the world and the dark side of life" (132/1:198). Christmas is a "kindly light from the houses behind the rocks and the water that breaks against them on a dark evening" (134/1:202), and God's word is also "a light in the night of suffering" (131/1:194). In many similar passages, Van Gogh affirms a certain value, which is then defined by contrast with the turbulent world that would cancel and destroy it but against which it also shines out all the more brightly. "Truly life is a fight," Vincent tells Theo (133/1:199), and, commenting on the difference between a conventionally beautiful body and a body that shows the marks of suffering and experience, he offers a choice: "just as one cannot serve two masters, one cannot love two things that are so very different and feel sympathies for both" (139/1:215). Consequently, we come to know what is of real value for us by resolutely choosing what seems to be the greater good, even though worldly opinion might be cast against us. In this process, we discover that our ideals create their own counter-images, with which we must then contend.

In the early letters, Van Gogh is especially idealistic about his preacher father, to whose image he strove to conform: "I know that his heart is burning within him that something might happen so that I could give myself over not only almost but altogether to following him, Pa always hoped I would do so" (109/1:151). Here, Vincent's ardour is indistinguishable from his father's, so complete is the identification with what Vincent took his father to represent. Elsewhere, this idealization rings out with an almost touching combination of clarity and naïveté. When his father preached, Vincent writes, "his countenance was like that of an angel" (87/1:107), and "how wonderful it must be to have a life behind one like Pa has" (131/1:196). Vincent ardently desired to shape himself in the image of an idealized other. The main counter-image to his ideal at this time was the free-thinking secularist Jules Michelet, whom Vincent had once admired, but in 1885, Vincent tells Theo, "I'm going to get rid of all my works by Michelet,"

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adding, "you should too" (50/1:75). However, as Vincent's faith in institutional Christianity wavered — especially in light of the sufferings of the Borinage miners — so his idealized father came to seem more fallible, human, and disappointing, and was eventually replaced by the formerly rejected counter-image. Vincent explains to Theo: "I also told Pa frankly that in the circumstances I valued Michelet's advice more than his" (186/1:317). Shortly afterwards, he suggests, "I nevertheless believe that *you* will benefit much more from re-reading Michelet than from the Bible" (189/1:325). Here, the secular, liberal, free-thinking Michelet re-emerges as the idealized other, replacing both Christianity and the authority of Vincent's father, which now assume negative roles. Moreover, this reversal is clearly intended to be provocative. "I wouldn't do without Michelet for anything in the world," Vincent writes; "Michelet even says things completely and aloud which the gospel merely whispers to us germinally" (189/1:325). At this time, Vincent was consumed by his infatuation with Kee Vos, and his governing ideal had become Michelet's romanticized view of love. The moral and social conformity represented by the Christian observance of Vincent's father seemed now to his wayward son to be the chief impediment to realizing what Michelet taught.

As we have seen in our earlier examples, Van Gogh exhorts his reader (and himself) to pursue ideals not least because of the negative counter-images that oppose them, so that, for instance, being good becomes an act of defiance against the bad things of which we become aware through the idea of the good. But Van Gogh also came to realize that an ideal can become a straitjacket that impedes a person's individual development and personal creativity — as was the case for him with conventional Christianity. One response to such a discovery might be to turn away from ideals altogether, but it is possible to counter an oppressive ideal with a more enlightened one, as with Michelet in contrast to Father. And yet we must expect that every new ideal in turn will bring to light its own contradictions between the utopian and the actual, giving rise to new desires, new dissatisfactions and aspirations. And so, within such a many-sided interchange, the self goes on attempting to shape itself meaningfully, through a process that is never finalized.

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Throughout his letters, Van Gogh is never drawn to the merely anarchic or extreme individualist alternative — the id unleashed from governing restraint. Although he railed often against convention, he remained throughout his life an idealist who kept substituting one version of the superego for another. At first, he admired each of his authority figures as a model to aspire to, but he soon discovered that they were all sufficiently imperfect to cause him disappointment and resentment. This certainly was the case with his father, but also with his old boss Tersteeg, his uncle C.M., Paul Gauguin, and Theo, with whom he had a complex and often moving relationship, yet everywhere shot through with ambivalence.

Here, I am interested especially in how the conflict between contending ideals often elicited from Van Gogh a special, combative intensity, sometimes expressed as anger or resentment. For instance, when he left his parents' home in Etten and went to The Hague in 1881, he told Theo: "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," going on to say that he will "guard against" this system "as against something fatal" (194/2:12). The unreserved vehemence of this rejection of an ideal in the image of which he had previously sought so passionately to shape himself is not untypical, and it shows something of both Van Gogh's strength and his weakness. That is, although his enthusiasm and commitment are admirable, they are also fortifications against what we might feel to be an unusually urgent insecurity. Thus, in the present example, Van Gogh's anger expresses his disappointment with institutional religion, but the highly charged overstatement ("angrier" than "in my whole life," "loathsome," "fatal") alerts us to a reservoir of anxiety projected as repudiation of a demonized other who had once promised stability sufficient to enable a kind of dialogue through which Van Gogh might shape a viable understanding of his place in the world. Interestingly, at the end of his outburst, he pauses to question his own motivations: "Was I *too* angry, *too* violent?" But he does not dwell on the implications of the question, and instead concludes, "at least now it's over and done with" (194/2:12). Well, we might doubt it.

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I cite this example partly to stress the wholeheartedness of Van Gogh's commitments, and his typical resistance to half measures. As he tells Theo, he insists on following his vocation as a painter because otherwise he would "lapse into the half measures that make someone a half person" (378/2:411). From Drenthe, he declares again, "I don't do things by halves" (396/3:36). While in Nuenen, he accuses Theo of half-hearted friendship, which he finds "half-and-half less pleasant," calling instead for a clearcut "separation" (436/3:129) to clarify the differences between them. In the same spirit, he associates Tersteeg with "*the everlasting* No," in contrast to the "everlasting *yes*" that one finds in "men of character" (358/2:365). He then goes on to link Tersteeg's negative attitude to the process of self-development: "almost all who seek their own way have something like this behind or beside them as a perpetual discourager" (358/2:365). That is, disillusionment with an admired mentor once again conjures up a negative doppelgänger that, ironically, remains as an incentive, if only because it is now an example of what to avoid.

Van Gogh's distinction between black and white light again marks the difference between acceptance and rejection by way of a strongly declared binary opposition, as he draws on Victor Hugo's contrast between "*the* BLACK *ray*" and "*the* WHITE *ray*" as a means of distinguishing between "people who genuinely seek good" and others who do not. Thus, Van Gogh says that his father has "more the black ray" and Corot "more the white ray," but "above all others," Van Gogh's hero, Millet, "had the white ray," which is, in its own way, "a gospel" (388/3:20). Again, the replacement of one admired model for self-fashioning by another calls up a contrast in which an ideal is affirmed (and even validated) by an equally forceful rejection of what stands opposed to it.

Along the same lines, writing from Drenthe in November 1883, Van Gogh impatiently rejects the kind of "'so-called' common sense" that he sees as aligned with worldly prudence and "half-hearted sincerity." Instead, he prefers his own "natural common sense," which he associates with "risk," and he is impatient with those whose "hesitations" prevent them from believing "that good is good, that black is

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black and white is white" (403/3:59). Again, a black and white contrast stands opposed to the "half-hearted" compromisers, as Van Gogh asserts his risky individuality in the teeth of the conventional prudence of those whose stabilizing regulation he sees as merely confining. A few lines later he returns to his preoccupation with his father: "to me he's a black ray . . . why isn't he a white ray?" This almost plaintive question is left unanswered, and Van Gogh ends the letter on a note of exhortation: "To you I say, look for white ray, white, do you hear!" (403/3:60).

In these examples, the opposition between black and white allows Van Gogh to assert his freedom in the teeth of convention, but his forceful rejection of the "black ray" also confirms his self-identification with the "white ray" as the means of enhancing his creative freedom instead of repressing it. In the same letter from Drenthe, Van Gogh repeats this idea: "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 a black ray and a white ray, and that I found their light black and a convention compared with the lightness of Millet and Corot, for instance." Again, "convention" stands opposed to the creative achievements of Millet and Corot as clearly as black stands opposed to white. This basic contrast then opens upon a further set of relationships, as we are invited to understand the "lightness" of Millet and Corot's achievement in contrast to what Father and Tersteeg (H.G.T. in the above quotation) have to offer. Clearly, Van Gogh resented the influence of what he took to be the black ray on his own life, and his comparison is not simply between the men of convention and the artists. Rather, "my youth has been austere and cold, and sterile under the influence of the black ray" (403/3:60), which was "unspeakably cruel"; consequently, "*from now on* let's seek the gentle light, since I know no other name for it but the white ray or goodness" (403/3:61). Here, the white light is opposed to the sterility and cruelty that destroy the good in general and that are aligned with the influence of a once admired but now repudiated father.

In a later letter, Van Gogh again objects to "something very narrow-minded, or rather icy cold" in his father, whose "character is dark (the black ray, as I once reminded you)" (415/3:85). Confinement, cold, and

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dark are the conditions over and against which we come to know, by way of contrast, the "lightness" of the white ray that shines in Millet and Corot. And so, once more, the white ray is best understood by contrast with the black ray, which opposes it and gives it value, and the good is worth pursuing not least because we have known the coldness and sterility of the darkness that would replace it.

Because Theo was an art dealer, Vincent could think of him as a comrade in arms, and therefore on the side of the white ray. But Theo also disapproved of Vincent's harsh opinions about their parents, as well as his taking up with Sien. And so, at times, Theo seemed after all to be on the side of the dark ray, the oppressive conventions that turn supportive structures into tyrannies. Again, the familiar language is called into service as Vincent accuses Theo of "a sort of relapse into cold decency, which I find sterile and of no use to one — diametrically opposed to everything that is action, especially to everything that is artistic" (432/3:113). The conclusion is then all too predictable, as Vincent accuses Theo of becoming their father's double: "I don't want to get into a second series of quarrels with Pa II like I've had with Pa I. *You would be* Pa II. *One is enough*" (474/3:195). The emphatic binary ("diametrically opposed") confirms the alignment of coldness and sterility against what is truly artistic. Father I and Father II are thus duplicates, a quasi-binary confirming the further binary opposition of the contending values. Elsewhere, Vincent returns to the two Fathers idea (482/3:204), which can be further associated with the suggestion that he and Theo are on opposite sides of a "barricade": "And here we are — in my view — opposite each other in different camps" (461/3:173, 174). But then, interestingly, Vincent also allows for a further split within Theo himself: "This is your drawback — in this respect I find you very miserable — but your good side is your reliability with the money" (474/3:194). This is quite shameless, as Vincent continues to condemn Theo's faults while making clear that he also knows on which side his own bread is buttered. Just as Theo saw "two persons" in Vincent, so Vincent finds a similar duality in Theo, accepting the "good" brother who hands out the money but scolding the censorious one.

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All too frequently, as we now see, Van Gogh favours the dramatic clarity of strongly stated opposites, and this is sometimes the case even when it would be prudent to hesitate. For instance, he declares confidently to Theo, "Either one is brave — or one is cowardly" (551/3:336), without pausing to consider that it is quite possible to be neither brave nor cowardly. Still, if Van Gogh sometimes played fast and loose as a way of exercising his flair for the dramatic, he was also capable of assessing his own tendency to exaggerate or oversimplify. Thus, he tells Theo, "it's again difficult for me to avoid extremes" (411/3:79), as he realizes that he needs to reconsider a judgement that is too clear-cut. "My views may sometimes be out of proportion," he admits, adding: "I'm increasingly coming to see that it's so terribly difficult to know where one is right and where one is wrong" (413/3:83). And so Van Gogh is sometimes quite aware that his own combative oversimplifications can cause difficulties, and with this self-reflexiveness in mind, I want now to focus on how his fondness for contrasts and juxtapositions is part of a further, more complex, dialogical process running throughout the letters.

Deconstructing the Binaries

Although Van Gogh's idiosyncrasy, stubbornness, and strong opinions often found expression in confrontational language, the letters show us that he also felt a contrary inclination to join with others in the pursuit of a shared goal. For instance, when Theo warns Vincent about the danger of becoming "totally isolated," Vincent replies that, to the contrary, he really wants "to feel myself a human being among human beings." He then assures Theo, "I try to look at myself as if I were somebody else, objectively in other words, so that I also try to see my own faults as well as what perhaps offsets them" (419/3:92). In standing back to look at himself "as if I were somebody else," Vincent accords to himself a degree of objectivity that catches exactly the tension at the centre of the process of self-fashioning itself, and in this context, we can detect what was for him an enduring dilemma. On the

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one hand, his insistent individuality threatened to leave him isolated, as Theo says. On the other hand, his desire simply to be "a human being among human beings" threatened to compromise his creative uniqueness. The social ideal and the creative ideal remained at odds to an unusual degree for Vincent, even as he courageously tried to step back and to assess his situation with a view to correcting what he took to be his "faults."

Van Gogh's awareness of his own shortcomings — and especially the self-isolating, rebarbative, black and white thinking that made it "difficult" for him, as he says, "to avoid extremes" (411/3:79) — leads him not infrequently to make gestures of reconciliation, offering to join again with those whom he has alienated. In his quarrel with Van Rappard, he at first gives his friend an uncompromising black and white ultimatum "to retract his letter *once and for all*" or to lose the friendship. But then he straightaway offers to "join hands" with Van Rappard in their joint enterprise of painting rural life, "because unity is strength" and "one can't do it alone, at any rate; a whole troop who agree can do more" (519/3:270). Here, Van Gogh pushes Van Rappard away by offering a crudely simple ultimatum but then invites him back by way of a more complex, further reflection on what their relationship means. Indeed, some of the most interesting passages in the letters occur when Van Gogh reflects on a vigorous distinction he has drawn and then provides a response that makes the distinction itself more humanly complex. This does not mean that the distinction is abandoned; rather, we are allowed to feel and understand something further of the experiences that gave rise to it in the first place and that continue to inform it. For instance, when Van Gogh says of his work that "regardless of approval or disapproval, it gives tone to life" (272/2:172), the opposition between "approval or disapproval" is not separate from the claim made by the rest of the sentence. That is, the "tone" (the Dutch "het toon" is virtually equivalent) or quality of life — to which a painting attests — is meaningful to Van Gogh partly because he has had to struggle with judgemental attitudes towards his work. If this were not the case, he would have needed only to say that his work "gives tone to life." As it is, the value associated with

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"tone" is both a response to and a protest against the arbitrariness and restrictive thinking inherent in the alternatives articulated: "approval or disapproval."

Elsewhere, Vincent writes to reassure Theo that their father is not opposed to a decision Theo has taken, despite appearances to the contrary:

> Because in my last letter I disapproved so strongly of what Pa had said — and still disapprove of it now, being decidedly of the opposite opinion inasmuch as I don't consider it appropriate in this case to raise objections to do with money and religion — I wanted to soften my words, in the sense that I believe that it's a question here of a fault (at any rate a fault in my view) that lies more in Pa's words than in his heart and mood.
>
> And I have in mind to talk to you about how Pa is an old man and so deeply fond of you, and you'll find, I believe, that he'll accept your view if there's no alternative, even if it conflicts with his own, yet couldn't possibly accept estrangement from you or having less contact, etc.
>
> And adopting a humane point of view, I take back my opinion: "by saying that, they have shown they are unworthy of your trust and in my eyes you needn't confide in them any further," or something similar that I wrote then, I don't remember exactly. (351/2:350)

Although Vincent says here that he would like to "soften" his words and even to "withdraw" his criticism, he also insists on being still "decidedly of the opposite opinion" to Father, going on to affirm that he does not "disapprove less" of what his father had said. But to interpret this apparent contradiction adequately, we need to notice how Vincent shifts the focus from his father's "words" to "his heart and mood," and to the fact that his father is old. "Heart and mood" ("hart en stemming"), here, is equivalent to "tone" in the previous example; the phrase indicates a personal quality that modifies the meaning of Father's actual words, to which, however, Vincent continues to object. Vincent's opinion changes not because his quarrel with his father has

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been resolved but because the opposition itself has enabled him to see and understand his father in a more complex way.

As Van Gogh says elsewhere, things are "infinitely more complicated, and good and evil no more occur by themselves than black and white do in nature." Rather, following one's "conscience" and accepting the fact of not being able to "achieve perfection" will give a person "a deep sense of compassion and courtesy, I believe, broader than the measured quality that the ministers have made their specialty" (368/2:391). Here again, he does not back away from reproving the prudently "measured" response of the clergymen (such as his father), but, as in the previous example, he also emphasizes the value of an inner, personal quality or sensibility ("a deep sense of compassion and courtesy"). That is, the "measured" mentality of the clergy needs to be humanized by the clergy themselves becoming more compassionate. But because things are "complicated" and not "black and white," this statement can equally mean that the clergy should also be the recipients of the compassion that their prudent chilliness itself has helped us to value.

As we have seen, Van Gogh could be aggressively straightforward when he was in a combative mode, but he also understood the complexities involved when values are contested. Something of this understanding emerges in the letters through his own response to the binary alternatives that he himself frequently presents and from which he does not withdraw even as he points to a further relational dimension that imparts a human value to the exchange, in excess of the simple clash of opposites.

The contrasts I am describing here are typical of the structure of self-fashioning itself, and an interesting letter from Nuenen can clarify how this is so. Writing to Theo in June 1885, Vincent explains that he is painting "two cottages, half decayed under one and the same thatched roof." These cottages, he writes, "reminded me of a couple of worn-out old folk who make up just one single being and whom one sees supporting each other" (506/3:248). Here, the cottages are distinct, but their connection is imagined in terms of a single human relationship, the personal quality of which exists simultaneously with

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the difference between the individual people involved. At the end of the letter, Vincent describes "the breaking and opposing of colours, which I think about every day," and in so doing, he reminds us that the opposition and harmony of colours in painting is analogous to the simultaneous contrasts by which human relationships are defined. The old couple, like the cottages and the colours, are a pair — a set of binaries — and this remains the case even as the added relational or dialogical dimension complicates the clear-cut distinction, causing us to re-evaluate it.

Along similar lines, writing from Drenthe in 1883, Van Gogh finds himself thinking about a distinction his father had made, comparing Theo and Vincent to Jacob and Esau. For Vincent, this was not exactly an agreeable comparison, but, surprisingly, he begins by confirming that his father's point was made "not entirely mistakenly" (405/3:63). He then goes on to describe the difference between thinking and acting, in order to stress that, in fact, "thinking and acting don't quite rule one another out, and sharp distinctions between thinking and acting that it's customary to assume nowadays, as if one rules out the other, don't actually exist." Still, he points out that thinking is, by itself, too much "an abstraction" (405/3:63), especially, he says, in comparison to the kind of action required to make a painting.

Here, Vincent does not simply reject the distinction between Jacob and Esau. Rather, as the rest of the letter makes clear, he sees that kind of distinction as incommensurate with the actual complexities of personal relationships — whether with Theo or with the kind of personal statement that is made in a painting. In giving us a framework of conceptual thought (the discussion of thinking and acting), Van Gogh therefore provides within the letter itself a context for responding to the personal issues raised by the Jacob and Esau comparison, and this dialogical process in turn instructs us about how best to understand a painting.

Another example of this kind of relationship between a conceptual framework and a concrete response occurs in a letter from Arles in which Van Gogh describes himself as caught "between two currents of ideas" as he attempts to cope with the material difficulties of making a living while attending to the development of his art. In painting, he

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says, "I still have hopes of finding something there" — for instance, by depicting "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" (673/4:255).

This passage opens by acknowledging a contrast ("two currents of ideas"), which is then carried over to the complementary opposition between the two lovers. In turn, these contrasts are offset by the idea that colours mingle to produce a "mysterious" effect having to do with "vibrations" and "tones." Again, the idea of opposition is not surrendered but rather provides a subtext by means of which, as in our earlier example, a further, more complex dimension of human understanding emerges, a dimension that the binary opposites alone do not sufficiently explain but that could not be adequately grasped without them.

In an interesting further reflection, Vincent proposes that he, along with Émile Bernard, should give up trying to "overcome," even though "neither will we be overcome." Rather, we are "not there for one thing or the other" but "to prepare for more consolatory painting" (782/5:38–39). Again, the overall challenge of conquering and being conquered is not discarded, even though the either-or alternative is not all that matters. Rather, Van Gogh focuses on consolation, a personal quality that is not reducible to the binary opposites in question but that does not emerge authentically without them. After all, as he says elsewhere about happiness and unhappiness, "both are necessary and useful" but, like death and life, they are also "relative" (805/5:105). That is, the contraries by which much human thinking is constructed remain necessary, but they are not all that life is, as a real painting or a real relationship can show us.

And so the structural clarity of Van Gogh's binary opposites often gives rise to further questions to which the text responds by insisting on a dialogical dimension in human relationships that does not surrender the binary opposition in question but rather allows us insight into its insufficiency as well as its significance. Conceptual clarity is, as it were, a framework to which the sensuous body of the letter responds, reproducing the process by which art itself affects us, neither wholly

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a matter of ideas nor of feelings but a complex entanglement of both, an elaborate nexus held together in what I have described as a force field, and by which, in turn, a reader is both engaged and challenged.

The Sower: A Dialogue of Life and Death

To end this chapter, I would like to consider a motif that runs through Van Gogh's correspondence and that, in various ways, takes up and transfigures the main ideas I have been exploring in these pages. Both in his writing and in his painting, Van Gogh shows a special interest in sowers as a way of addressing the all-encompassing binary opposition between life and death.

The idea of sowing took hold of Van Gogh's imagination early; in letters written during his religious phase, he refers often to the idea of sowing and reaping to support his conviction that labour and sacrifice will bear fruit in the fullness of time. For instance, he refers approvingly to a sermon in which the Reverend Eliza Laurillard spoke about "the parable of the sower" (120/1:175), and elsewhere, he explains how "the parable of the sower" teaches us about "bringing forth fruits meet for repentance" (130/1:192). Though we await God's blessing on "the seed of His word" within us, Van Gogh explains, we should "put the hand to the plough on the field of our heart" and persevere accordingly (96/1:129). "In the midst of life we are in death," he tells Theo from Amsterdam in 1877, going on to cite Luke 9:62, "'Let him who has put his hand to the plough not look back'" (126/1:185). From Cuesmes in 1880, he writes, "As for *The Sower,* I've drawn it 5 times now, twice small, 3 times large, and yet I'll go back to it again, that figure haunts me so" (157/1:253). He doesn't explain why he feels so haunted, but in light of the above examples, we can surmise that the sower represents, in a concentrated form, the interconnection between labour and fruitfulness, death and life, and how the interrelationship between these opposites is fundamental to God's design.

When Van Gogh gave up his allegiance to institutional religion, his interest in how hard labour bears fruit was transferred both to the

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process of producing art and to his own self-fashioning as an artist. In a letter from Cuesmes in 1880, he describes how he is "working like mad," hoping that his difficult apprenticeship "will bear white flowers in their time" (158/1:255). The work to which he refers here is a drawing, and the juxtaposition of patient endurance and joyful fruition (the shock of "white flowers" emergent from what he calls "these thorns") applies the idea of hardship and regeneration directly to the process of making art. In a letter from Etten in May 1881, he confirms the point by describing his sketches as a "seed from which later drawings will grow" (166/1:273). From The Hague, he writes that "one has gathered in one's studies, just like the farmer does his corn or hay" (257/2:136), and, again, "I think of the studies as seed, and the more one sows the more one may hope to reap" (265/2:156). Shortly afterwards, he states, "I regard making studies as *Sowing,* and making paintings as reaping" (266/2:158). In a passage about the reproduction of etchings and lithographs, he expands this idea: "I've always thought painting a miracle, the kind of miracle by which a grain of wheat becomes an ear. An everyday miracle — all the greater because it's everyday. One sows a single drawing on the stone or in the etching plate and one reaps a multitude" (333/2:318). The "miracle" here is natural, but it remains mysterious in its own way, and for Van Gogh, the main thing "is to ensure that the quality of the seed (namely the drawings themselves) improves, and if it takes a little longer I'll be content, provided the harvest is better as a result. But I still have my eye on that harvest" (333/2:318). Again, we encounter here the idea that hard labour will be rewarded, just as the sower is rewarded by the harvest. In a similar vein, from Drenthe, Van Gogh writes that "the artistic element" will be like a "new shoot" sprouting from an "old trunk" (397/3:41). Here, his favourite idea of new life springing from old gnarled wood gains in suggestiveness because of the strong juxtaposition of young and old, delicate and harsh, dull and bright. Finally, Van Gogh states that the point of these comparisons is, simply, to show "the artistic element." That is, the sower throws fresh light upon what it means to be a painter.

At this point, it is worth recalling that Van Gogh's abandonment of institutional Christianity was followed not by a unilateral dedication

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to art for its own sake but by a commitment to art as a means of portraying the lives of working people. For instance, as I pointed out in chapter 1, he writes that "the idea of drawing types of working man from the people for the people, and circulating them as a popular publication" was "an affair of duty and charity." As an example, he says he has drawn "a Sower," and then "a second sower" (291/2:215), and after that "a reaper with a big scythe in a pasture," partly to demonstrate "that there's more toil than rest in life" (291/2:216). The "toil" here is the condition of the labouring poor whose lives are circumscribed by the contrasting activities of the sower and the mower, and Van Gogh's aim is to express sympathy with those who are condemned to a life of unrelenting labour. When he says that "in Millet's sower," for instance, "there is more soul than in an ordinary sower in the field," he is praising Millet for successfully distilling "*the type*" from "*many individuals*" (298/2:229). That is, Millet's art captures the truth about the condition of the sower, as distinct from merely depicting a sower in a specific instance. In this sense, Millet's art is moral, and Van Gogh attempted to duplicate it in his many drawings of working people.

After Van Gogh moved to Arles, his letters show a marked increase in his interest in the sower motif. "The idea of the sower still continues to haunt me," he writes (680/4:268), and in the letters from St. Rémy, the sower is complemented by a new interest in the reaper — "the opposite of that Sower I tried before" (800/5:80). Also in the Arles letters, the sower is no longer strongly linked to the moral values foregrounded in the letters from The Hague and Nuenen but rather to colour. For instance, Van Gogh describes how he has made "a sower in blue and white. On the horizon a field of short, ripe wheat. Above all that a yellow sky with a yellow sun. You can sense from the mere nomenclature of the tonalities — that *colour* plays a very important part in this composition." He goes on to say that "for such a long time it's been my great desire to do a sower" but that he is "almost afraid" to try. Still, in order to make progress, "what remains to be done is . . . the sower, with colour and in a large format" (629/4:142).

Van Gogh's main concern here is with the painting itself — including its colour, its size, and the challenge it presents to him as an artist.

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This concern is taken up again when Vincent tells Theo, "Yesterday and today I worked on the sower, which has been completely reworked. The sky is yellow and green, the earth purple and orange." He goes on to say that "Millet's sower is colourless *grey* — as are Israëls's paintings too," but now he will "paint the sower with colour, with simultaneous contrast between yellow and purple for example (like Delacroix's Apollo ceiling, which is precisely yellow and purple), yes or no? *Yes* — definitely" (634/4:158). Again, the focus here is on colour, as the contrast with Millet and Israëls makes clear. And so the idea of contrasting opposites in the sower motif has shifted to the "simultaneous contrast" between the colours themselves.

In a later letter, Van Gogh again discusses the sower, explaining how "the night café is a continuation of the sower" and emphasizing that the colour "isn't locally true from the realist point of view of *trompe l'oeil,* but a colour suggesting some emotion, an ardent temperament" (676/4:260). And in the letter in which he admits that the sower "still continues to haunt me," he says that paintings like *The Night Café* and *The Sower* are deliberately "exaggerated" (680/4:268), so that the effectiveness of the painting depends on a heightening of juxtaposed colours, even in defiance of what is conventionally "realistic."

After Van Gogh entered the asylum at St. Rémy, he described his painting of a reaper, which he saw as complementary to *The Sower,* so that they make a pair. "The canvas of the reaper will become something like the sower of the other year" (784/5:53), he writes, and in a further letter he describes the reaper painting in more detail:

> I'm struggling with a canvas begun a few days before my indisposition. A reaper, the study is all yellow, terribly thickly impasted, but the subject is beautiful and simple. I then saw in this reaper — a vague figure struggling like a devil in the full heat of the day to reach the end of his toil — I then saw the image of death in it, in the sense that humanity would be the wheat being reaped. So if you like it's the opposite of that Sower I tried before. But in this death nothing sad, it takes place in broad daylight with a sun that floods everything with a light of fine gold. (800/5:80)

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Although this passage begins by drawing attention to the colours of the painting, it quickly veers in another direction as Van Gogh describes the reaper's hard labour, which in turn prompts an almost allegorical observation: "I then saw the image of death in it," just as he also sees "humanity" in the wheat. By means of this contrast, the life cycle is itself represented — from sowing to reaping, planting to harvesting, life to death. But the sower and the reaper are not just opposites. They also complement each other, and, as a result, death is made to seem less frightening. The last lines of the excerpt can then be read almost as a welcoming gesture — an attempt to make friends with the grim reaper who is now paradoxically associated with the life-affirming "sun that floods everything with a light of fine gold." The reaper struggling to get his work done in the field is an ordinary worker, and yet he is also a "vague" figure, and the passing comparison to a devil ("struggling like a devil in the full heat of the day") suggests that he has a shadowy, almost allegorical aspect as well. Yet the insistence on "broad daylight" and "nothing sad" returns us to a positive interpretation of this figure who is both like us and unlike us and whose significance seems at first opposite to that of the sower, to whom he is in fact complementary. "Phew — the reaper is finished," Vincent writes at the end of the letter. "It's an image of death as the great book of nature speaks to us about it — but what I sought is the 'almost smiling'" (800/5:85). Death here is interpreted within the context of an encompassing natural process in which the opposites coalesce, so that death is (almost) benign rather than something to be feared.

As his health became more precarious and a series of devastating epileptic attacks left him debilitated for days afterwards, Van Gogh quite understandably became increasingly aware of the proximity of the grim reaper. Also, he began to think about how the natural cycle of sowing and harvesting might be arbitrarily interrupted, as, for instance, when wheat is ground by millstones instead of being sown in the earth. "I feel so strongly that the story of people is like the story of wheat, if one isn't sown in the earth to germinate there, what does it matter, one is milled in order to become bread" (805/5:105). He repeats this point in a letter to Willemien:

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> Not every grain of wheat, once it has ripened, ends up in the earth again to germinate there and become a stalk — but far and away the most grains do *not* develop but go to the mill — don't they?
>
> Now comparing people with grains of wheat — in every person who's healthy and natural there's *the power to germinate* as in a grain of wheat. And so natural life is *germinating*.
>
> What the power to germinate is in wheat, so love is in us.

If the natural process of germination is thwarted, he goes on to say, we find ourselves "placed in circumstances as hopeless as they must be for the wheat between the millstones" (574/3:369).

In these passages, Van Gogh is uncomfortably aware that the natural cycle, in which life and death are in complementary opposition, can be violently interrupted. That is, the process of germination — which, as he says, is a figure for love — can be thwarted by unexpected trauma, which he compares to being ground by millstones. And so the sowing and reaping metaphors give rise to a further concern about the scandal of unjust suffering, and this concern in turn reflects a renewed spiritual (rather than conventionally religious) interest that developed in the closing years of Van Gogh's life. For instance, he tells Émile Bernard about "yearnings for that infinite of which the Sower, the sheaf, are the symbols" (628/4:137). In a following letter, he admires Christ "as *an artist greater than all artists,*" going on to praise the parables: "What a sower, what a harvest, what a fig tree, etc." (632/4:154). In admiring Christ as primarily an artist, Van Gogh avoids returning to conventional religion but instead points to how art itself is spiritually edifying. In this context, the sower, the wheat field, and the harvest become invested with a spiritual significance of which art is both the embodiment and the expression.

Interestingly, this renewed spiritual emphasis had the effect of intensifying Van Gogh's preoccupation with colour. Thus, when he sends a second picture of the field in which he had painted the reaper, his discussion of it focuses exclusively on its colours, suggesting that "this will complement the reaper" and "will balance it." He urges Theo

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to show the two paintings together "because of the opposition of the complementaries" (810/5:118), whereby the colours in themselves will make an impact on the viewer, even as the paintings evoke the thematic and symbolic opposition between the sower and reaper.

Close to the end of his life, in Auvers, despite his anxieties about money and his feeling that his life is "attacked at the very root," Van Gogh nonetheless went on painting wheat fields:

> They're immense stretches of wheatfields under turbulent skies, and I made a point of trying to express sadness, extreme loneliness. You'll see this soon, I hope — for I hope to bring them to you in Paris as soon as possible, since I'd almost believe that these canvases will tell you what I can't say in words, what I consider healthy and fortifying in the countryside. (898/5:287)

On the one hand, Van Gogh says that the wheat fields express "sadness, extreme loneliness"; on the other hand, they affirm "what I consider healthy and fortifying in the countryside." He does not dwell on the contradiction, instead allowing it to speak directly about the struggle between his lonely, suffering self and the consolation that comes from being in harmony with the imagined wholeness of a sustaining other — in this case, nature. As ever, the opposites are not separate but are interrelated as the painter's labour is shaped in relation to an ideal and by way of a dialogical process beyond what he can "say in words." Even so, the human value of the process in question is conveyed by the same dialogical process, which in turn is reproduced within the letters themselves.

Conclusion: Contradiction and the Quest for Meaning

In this chapter, I have highlighted how persistently Van Gogh's writing deploys binary structures, and my aim has been to connect Bakhtin's ideas about dialogism and self-fashioning with Theo's diagnosis of Vincent's self-contradictions.

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In general, I have suggested that Van Gogh's binary rhetoric sets up force fields of meaning that introduce a reader to a fresh perception of the concerns expressed in the letters and to how Van Gogh himself struggled to see and understand more clearly. For instance, the frequent use of juxtaposed opposites bordering on paradox is a means of expressing a direction of the will, the force of an exhortation. But more significantly, these opposites are also a means by which Van Gogh explored and contended with contradictions between the ideals to which he aspired and the intractable demands of his individuality as he struggled to avoid the twin perils of isolation and absorption, the dead hand of convention and the dead end of individualism.

The deployment of a further broad range of "simultaneous contrasts" throughout the letters can help us also to chart the course of Van Gogh's personal development, but they do so in a manner that enables (indeed, causes) us to feel and understand the human complexity of the process, often imparting to the letters a combination of compelling insight and emotional power. In turn, this literary dimension is a function of how Van Gogh's writing provides a framework of ideas — presented, for instance, as a choice between opposites — to which the text also responds. The result is not so much that the opposites are reconciled or that the force of a contradiction is lost. Rather, the contradiction itself is invested with a further dimension of meaning and understanding, showing us why and how it is humanly significant, even if not resolvable.

Finally, I have considered Van Gogh's sower motif as a way of encapsulating and filling out the foregoing discussion. The idea of sowing brings together the interrelated binary notions of planting and harvesting, fruitfulness and reaping, maturity and loss. Running throughout the correspondence, the motif can help us better to understand not only Van Gogh's own remarkable self-fashioning but also its broader human significance. That is, the means by which the sower motif opens up within the texts a dialogue between pain and joy, loss and fulfillment, loneliness and hope, death and life expresses in a concentrated form the perpetual quest of the troubled and anxious self for the resolution that would lay trouble and anxiety to rest.

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Yet such a resolution remains beyond the reach even of our best efforts to overcome the contradictions — the persistent binaries — within which, as creatures of history, we discover and shape a place in the world.

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CHAPTER 3

Reading Van Gogh's Letter-Sketches

The Letter-Sketches and the Letters

Van Gogh's correspondence contains 242 sketches, but there has been no detailed assessment of how they contribute to the record the letters provide of the evolving course of his life and thought. It has, however, been correctly noted that the letter-sketches have art-historical value. For instance, they sometimes show how Van Gogh attempted to catch the essence of a painting on which he was working, thus providing valuable clues about how the finished work evolved. Occasionally, they give us information about paintings that are lost and thereby help to fill out our understanding of Van Gogh's work as a whole.[1] Also, they provide interesting graphic descriptions of tools and equipment that he used: for instance, his palette (253/2:126), his perspective frame (253/2:127; 254/2:129), the kind of spike with which he secured his easel (628/4:139), a variety of brushes (421/3:96; 777/5:28; 863/5:216), scrapers (325/2:295), and the shutters that he installed to modify the light in his studio (318/2:278–79).

But, as the editors of *Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters* (2009) point out, the sketches are often hasty and rudimentary, and therefore "cannot be regarded as a stage in the creative process or as part of Van Gogh's artistic oeuvre." Rather, they "served one purpose: to give the recipient an idea

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of something that he was working on or had just finished" (6:34). This caveat makes good sense, but, as is often the case with discussions of Van Gogh's letters, the gravitational pull here is towards the paintings. By contrast, in the following pages, I want to consider the relationship of the sketches to the texts of the letters with which they belong. In so doing, I suggest that there is often a revealing interaction between Van Gogh's writing and the drawings that accompany it, so that the juxtaposition of these two modes of expression produces a range of effects that deepens and complicates the account of Van Gogh's life and experience described in the letters as a whole. Moreover, because the relationship between the sketches and the written texts is, of necessity, dialogical, the interplay between the visual (spatial) drawings and the (temporal) textual narrative extends the discussion of the "painterly writer," which was the main topic of chapter 1. This interplay also develops the points made in chapter 2 about juxtaposition and contrast as a mimesis of the contending aspirations and deflections, attractions and repudiations by which the self discovers and claims a place in the world. But because there is as yet no critical assessment of how the sketches contribute to Van Gogh's correspondence, I want first to describe something of their range, variety, and evolution, with a view to assessing how they interact with the written texts in a manner that exemplifies and intensifies the dynamism of self-fashioning, as I have described it.

At this point, it is worth noting briefly that the letter-sketches can be related also to the other kinds of textual markings throughout the correspondence. The frequent underlinings, crossings out, bold emphases, stretched-out words, dramatic dashes, and exclamation marks are, as the 2009 editors say, "part of the message that Van Gogh wanted to convey; they are part of his rhetoric" (6:9).[2] In other words, how the letters look affects what they mean, and my main suggestion about the letter-sketches makes much the same point: they are not just add-ons to the text; they are also part of Van Gogh's "rhetoric."

Certainly, Van Gogh was well aware of the different kinds of interplay between the texts of his letters and the sketches. For instance, he writes to Theo from Amsterdam (28 May 1877) to say that he has been reading in Genesis about the burial of Sarah in a cave at Machpelah,

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FIGURE 1. *The Cave of Machpelah,* FROM LETTER 116 (1:163), VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH, 28 MAY 1877, AMSTERDAM. PEN AND INK, 7.2 X 15.4 CM (F JUV XXX). VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), D300V/1970.

"and I couldn't help making a little drawing of how I imagined that place to be" (116/1:162; fig. 1). Here, in a straightforward way, the drawing complements the written text according to Vincent's explicit intent by adding a further, imaginary dimension to the writing.

A different kind of example occurs in a letter from The Hague (11 August 1882), in which Vincent says that after he composed the letter, he "realized that it lacked something" (255/2:131). And so he held the letter back until he had made a painting of a beach at Scheveningen so that he could add a sketch to his written description of the painting (fig. 2). As was often the case in his correspondence, Vincent was partly concerned to show Theo that he was working and that he deserved Theo's continuing financial support. "I thought you'd be pleased that I've tackled this," Vincent writes, as if to make the point clear. And so not only does the sketch complement the written account, but the painting (as well as the sketch that depicts it) also enabled the letter

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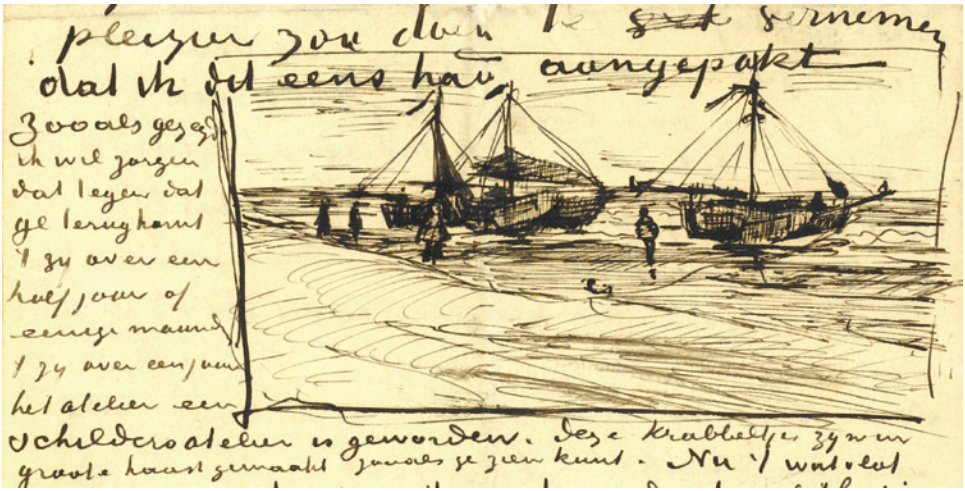

FIGURE 2. *Beach with Fishing Boats,* FROM LETTER 255 (2:130), VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH, 10 AND 11 AUGUST 1882, THE HAGUE. PEN AND BLACK INK, 5.5 X 10.5 CM (JH 174). VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), B246V/1962.

itself to be written. The sketch is therefore not just an illustration, as in the first example, nor are the two realms of discourse (written and graphic) merely juxtaposed; they are interdependent.

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

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

The last two examples might now themselves be seen as standing in complementary opposition. In the first (the beach), the sketch specifies what the text sets out loosely and in general terms, and although the sketch is small, it is densely worked and has a certain engaging vividness. In the second (the wheat), the sketch provides a general idea and the telling detail is provided by the text. The very flimsiness of the drawing helps to remind us of the pre-eminence of colour for Van Gogh at the time when the letter was written. By contrast, in The Hague in 1882, when Van Gogh drew the sketch of Scheveningen beach, he was an aspiring illustrator, and something of his desire to draw well is reflected in the vigour of the sketch itself. And so we might conclude from these two examples that the letter-sketches are not always best seen as straightforward illustrations. Rather, they interact with the text, and, as I will show, they do so in a variety of ways, confirming and also enhancing what the letters tell us about the development of Van Gogh's career and his struggles to define himself as an artist.

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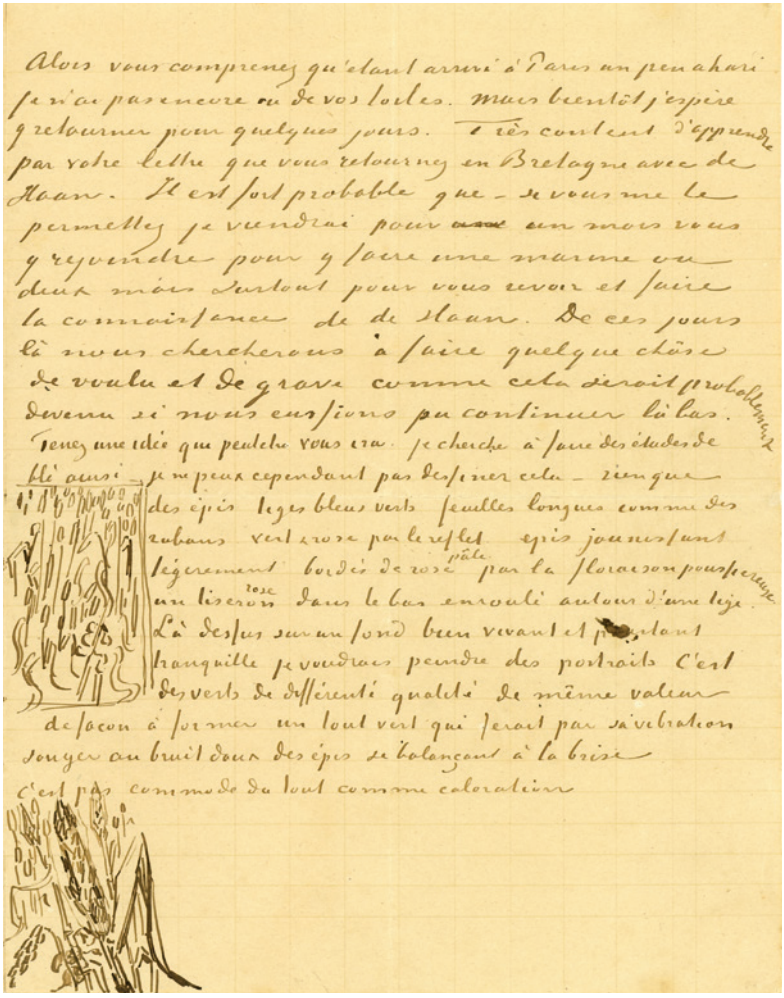

FIGURE 3. *Ears of Wheat,* FROM LETTER RM23 (5:323), VINCENT VAN GOGH TO PAUL GAUGUIN, CA. 17 JUNE 1890, AUVERS-SUR-OISE. PEN AND INK, 5.0 X 3.2 CM AND 4.5 X 4.5 CM. VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), B691V/1962.

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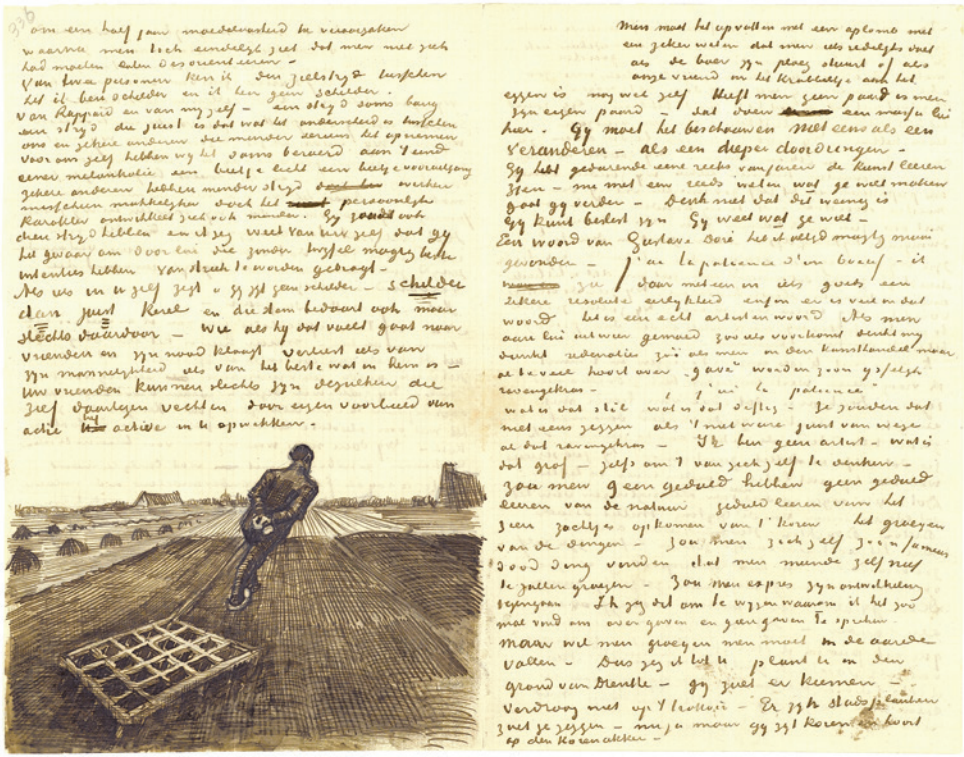

FIGURE 4. *Man Pulling a Harrow,* FROM LETTER 400 (3:52), VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH, 28 OCTOBER1883, NIEUW-AMSTERDAM. PENCIL, PEN, AND INK, 9.0 X 13.4 CM (JH 420). VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), B359BV/1962.

At this point, some notice should also be taken of the fact that the letter-sketches occasionally do have merit in themselves. For example, in a long letter from Drenthe in October 1883, Vincent insists on the integrity of his vocation as a painter and his lack of regard for convention. He tries to convince Theo to become a painter and to share in the creative energy exhibited by the great artists of past generations.

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The key to success, Vincent says, is perseverance, especially in the face of hardship, and he assures Theo, "You would also have this struggle." Nonetheless, Vincent goes on, "one must take it up with assurance," and "if one has no horse, one is one's own horse" (400/3:53). To confirm the point, he provides a sketch of a man pulling a harrow across a field (fig. 4). The man leans forward to take the strain as he walks away from us, facing the horizon. This is the kind of heroic conviction we need, says Vincent, "like our friend in the scratch, who is doing his own harrowing" (400/3:3).

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

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

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

The examples I have so far discussed provide us with a range of effects that are not simple or uniform and that illustrate the different kinds and degrees of relationship between the letter-sketches

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and the texts of the letters in which they occur. Nonetheless, as with the other markings in the letters, the sketches can help us to understand Van Gogh's governing preoccupations at different phases of his career, while also confirming how the interplay between words and pictures contributes to the depiction of self-fashioning within the correspondence as a whole. I would like now to consider these claims in more detail, before turning to two related topics: first, how the sketches contribute to Van Gogh's representation of what I will loosely call the sacred; second, how they help to develop a recurrent motif that is relevant to the process of self-fashioning and that I refer to as *homo viator*.

Narrative Dimensions

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

During his time in The Hague (December 1881 to September 1883), as Van Gogh settled into his challenging apprenticeship as an artist, the number of his letter-sketches increased markedly. Of the letters written in these two years, thirty-nine have sketches (sometimes multiple), in comparison to sixteen letters with sketches in the six years preceding.

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

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

As a group, these letter-sketches are varied, but Van Gogh's empathy for the trials and sufferings of working people remains the central concern, and he has begun to include children and babies among his subjects. For instance, he draws four people and a baby on a bench (263/2:153), orphan boys and girls out for a walk (265/2:155), five men and a child in the snow (322/2:287), children and babies in a soup kitchen (323/2:291; 324/2:293), and a girl kneeling beside a cradle in which we can see a baby (320/2:309). In general, these topics add a sentimental dimension to Van Gogh's concerns for the labouring poor and the precariousness of their well-being.[4]

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FIGURE 5. *Soup Distribution in a Public Soup Kitchen,* FROM LETTER 324 (2:2), VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH, CA. 4 MARCH 1883, THE HAGUE. PEN AND BLACK INK, 6.0 X 9.8 CM (JH 332). VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), B295V/1962.

Finally, it is worth noting that the letter-sketches during Van Gogh's time in The Hague are, for the most part, densely worked and vigorously cross-hatched. In short, they communicate something of Van Gogh's effort to make them expressive, and they bear the marks of an intense, urgent labour. As I have mentioned, part of his intent here is to show Theo that he is hard at work, and this point is sometimes explicitly declared. "Here are a couple of small sketches," Vincent says, and then goes on: "Make no mistake, old chap, I'm fully back into my normal routine, and rest assured that everything else depends on work" (251/2:118). Elsewhere, he sends Theo a rough sketch and asks, "Why am I sending it?" (322/2:286), going on to describe at some length how he will persist through various failures in order to succeed.

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FIGURE 6. *Woman Digging,* FROM LETTER 331 (2:313),
VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH, CA. 21 MARCH 1883, THE HAGUE.
PENCIL, PEN AND INK, CRAYON, 20.5 X 13.5 CM (JH 337).
VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), B298AV/1962.

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"I long for you to come," he concludes, "specifically so that I can show you the studies and talk about the work" (322/2:287).

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

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

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

Interestingly, the letter-sketches from The Hague are idealistic in a manner that is often in contrast to the strife Van Gogh was experiencing

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FIGURE 7. *The Poor and Money,* FROM LETTER 270 (2:167), VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH, CA. 1 OCTOBER 1882. THE HAGUE. PEN AND INK, 13.6 X 21.1 CM (JH 223). VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), B257V/1962.

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

When Van Gogh moved from The Hague to Drenthe, after breaking up with Sien in September 1883, he felt guilty about abandoning her

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

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

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FIGURE 8. *Women Working in the Peat,* FROM LETTER 393 (3:29), VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH, CA. 7 OCTOBER 1883, NIEUW-AMSTERDAM. PENCIL, PEN AND INK, 3.8 X 13.5 CM (JH 410). VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), B354V/1962.

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As a way of introducing Theo to Drenthe, where, according to Vincent, "everything is beautiful," he includes a sketch of a churchyard (fig. 9), along with a description:

> Imagine a patch of heath with a hedge of small, closely planted pines around it — so that one would think that it was an ordinary little pine-wood.
>
> However, there's an entrance — a short avenue and then one comes upon a number of graves overgrown with bent-grass and heather. (387/3:14)

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

The final sketch from the Drenthe letters is the depiction that we encountered earlier of a man pulling a harrow across a field (400/3:52). Again, as in so many sketches from this period, the man faces away from us and his work is lonely and strenuous. As already noted, in the long letter to which the sketch is attached, Vincent affirms his decision to become an artist and asks Theo to join him so that they can face the rigours of the struggle together, emulating the heroic dedication of the man in the sketch. But here I want to note also how the sketch emphasizes the man's solitariness. He appears manacled to

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FIGURE 9. *Churchyard* (387/3:15)
VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH, CA. 6 SEPTEMBER 1883, HOOGEVEEN.
PENCIL, PEN AND INK, 10.0 X 14.8 CM (JH 396).
VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), B348AV/1962.

the harrow and his hands seem fastened behind his back. His face is turned away as if confirming his isolation, and the sketch seems not so much an exemplum for Theo as an expression of Vincent's own condition. Here, the tension between Vincent's confinement and loneliness and his aspiration to a heroic ideal is communicated more effectively by the interplay between the sketch and the text than by either of these considered separately.

In general, then, the letter-sketches from Drenthe continue to develop the themes depicted in Van Gogh's sketches from The Hague, as he maintains his focus on people's everyday lives. Again, the Drenthe

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sketches are dense and closely worked, but now there is also a distinctive melancholy, reflected in the loneliness of the workers, their facelessness, and their postures.

Van Gogh soon left Drenthe, but it was not long before he felt uncomfortable living with his parents in Nuenen.[5] He complained bitterly to Theo (415/3:85–86), whose response was reproving, so that the relationship between the brothers became testy. Then Vincent's mother fell and broke her leg, and one of his father's parishioners, Margot Begemann, with whom Vincent was having some kind of amorous relationship, tried to commit suicide. To make matters worse, Vincent's father died suddenly, and Vincent's relationship with his family became acrimonious. He also wanted to be in a city again, and so in November 1885, he left for Antwerp.

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

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

Although several of the Nuenen letter-sketches reproduce the dense style that we recognize from The Hague and Drenthe, some also show a new combination of ease and suggestive detail. This is the case, for instance, in a pair of sketches depicting a woman sewing and a weaver

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at his loom (421/3:99), which are precise even though they were drawn quickly and with something of the liveliness that Van Gogh admired in great painting. Despite the fact that they depict confinement (especially in the case of the weaver, who is engulfed in the machinery surrounding him), these drawings are clearer and airier than are Van Gogh's earlier depictions of comparable topics.

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

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

But the most important new element in the letter-sketches of the Nuenen period lies in another direction. Van Gogh's major achievement during these years was his painting *The Potato Eaters*, which he discusses in some detail in the correspondence. Among other things, this painting is an antidote to the idealized depictions of peasant life that were currently fashionable. By contrast, Van Gogh's peasants

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

Thus, a compact, detailed sketch of *The Potato Eaters* is provided in a letter in which Van Gogh also describes the painting (492/3:221). In the subsequent letter, he encloses a larger version of the sketch in pen, ink, and lithographic chalk, and he praises Millet for setting the example that Van Gogh now follows, of being "so absorbed in peasant life" that the authenticity of the experience shows through in the painting (493/3:225). Even though he acknowledges that there are faults in *The Potato Eaters,* he expresses confidence in what he has achieved. "I know myself that there are flaws in it," he tells Theo, but he is sure that it "will also hold up." He affirms that "now I'm working

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FIGURE 10. *Head of a Woman (Gordina de Groot),* FROM LETTER 505 (3:246), VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH, CA. 28 MAY 1885, NUENEN. PEN AND INK, 13.3 X 15.9 CM (JH 784). VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), B447V/1962.

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

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

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

As we might expect, the letter-sketches from Arles do not depict peasant life or the lives of workers, such as the Nuenen weavers. True,

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

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

These careful sketches leave little doubt that Van Gogh could draw effectively when he wanted to, and they provide a clear contrast with the many simpler ones throughout the Arles letters. For instance, a thumbnail sketch of the Seine with the Clichy Bridge is a mere gesture intended to jog Theo's memory of the painting (589/4:35; fig. 13). Other sketches, such as the orchard with pear trees in bloom (599/4:62) and the farmhouse in a wheat field (609/4:82), are also so elementary as to be virtually without inherent interest. A good many are like this, though sometimes Van Gogh provides enlivening touches that do manage to arrest our attention. For instance, although the sketch

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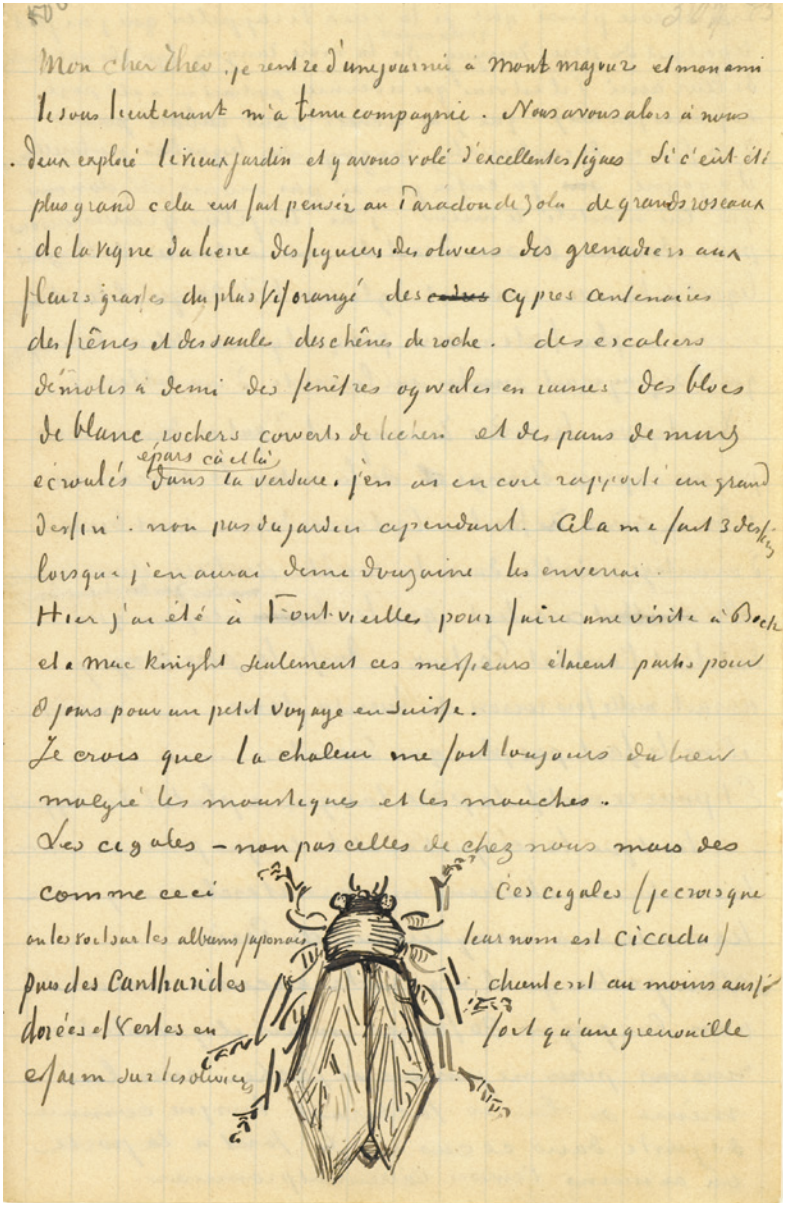

FIGURE 11. *Cicada,* FROM LETTER 638 (4:169),
VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH, 9 OR 10 JULY 1888, ARLES.
PEN AND BLACK INK, 5.5 X 5.0 CM.
VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), B547AV/1962.

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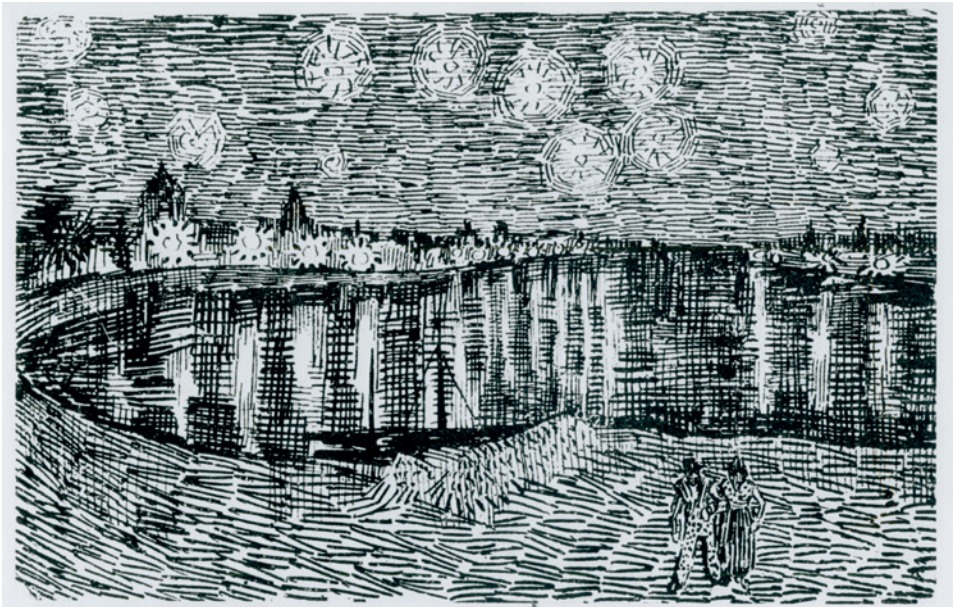

FIGURE 12. *Starry Night on the Rhône,* FROM LETTER 691 (4:293), VINCENT VAN GOGH TO EUGÈNE BOCH, CA. 29 SEPTEMBER 1888, ARLES. PEN AND BLACK INK, DIMENSIONS UNKNOWN (F 1515 / JH 1593). VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), B598B(RM16)

of a garden (644/4:189) is, again, hasty, it is also rendered with some vigour, echoing the accomplished drawing *Garden with Flowers* (1888), of which Van Gogh also made a painting (644/4:186–87). A similar effect is evident in the letter-sketch of ploughed fields (687/4:284) and the *Reminiscence of the Garden at Etten* (720/4:359).

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

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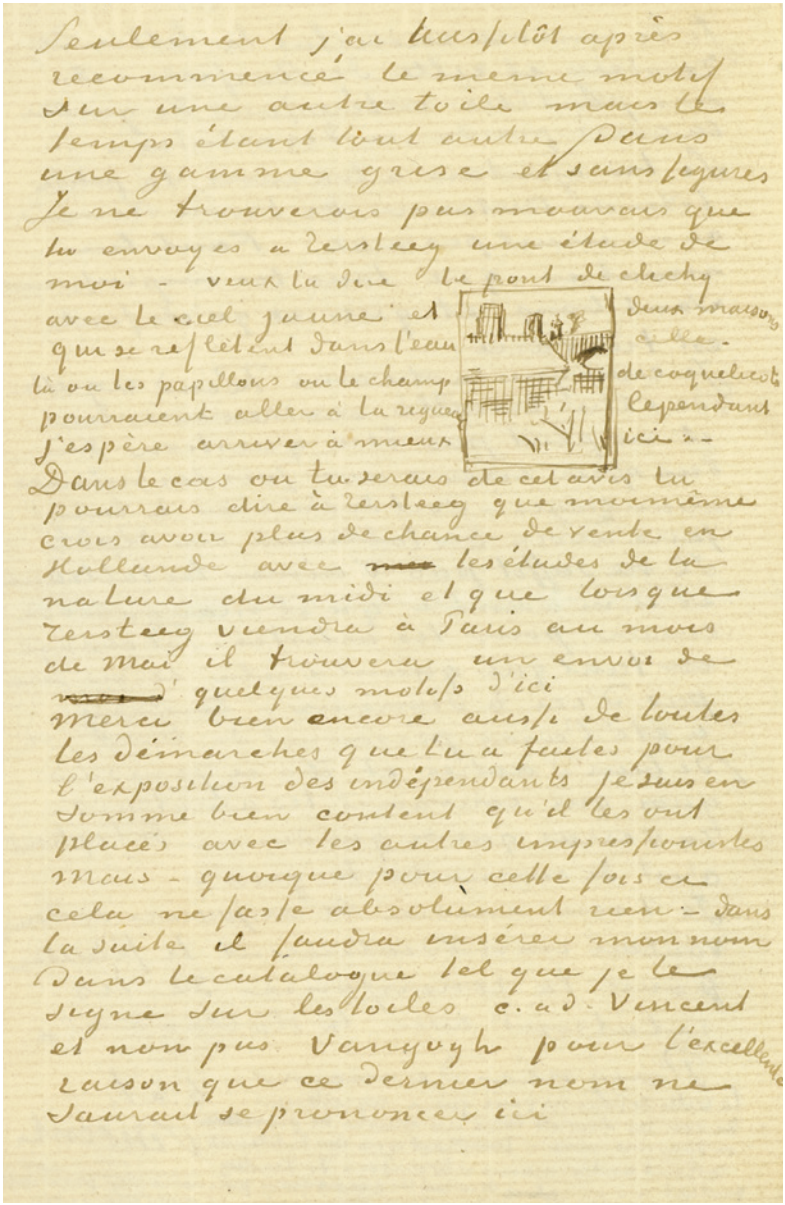
Seulement j'ai tout de suite après recommencé le même motif sur une autre toile mais le temps étant tout autre dans une gamme grise et sans teintes je ne trouverais pas mauvais que tu envoyes à Tersteeg une étude de moi - veux tu dire le pont de Clichy avec le ciel jaune et deux masses de que se reflètent dans l'eau celle-là où les papillons ou le champ de coquelicots pourraient aller à la rigueur j'espère arriver à mieux cependant ici - -
Dans le cas où tu serais de cet avis tu pourrais dire à Tersteeg que moi même crois avoir plus de chance de vente en Hollande avec ~~mes~~ les études de la nature du midi et que lorsque Tersteeg viendra à Paris au mois de mai il trouvera un envoi de ~~mes~~ quelques motifs d'ici
Merci bien encore aussi de toutes les démarches que tu a faites pour l'exposition des indépendants je suis en somme bien content qu'il les ont placés avec les autres impressionistes mais - quoique pour cette fois ci cela ne fasse absolument rien - dans la suite il faudra insérer mon nom dans le catalogue tel que je le signe sur les toiles c.ad Vincent et non pas Vangogh pour l'excellente raison que ce dernier nom ne saurait se prononcer ici

FIGURE 13. *The Seine with the Clichy Bridge,* FROM LETTER 589 (4:35), VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH, CA. 25 MARCH 1888, ARLES. PEN AND INK, 3.0 X 2.6 CM (JH 1324). VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), B511V/1962.

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

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

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

The two gardens and the ploughman are drawn in the loose style characteristic of most of the Arles sketches, but (especially in the first of the two garden drawings) the result is quite evocative. Also, it is worth noting that the drawings of the asylum gardens are close-ups. In the first (776/5:23), the point of view is near ground level, and the sightlines are hemmed in by tree trunks, themselves cut off a short way above

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ground. The confined effect is further intensified by the thick foliage that crowds the foreground. The second sketch (868/5:230; fig. 14) is much the same, though less detailed. Here again, we are on the level of the dandelions, and the tree trunks are cut off just above ground, so that we have the impression of seeing the scene close-up. Although this kind of composition owes something to Van Gogh's study of Japanese prints, his detailed drawings of the three cicadas (790/5:62) and of the peacock moth (in the same letter as the first asylum garden drawing; 776/5:25) suggest that he was, simply, interested at looking at things in a highly focused way, and I would like to suggest that his illness provides a clue as to why this is so.

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

From these and other examples, it is not difficult to understand how anxious Van Gogh was about his illness and how, in turn, his anxiety is reflected in a fierce concentration on the process itself of painting. "As for ideas," he says, "I have no others except to think that a wheatfield or a cypress are well worth the effort of looking at them from close at hand" (783/5:46). Elsewhere, when he finds himself wondering about the problem of suffering, he quickly redirects his attention: "it's better to look at a wheatfield" (784/5:53). He says about the letter-sketch of the cicadas that they remind him of home, and he acknowledges how matters of large significance are often contained in concentrated form in apparently small or transient things: "let's not forget that small emotions are the great captains of our lives, and that these we obey without knowing it" (790/5:62). In short, in these examples, we can see how Van Gogh offsets and counteracts his anxiety

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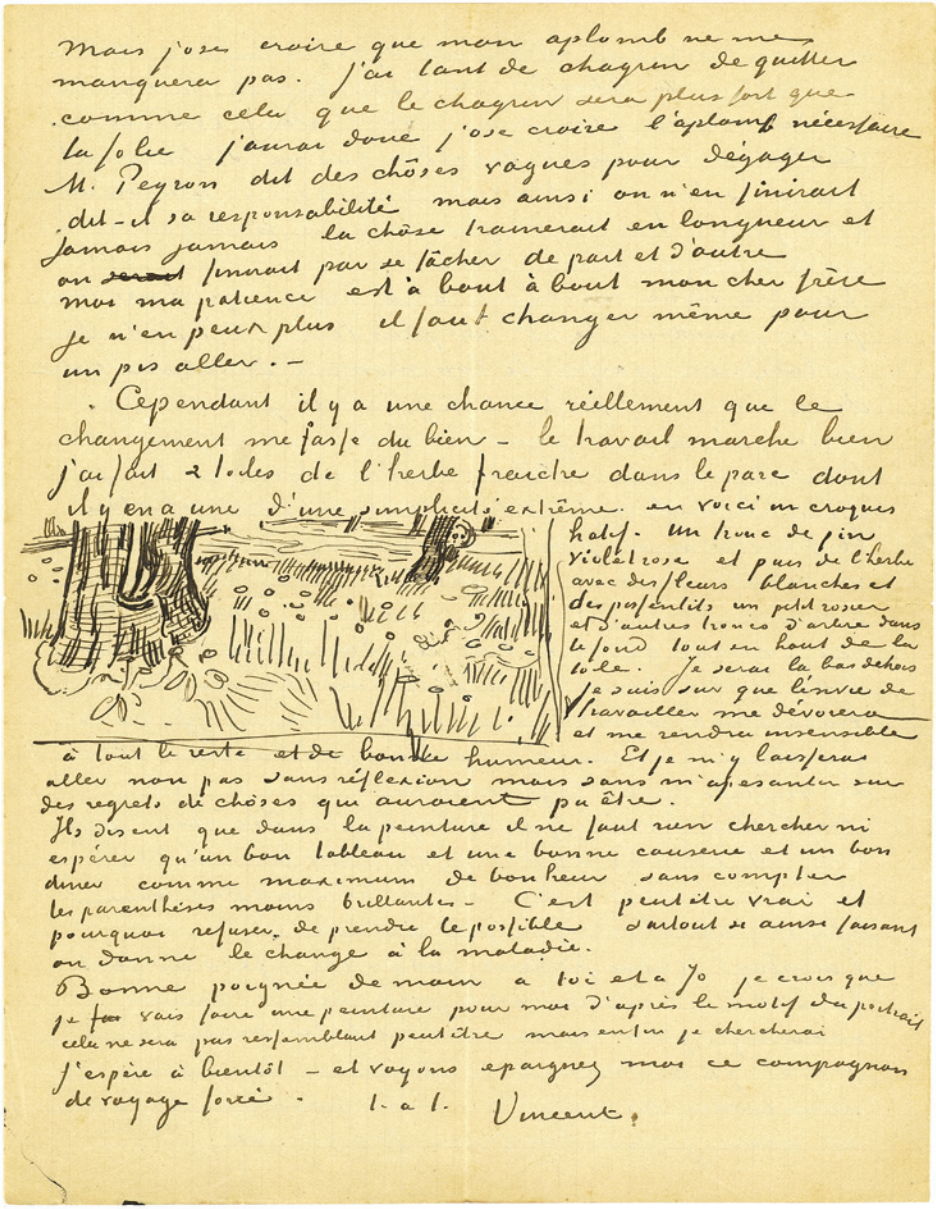

FIGURE 14. *The Garden of the Asylum with Dandelions and Tree-Trunks,* FROM LETTER 868 (5:230), VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH, 4 MAY 1890, SAINT-RÉMY-DE-PROVENCE. PEN AND INK, 5.2 X 12.5 CM (JH 1971).
VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), B680V/1962.

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by way of a deliberately focused, close-up intensity. Interestingly, his drawings at the time also show a proclivity for similar close-up effects. Although it is beyond the scope of the present study to pursue this point in detail, a quick look through the catalogue of Van Gogh's St. Rémy drawings shows a markedly increased emphasis on closely observed studies of plants (periwinkle, tassel hyacinth, pine cones, chestnut leaves) as well as of hands, a beetle, a dead sparrow, a foot, and a wide range of *sous bois* motifs with truncated perspective lines, crowded vegetation, cut-off trees impeding the view, and compositions that suggest claustrophobia and confinement.[7] And so Van Gogh's contemporary sketches in general confirm what the St. Rémy letters say about his therapeutic resort to the close-up, alerting us to how potentially chaotic energies need to be intensely observed in order to be contained. All of this can lead us to the sketch of the raising of Lazarus (fig. 15), which is connected both to Van Gogh's illness and to his trust in the restorative power of art (866/5:225).

The letter with the Lazarus sketch begins with Vincent explaining to Theo that he is "a little worn out by this long crisis," but now that he plans to leave St. Rémy, the change "will refresh my ideas more." He is now worried that his confinement in the hospital (even though he went there voluntarily) has been undermining his health as well as his art: "it's enough that I feel that what remains to me of reason and capacity for work is absolutely in danger" (866/5:224). He therefore hopes that Theo and Dr. Peyron will agree to his release. He then describes the letter-sketch, using it, as usual, to supply Theo with an account of the colours in the painting. Again, the sketch is loose and hasty, except that the head of the resurrected Lazarus is more detailed and stands out from the rest of the drawing. In the painted version, the resurrected Lazarus is a red-bearded Vincent look-alike, and the sketch clearly suggests that Vincent will be brought back to life, as it were, through painting. As Cornelia Homburg says, the depiction of Lazarus is "a very personal interpretation" of Rembrandt's original, and she follows Evert von Uitert in maintaining that the red beard does indeed suggest a self-portrait. To confirm the point, she notes that this is "the only copy" made by Van Gogh in which he "did not stick closely

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FIGURE 15. *The Raising of Lazarus (After Rembrandt),* FROM LETTER 866 (5:225), VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH, CA. 2 MAY 1890, SAINT-RÉMY-DE-PROVENCE. PENCIL, PEN AND INK, 10.7 X 13.6 CM (JH 1973). VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), B681AV/1962.

to the exact composition of his model."[8] That is, he includes only the two figures of Martha and Mary, omitting Rembrandt's other startled observers, as well as Christ. In his letter, Van Gogh indicates that the two women are Mmes Roulin and Ginoux, the models for his *Berceuse* and *Arlésienne* paintings (866/5:224). As Homburg says, these women "were close friends who knew about his illness and who had worried about him," and their expressions of surprise in the Lazarus painting are a reaction to his restored health. The fact that Christ is omitted supports the idea that Van Gogh's "translation" of Rembrandt is not so much about a supernatural miracle as about the "hope for his own

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recovery."[9] And so here again, we see the link between his anxieties about his illness and the therapeutic, life-enhancing power of art — the tension, that is, between an anxiously circumstanced self and the visionary ideal that promises release and fulfillment.

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

For instance, six letters from Auvers contain sketches, and four of these are portraits. There is a tiny drawing of Dr. Gachet (877/5:246) and a larger one of Mme Ginoux (879/5:252), as well as a drawing of Marguerite Gachet (893/5:279) and of a girl against a background of wheat (896/5:282). Although they are of uneven quality, these drawings, like the paintings they illustrate, confirm the broad sense that

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the letters also provide of Van Gogh's heightened appreciation of the personal — or, more accurately, the interpersonal, which is to say a more complete form of dialogue than the dialogue mediated by art.

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

As a whole, the letters from Auvers during the last weeks of Van Gogh's life continue to express this mix of elements, confirming his sense of isolation and his continuing search for a reconciliation of differences. The fields are lonely but also restorative. Just so, the people to whom Van Gogh wanted to be close were never quite close enough, even if they did help to sustain him; in the end, the kind of mutuality that he sought throughout his life eluded him. Still, in these final letters and in the sketches that accompany them, we see how he kept aspiring to the reconciliations that might lead to the kind of interpersonal fulfillment that he so intensely desired. As ever, the search for such a fulfillment is represented throughout the letters through the inextricable interinvolvement of personal aspirations and elusive ideals. In turn, the structure of this dialogue is a main vehicle for

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representing the heroism and anguish of Van Gogh's own development, which his letters also describe. And so, through a variety of examples spanning his career, I have suggested that the letter-sketches are not only accompaniments to the narrative of Van Gogh's personal development but are part also of the process that is at the heart of its unfolding and that imparts to that unfolding an enduring human significance.

Representing the Sacred

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

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

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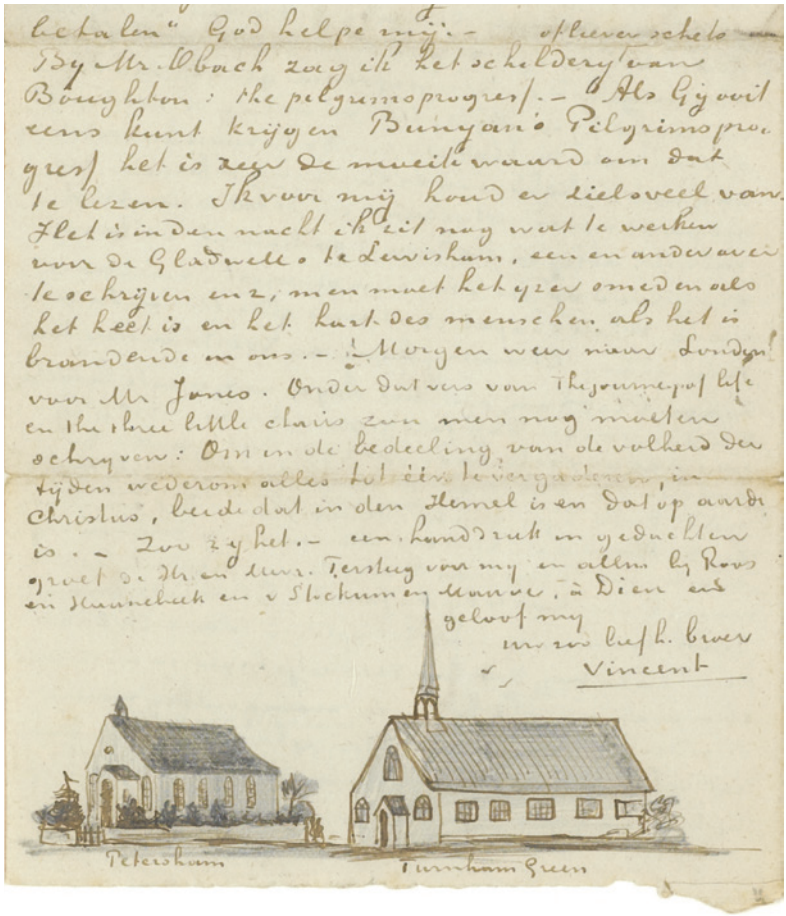

FIGURE 16. *Small Churches at Petersham and Turnham Green,* FROM LETTER 99 (1:134), VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH, 25 NOVEMBER 1876, ISLEWORTH. PENCIL, PEN AND INK, 3.8 X 10.0 CM (F JUV XXVIII / JH JUV 8). VAN GOGH MUSEUM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), AMSTERDAM, B96V/1962.

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

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

Van Gogh says that he made the drawing of the cave because he "couldn't help" conveying to Theo how he imagined the place to be. The deft sketch shows a knoll with some grass and trees, and, in the background, a flock of birds. The cave's mouth is open, suggesting

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a threshold to some further mystery, as well as the finality of death. There are also, however, hints of new life in the birds and the foliage in this not-quite-desert place.

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

The idea of a church as the end point of a journey is taken up again in a letter written in 1878, to which Van Gogh attaches a map of Etten (145/1:228; fig. 17). The roads on the map are neatly labelled and carefully drawn, and several small churches are indicated.[10] But our attention gravitates to the more distinctive church at the top left corner. It stands out partly because of its position but also because it is highlighted with colour and because the road widens as it approaches the top left of the drawing, where we also see two small figures walking. It is as if all the roads lead upwards to this little church and to the higher destiny that it represents. Interestingly, at the time when Van Gogh drew the map and wrote the letter to which it is attached, he was preparing to make a journey of his own, to Brussels, where he would be trained as an evangelist. The letter is full of anticipation of his departure and he explains that there are moments when "all of life seems to be like a path across the heath" (145/1:230). These words suggest that local geography ("the heath") can be transparent to a more general significance ("all of life"). Just so, the little church at the top of the drawing where the road widens is not only a particular aspect of the Etten landscape but also a version of the same "kindly light" at the end of the journey, as we see in the sketches of the Turnham Green and Petersham churches. In relation to the letter, the map of Etten therefore operates by way of what we might call suggestive intensification. That is, we cannot say that the sketch is a direct illustration of something described in the letter, but neither can we separate it from the broad concerns that the letter describes.

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FIGURE 17. *Map of Etten and Environs,* FROM LETTER 145 (1:228), VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH, 22 JULY 1878, ETTEN. PENCIL, PEN AND INK, 18.4 X 13.6 CM. VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), B143V/1962.

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

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

As the account of the miners continues, Van Gogh expresses hope that he will be able eventually to live among them and to preach. "Experience has taught us," he writes, that people such as the miners "are very moved by the message of the gospel," and he describes the "impressive sight" of these faithful souls working underground. The foreman, we learn, "has a cheerful character" and "entrusts himself

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FIGURE 18. *Café 'Au charbonnage',* FROM LETTER 148 (1:233),
VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH, CA. 13–16 NOVEMBER 1878, LAKEN.
PENCIL, PEN AND INK, 14.0 X 14.2 CM (F JUV XXXI / JH JUV 9).
VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), D293V/1970.

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to his God Who sees his labours and Who protects him, his wife and his children" (148/1:234).

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

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

My main point is that, in the context of the letter, the drawing of the café is significant because it is about physical comfort and is not explicitly about religion or the gospel message. Van Gogh thought that making the sketch was transgressive because art was not his "real work" and was less important than religion. The awkwardness of the drawing confirms the point. But in fact the sketch also offers an intimation of how, in the Borinage, moral concerns would displace religion as the main focus of Van Gogh's attention and how art would become a main vehicle for exploring the implications of this shift. And so we see how the little churches at Petersham, Turnham Green, and Etten yield to a different kind of "kindly light," represented now by the café.

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FIGURE 19. *The Yellow House,* FROM LETTER 691 (4:294), VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH, CA. 29 SEPTEMBER 1888, ARLES. PEN AND BLACK INK, 13.4 X 20.6 CM (F 1453 / JH 1590). PRIVATE COLLECTION.

Van Gogh's uneasiness about this shift of emphasis is clear in the text. However, the significance of his uneasiness is not discernible from the text or from the sketch alone, but rather from the interaction between them, as Van Gogh struggles to shape himself in the image of an ideal that is itself in process of transformation. He thus seeks anxiously for refuge in a resolve to pursue what he hopes is his "real work," even though his deeper inclinations are already pulling him in the direction of a different kind of self-fashioning.

Here, as a brief digression, it is also interesting to note that this further direction — whereby Van Gogh defined himself as an artist — is represented by his letter-sketches of yet another building, associated

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

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

The letter-sketches of three different kinds of protective and nurturing buildings, each associated with a sustaining light, can therefore in themselves be read as markers of Van Gogh's entire self-fashioning journey, in the course of which religion (the little churches) yields its dominant ideological position to morality (the miners' café), which

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in turn is displaced by a predominant emphasis on the aesthetic (the Yellow House).

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

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

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

And so the pilgrimage and "kindly light" motifs of Van Gogh's early letter-sketches recur in these two sketches, but now in a secularized form. It is as if the message of the miners' café has led to a

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FIGURE 20. *On the Road* (A) AND *In Front of the Embers* (B), FROM LETTER 162 (1:263), VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH, JANUARY 1888, BRUSSELS. PENCIL, PEN AND INK, WATERCOLOUR (BOTH), EACH 9.8 X 5.8 CM (JH JUV 15 AND 16). VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), D294V/1972 AND D295V/1972.

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reconfiguration of Van Gogh's favoured religious iconography, confirming his new moral concerns. Thus, the light and warmth of the hearth offer the traveller a simple material comfort. But, in so clearly evoking a church porch, the sketch also suggests that the provision of material comfort has taken over from conventional religion.

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

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

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

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to refer to the text to understand Van Gogh's reasons for doing so. The combination of the text and the sketch, together with what we learn from other sketches, therefore gives us a more complex insight than does either the sketch or the text taken separately.

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

Finally, as I have pointed out, *The Raising of Lazarus* (866/5:225) suggests Van Gogh's own resurrection from his confinement at St. Rémy. But like the sketch, the painting is also an act of homage to Rembrandt, who painted the prototype that Van Gogh "translates," as he says (850/5:194). So although Van Gogh draws upon a biblical motif, the letter and the sketch together help to show us that for him, art is itself a means of resurrection, which occurs through the perpetually vital, timeless example of Rembrandt and also through Van Gogh's

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own ability to go on painting in the life-enhancing spirit of the old masters. Again, here the text and the sketch comment on one another, and by way of their interrelationship, we discover a more complex and interesting message than either provides separately.

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

Homo Viator

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

Already in his early sketchbook for Betsy Tersteeg (1874), Van Gogh made a sketch of a tree-lined avenue (24/1:48; fig. 21), in which we follow the narrowing perspective lines to what might be a building at the end, though the markings are indistinct and we can't be sure. Also,

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FIGURE 21. *Tree-Lined Avenue,* FROM LETTER 24 (1:48),
VINCENT VAN GOGH TO BETSY TERSTEEG, 7 JULY 1874, HELVOIRT.
PENCIL, 11.4 X 9.8 CM.
VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), D410V/1965.02.

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far down the avenue, there appears to be a solitary person walking. It is as if the trees are meant to stand in static contrast to the traveller, whose way forward is supported, nonetheless, by the roots that prop up the road. The symbiosis between the vitality of organic life and the dislocated solitariness of the human journey was compelling to Van Gogh's imagination throughout his career.[11] It is easy to detect a romantic intuition here: the notion that the human traveller needs to stay in contact with nature's capacity for perpetual renewal and with nature's enduring stability. Otherwise, the individual human journey becomes a rootless wandering. At this early stage in his development as an artist, Van Gogh sets down the basic terms of the "I/other" dialogue that will constitute and shape his own journey, as the letters as a whole record it. And in this earliest example of his *homo viator* motif, the trees, in full leaf, form a canopy inviting us into his traveller's world, leading us confidently on.

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

When Van Gogh went to Etten after his stay in the Borinage, he especially wanted to improve his draughtsmanship, and he declares his determination: "he who truly takes it seriously doesn't let himself be deterred." He goes on to say that "figure drawing in particular is good," but it "also works indirectly to the good of landscape drawing." For instance, "if one draws a pollard willow as though it were a living being, which it actually is, then the surroundings follow more or less naturally, if only one has focused all one's attention on that one tree and hasn't rested until there was some life in it" (175/1:294). He includes

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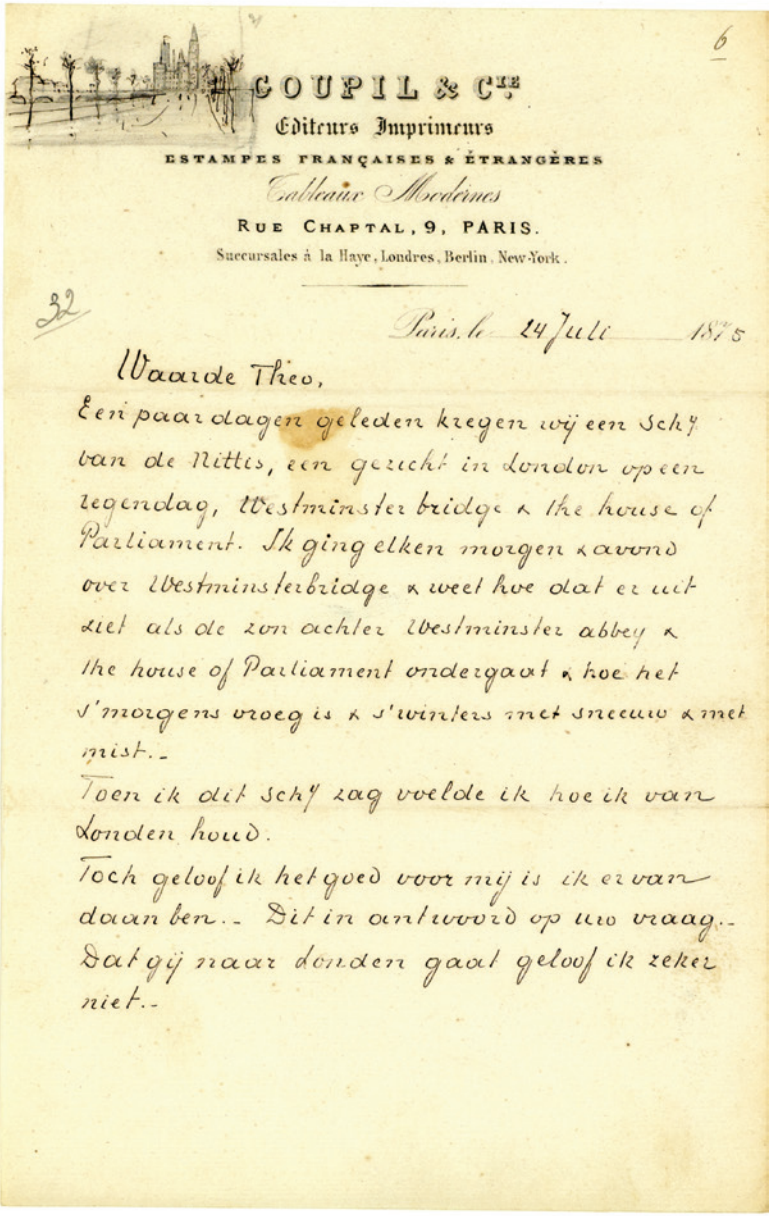

FIGURE 22. *Westminster Bridge,* FROM LETTER 39 (1:67),
VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH, 24 JULY 1875, PARIS.
PENCIL, PEN AND INK, 2.5 X 4.4 CM (F JUV XXIII / JH JUV 4).
VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), B41V/1962.

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FIGURE 23. *Road with a Man and Pollard Willows,* FROM LETTER 175 (1:295), VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH, CA. 12–15 OCTOBER 1881. ETTEN. PENCIL, PEN AND INK, 18.3 X 11.7 CM (JH 58). VAN GOGH MUSEUM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), AMSTERDAM, B172/1962.

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a full-page sketch of a road with pollard willows to illustrate the point, again reproducing the *homo viator* motif (175/1:295; fig. 23). The road is lined with the severely pruned trees, and a man stands facing us, as if waiting. Behind him, the road winds towards what appears to be a junction, and further behind, on the left, is a church spire.

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

In The Hague, as Van Gogh settled down with Sien and her daughter and new baby, he was recovering from gonorrhea, for which he had been hospitalized while Sien was nearing her confinement. He assures Theo that he is now on the mend and ready to continue his work: "I'm going to draw again regularly from morning till evening" (249/2:113). Other letters written at this time confirm Vincent's reassurances to Theo that the work really is progressing. But Vincent also strikes a new note, calling attention to what he has come to see as his own distinctiveness and his dissimilarity from other painters. Thus, he tells Theo, "I'll fight my fight quietly in this way and no other." He wants his old boss, Hermanus Tersteeg, to know "that my painting is an entirely different matter from other things" (250/2:116) — unconnected, he goes on gruffly to assure Theo, from "money from you" (250/2:117). Admittedly,

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this might be a defensive ploy. Van Gogh wasn't able to sell his work and might have sought an excuse for this in claiming an outsider status because of which, he says, "working with an eye to saleability isn't exactly the right way" (252/2:122). From the position of misunderstood misfit, he could also play for sympathy: "What am I in the eyes of most people? A nonentity or an oddity or a disagreeable person." Still, I take him to be sincere when he claims that he wants his work "to show what is in the heart of such an oddity, such a nobody" and that he hopes "to make drawings that *move* some people" (249/2:113). "Either in figure or landscape," he wants to express "not something sentimentally melancholic but deep sorrow" (249/2:113). The important thing about his drawings, he says, is their "poetry" (250/2:115).

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

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

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FIGURE 24. *Pollard Willow,* FROM LETTER 252 (2:123),
VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH, 31 JULY 1882, THE HAGUE.
PEN AND INK, WATERCOLOUR, 6.3 X 13.4 CM (JH 165).
VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), B243CV/1962.

He says that he wants the painting to communicate how "the signalman with his smock and red flag must see and feel it when he thinks: how gloomy it is today" (252/2:122).

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

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

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

The second Nuenen sketch is more interesting. In a letter written on 17 November 1885, Vincent assures Theo that their mother has now fully recovered from her accident and that he is looking forward to leaving Nuenen and heading to Antwerp. "SO THE SOONER I CAN GET AWAY, THE BETTER," he declares emphatically. He goes on to say that he has "worked entirely alone for years" and now he hopes to

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FIGURE 25. *Avenue of Poplars,* FROM LETTER 542 (3:315),
VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH, CA. 17 NOVEMBER 1885, NUENEN.
PEN AND INK, 13.1 X 17.3 CM (JH 960).
VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), D314V/1962.

learn from others, even though insisting that "I'll always see through *my own* eyes and tackle things originally." He adds that he is going to take one landscape painting with him, and he describes it in detail, again providing a sketch by way of illustration (542/3:315; fig. 25).

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

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

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

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

My final example is from Auvers. On 2 July 1890, Vincent wrote to Theo and Jo, expressing concern about the baby Vincent Willem's health and recommending that the family should come to the country, where the air would do them good (896/5:282). The letter includes three sketches on a single sheet. One of these depicts a couple walking between rows of poplars (fig. 26), and Vincent describes the painting on which the sketch is based: "Then undergrowth, violet trunks of poplars which cross the landscape perpendicularly like columns. The depths of the undergrowth are blue, and under the big trunks the flowery

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meadow, white, pink, yellow, green, long russet grasses and flowers" (896/5:282). The sketch itself is a slight, quickly drawn representation of the magnificent, yet strange, painting that Van Gogh describes. There are two main lines of poplars, as well as a further assortment of the same kind of trees, offering several different perspective lines. Close to the centre, a couple is walking. Unlike our other *homo viator* examples, there is no clearly defined road here but rather a dense foliage, which the couple uses as a walkway. In both the painting and the sketch, it isn't clear whether the couple is coming towards us or going away. The lines of trees on the right and left of the sketch (and of the painting) suggest further possible walkways, and the perspective lines are so arranged that it seems as if the background is pushing forward as the vitality of the underbrush (much more vivid in the painting) forces itself on our attention. Also, we see only part way up the trunks of the trees, which are cut off by the top edge in both the sketch and the painting, thus concentrating our focus and emphasizing the underbrush. Here again, we find the close-up point of view and the manipulation of perspective that Van Gogh explored in his final years.

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

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

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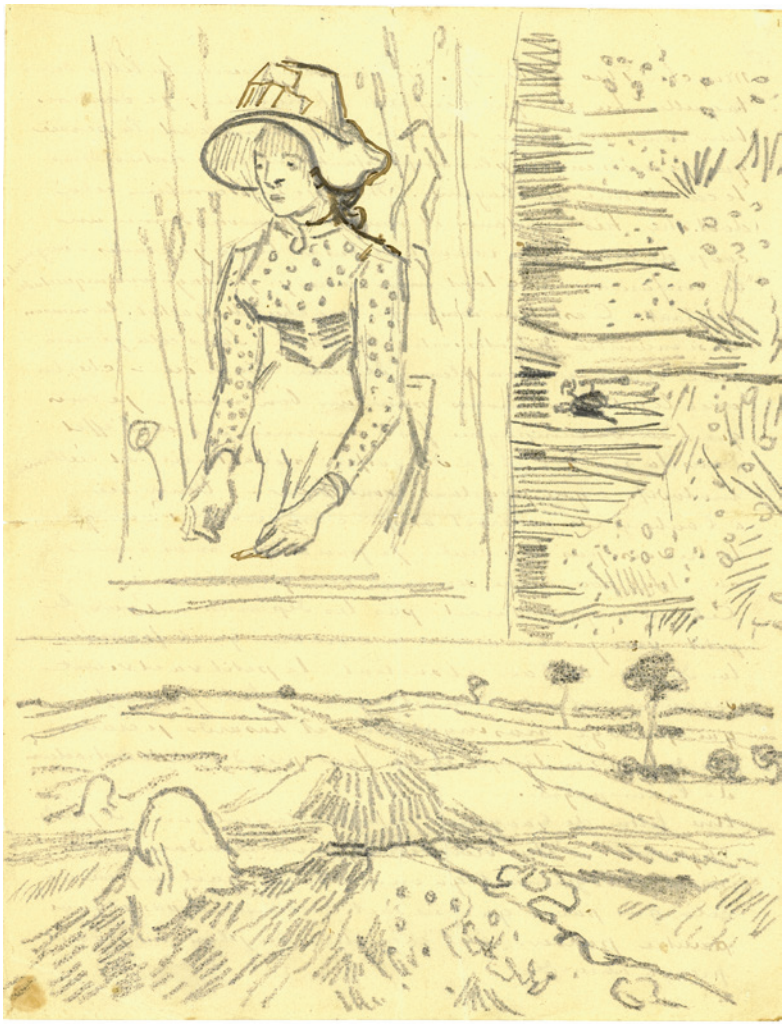

FIGURE 26. *Couple Walking Between Rows of Poplars,* FROM LETTER 896 (5:282), VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH AND JO VAN GOGH-BONGER, 2 JULY 1890, AUVERS-SUR-OISE.
PENCIL, PEN AND INK, 10.2 X 20.9 CM (JH 2042).
VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM (VINCENT VAN GOGH FOUNDATION), B694V/1962.

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Conclusion: Enhancing the Text

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

With these points in mind, I have dealt with the sketches from three different points of view. First, I have suggested that, in a quite straightforward way, they can help us to chart the process of Van Gogh's development as an artist. In the early correspondence, during his religious phase, the sketches are naive and provide simple illustrations of external scenes. But when Van Gogh's religious enthusiasm became displaced by his increasingly urgent moral concerns, he discovered also that he wanted to be an artist. His letter-sketches were then deployed both to illustrate his moral commitments and to provide evidence of his developing draughtsmanship, partly as a means of securing Theo's continuing support. Especially in the sketches from The Hague, Van Gogh's concentrated labour shows through in his dense cross-hatchings and heavily worked effects. This style continues in the Drenthe drawings, where an additional melancholic element becomes evident. In Nuenen, the narrative aspects of Van Gogh's sketches are gradually displaced by a fresh engagement with peasant life, prior to the making of *The Potato Eaters*. A new, unsentimentalized view of peasants as individual people is registered as the sketches provide an earnest of the portraiture that Van Gogh was exploring at the time.

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In Arles, the density of the sketches created in The Hague, Drenthe, and Nuenen is replaced by an airier, looser, and often flimsy style of illustration. Mainly, the Arles sketches reflect the rising pre-eminence of colour in Van Gogh's theory and practice; indeed, many are simply templates for the colour notations that he prints directly on them. But the Arles sketches are also more varied, both in content and in quality, and in general, they reflect a more relaxed attitude than was the case when Van Gogh's moral and religious preoccupations were in the foreground.

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

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

As noted above, the drawings of the churches at Petersham and Turnham Green, together with the map of Etten, stand in counterpoint to the cave at Machpelah, reminding us (as the letters confirm) that Van Gogh's religious belief was shaped from the start by his sensitivity to suffering. I have suggested that a further contrast between these three drawings and the drawing of the miners' café indicates an uncomfortable tension — even before he went to the Borinage — in Van Gogh's understanding of the relationship between religious faith and the moral problems raised by suffering and oppression.

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A secularized interpretation of conventional religious motifs is reflected in further sketches from The Hague, Drenthe, and Nuenen. Then, in the last phase of his career, a renewed spiritual dimension emerges as Van Gogh attempts to express the infinite within the ordinary, reaching for something "above art itself." To some extent, the sketches I have considered in this section are interesting in relation to one another, even as the dialogical interplay between the sketches and the text also helps us to see how their combined effect exceeds what we can learn from either in isolation.

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

Throughout the correspondence, there are many other examples of the *homo viator* motif, with the familiar tree-lined road metamorphosing into other kinds of roads and scenes leading to a variety of destinations. Van Gogh's imagination was captivated by the idea of a journey

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

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CHAPTER 4

Imagination and the Limits of Self-Fashioning

Van Gogh seems to have been an odd and difficult child, and when he got his first job at age sixteen, he soon proved to be an odd and difficult employee. His subsequent religious enthusiasm was so extreme that his ecclesiastical overseers soon fired him, and his father considered having him committed to an institution for the mentally ill. His infatuation with his cousin Kee Vos caused his family much embarrassment and distress, soon resoundingly exceeded by the scandal of his taking up with the pregnant ex-prostitute Sien Hoornik. His sojourn in Paris drove his brother Theo almost to distraction, and in Arles, his breakup with Gauguin was accompanied by self-mutilation and dementia, as a result of which a public petition was presented to the police, claiming that Van Gogh was too dangerous to be walking the streets. While in the asylum in St. Rémy, he ate paint out of tubes, tried to drink turpentine, and kicked a guard in the stomach. In 1888, his devout but distressed mother confided in a letter to Theo that she hoped God would soon take her suffering son: "If it was for me to say, I would ask, 'Take him unto Thee.'" That is, he would be better off dead. "Poor thing," she writes, "I believe he was always ill."[1] Meanwhile, Van Gogh went on contending with loneliness, illness, and anxiety, before dying at the age of thirty-seven from a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

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The troubles that so persistently destabilized Van Gogh's life can help to explain why he repeatedly sought anchorage in an all-but-undauntable utopianism, despite the fact that his idealistic aspirations kept running aground upon the muddy shoals of a predictably recalcitrant actuality.[2] Still, his many disappointments notwithstanding, he sought always to go on affirming the "everlasting *yes,*" as he says (borrowing from Carlyle).[3] Throughout the letters, we find ourselves everywhere engaged by a remarkable conversation between these strongly contending aspects of Van Gogh's experience — a dialogue, as it were, between his unusually unstable ego and the self-identical utopian ideals to which he aspired. In turn, the poles that constitute this dialogue also define the parameters within which imagination operates as it infuses (general) ideas with (particular) sensuous immediacy. Moreover, as with the adventure of self-fashioning itself, imagination is fraught with uncertainty and peril, and in committing himself to imagination as the foremost means of his own self-fashioning, Van Gogh encountered these difficulties head-on. Consequently, in the following pages I want to consider how, throughout the letters, Van Gogh's many reflections on imagination mirror and intensify the challenges, as well as the gratifications, that lie at the heart not only of his own self-fashioning but of the self-fashioning process in general.

Open Sea and Enchanted Ground: The Perils of Commitment

Although Van Gogh realized that he needed ideals, he also feared that if his imagination were deployed too actively in the pursuit of some utopian dream, he might find himself dangerously out of touch with the ordinary world. And so he insists repeatedly that the creative impulse needs to be stabilized by direct reference to particular, recognizable objects. One main reason he offers for seeking this kind of anchorage is that art should stay in contact with the lives and interests of ordinary people. But we don't have to read far in his letters to detect that, on another level, he was anxious, simply, about the disorienting effects of letting his imagination have too free a rein.

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Paradoxically, however, Van Gogh also realized that giving himself over to imagination in the heat of the creative moment was the secret of making a great painting as distinct from a merely correct one. On the one hand, therefore, he worried that imagination would run away with him; on the other hand, he counted on imagination to bring him home.

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

I cite these examples in order to suggest that Van Gogh's awareness of the fragility of self-understanding and of rational control enabled him to realize all the more acutely that the "mysterious" (559/3:350; 719/4:356; 155/1:247) powers at work in the world and in ourselves might be agents of either integration or disintegration. Towards the end of his life, the contest between these opposites, in which the disintegrative effect of his hallucinations and epileptic fits was pitched against the harmony and radiance to which his painting aspired, was especially

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intense. And throughout his career, his most painful experiences arose from the discovery that an ideal to which he had committed himself was in fact an illusion. Yet despite the fact that he realized how unstable his ego was and how it was influenced by unconscious forces, he never held back from the all-or-nothing commitments that his ideals seemed to require.

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

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

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

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sea," and Van Gogh's evangelical fervour remains in the injunction to "surrender our souls." Although the focus is not now on religion, the commitment retains a quasi-religious intensity as he embraces his new vocation as an artist, driven again by a sense of higher calling to risk everything to the perils of the sea.

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

Van Gogh also realized that commitment might involve different kinds and degrees of risk: from Drenthe, he advises Theo, "Don't fear the storm but dread the *calm, treacherous, enchanted* ground" (407/3:68). This sentence does not mean that storms are not destructive; rather, Van Gogh believed that facing external difficulties head-on would help him to grow.[4] "I believe I will mature in the storm," he tells Van Rappard, though he also warns, "A man can't stand it on the open sea for long" and needs "a little hut on the beach with a fire on the hearth" (406/3:67). "Anyway," Vincent writes to Theo in 1883, "though I know very well that the sea holds dangers and one can drown in it, I still love the sea deeply" (307/2:256). In such a spirit, he repeatedly faced up to the stormy consequences of his own decisions, despite the chance of drowning.

But the "*treacherous, enchanted* ground" posed a different kind of danger for Van Gogh, not least because illusion was more difficult for him to face than was a storm at sea. In general, although he could take a brave stand against external threats, if he discovered that the ideals to which he was committed were in fact illusions, then he felt that his grip on the world was loosening. For instance, his anxiety about falling

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prey to illusions stands front and centre in his letters from The Hague about his relationships with Kee Vos and Sien Hoornik. He had been disastrously infatuated with Kee, who turned him down flat. In retrospect, he writes to Theo as if to reassure himself: "It's difficult, terribly difficult, indeed impossible, to think of something like my passion of last year as an illusion" (244/2:101). He then goes on to say, confusingly, that "reality has become the woman of the people" — namely, Sien — and "the *illusion*" was in fact Kee. He attempts to explain: "I may have had an illusion, failure or whatever — I really don't know what to call it — that doesn't rule out something more real, either for you or for me" (244/2:102). Although it seems "impossible" for Van Gogh to see his relationship with Kee as an illusion, he nonetheless seems to force himself to do so, and to acknowledge Sien as "more real," not least because she is a woman "of the people."

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

The attitudes expressed here are complex and often affecting, as Van Gogh attempts to sort out his feelings for the two women. But at the centre lies an unsettling concern about how we might know, in general, what is real and what is illusory: these letters indicate that Van Gogh was struggling to get his feet on the ground despite the intense feelings and idealized aspirations that also made a claim on him and that he found simultaneously captivating and dangerously destabilizing. The difference between the real and the illusory does

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not, in the end, emerge clearly; rather, we feel ourselves taken up by the conflict itself between imagination, illusion, idealism, and the claims of a common world — the arena, that is, in which the process of Van Gogh's self-fashioning was being worked out. In turn, this process is reproduced in and through the dialogically structured rhetoric of the letters themselves, which assess the pros and cons of the fragile ego's commitment to the values by means of which it seeks to define itself. In this context, we might now consider in more detail the part played in Van Gogh's thinking by the idea of imagination — that age-old site of contention about the ambivalent links between illusion and truth.

Imagination: "Impossible Windmills"

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

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

The same concern about imagination being disconnected from "what exists" occurs in a letter in which Vincent apologizes to Theo for having written harshly about their parents. "I don't hit the mark," he explains, "but fantasize beyond nature and see things very fantastically" (375/2:405). Here, Vincent accuses himself of what was for him

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the radical error of allowing imagination to become separated from the facts of the matter; as a result, he says, he became a victim of his own fantasy.

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

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

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with mental instability — the "great inner struggle" that causes him to think himself "mad."

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

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

Shortly afterwards, he asks:

> Can I be mistaking gold for gilding? Am I mistaking something that's in full growth for something withering? I couldn't come up with an answer for myself. Can you? Do you know for sure that there isn't already a far-advanced, unrelenting decline on all sides? (409/3:77)

In these paragraphs, Van Gogh does not specify the things in which he believed and which turned out in fact to be "in a sorry state." Rather, he voices a more general concern that there is an "unrelenting decline on all sides." He acknowledges that sometimes the "sorrow" of disappointment "banishes illusions" and "*awakens* one," but he does so only to exempt himself from this possible compensation. He has experienced disillusionment pure and simple, and one of the main results for him is confusion. Although he says that he believed in things that were in "a sorry state at bottom," it turns out, as the excerpt continues, that he isn't sure what is true, at bottom, and what is not. He admits that he doesn't know: "I couldn't come up with an answer for myself. Can you?"

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Here, the movement away from the opening clear-eyed assertion about unfounded beliefs towards the realization that he doesn't actually know what is false and what is true leads Van Gogh to the declaration about a general "decline on all sides," as he projects the vulnerability of his own ego onto the world at large. Throughout his career, as we have seen, he needed strong values, and discovering that his commitments were often shot through with the deceptions of imagination was not only disappointing to him but also threatening.

In Arles, Van Gogh returns to his "impossible windmills" when he explains to Theo that the Midi reminds him of "a certain country Voltaire speaks of" that is associated with "castles in the air." The allusion seems to be to Voltaire's fanciful El Dorado, in *Candide*.[5] Interestingly, however, this passage occurs in the context of a discussion about Paul Gauguin, whom Vincent also describes as building "castles in the air" (732/4:380). The problem is that Gauguin is "led by his imagination" and, as a result, is "quite irresponsible" (736/4:388). The illusory "castles" here are connected directly to morality ("irresponsible"), again confirming how seriously Van Gogh considered the indulgence in fantasy to be. In Arles, his main disagreement with Gauguin was caused by the fact that Gauguin liked to paint imaginary scenes and did not depend on models. For a while, Van Gogh allowed himself to be influenced by Gauguin's example. "He encourages me a lot often to work purely from the imagination" (720/4:360), Vincent explains to Willemien, and he writes to Theo, "I don't find it disagreeable to try to work from the imagination" (723/4:367), and "Gauguin gives me courage to imagine, and the things of the imagination do indeed take on a more mysterious character" (719/4:356). But the experiment was not a success for Van Gogh, who, as noted above, concluded that Gauguin was irresponsibly carried away by handing himself over to his own fantasies at the expense of attending to the actual material world.

A clue as to why Van Gogh felt so strongly about the dangers of a free-ranging imagination occurs a few paragraphs before the accusation that Gauguin was irresponsible. There, Van Gogh writes that he hopes to continue working despite his illness and that Dr. Rey will

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

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

Consequently, when Vincent declares to Theo from Arles in 1889 that "as for myself, I don't have any illusions" (745/4:406), we might wonder if he is not whistling in the dark, putting on a bold face to counter what, at this time, he knew to be a frightening susceptibility to hallucinations and the like. His frequent references during these years to Voltaire's Dr. Pangloss, who declares that we live in the best of all possible worlds and that things will turn out for the best, make

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sense if we read them as examples of forced optimism, as Van Gogh attempted to distract himself from what he knew to be the case. Thus, although he says he has no illusions, he goes on almost immediately to add, "I have moments when I'm twisted by enthusiasm or madness or prophecy like a Greek oracle on her tripod" (745/4:406). If it is indeed the case that he has no illusions, this must mean that he realizes how prone he is to attacks that deprive him of reason and render him "twisted by enthusiasm or madness or prophecy." Elsewhere, he says that during his illness, "it seemed to me that everything I was imagining was reality" (760/4:430), and he describes painting a garden "as if seen in a dream" and as "stranger than the reality" (720/4:360). In short, during this period, the boundaries between illusion and reality were unusually unstable for Van Gogh, who knew all too well that the "strangeness" of a beautiful Gauguin-inspired dream could easily slide into the nightmare of a mental storm that would unhinge him from the stable structures of the ordinary world.

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

Imagination: "That's Rich, That's Poetry"

Despite his anxiety about how imagination might cause him to fall prey to illusions, Van Gogh knew that art without imagination is reduced to a sterile academic exercise. A letter written to Émile Bernard in 1888 shows how perplexing Van Gogh found this topic to be. He begins by discussing the Dutch Golden Age painters, whom he respects because they "had scarcely any imagination or fantasy": instead, they had "great taste" and skill in "the art of arrangement." Van Gogh then discusses a self-portrait by Rembrandt, admiring how moving and powerfully imagined it is. At this point, he pauses to acknowledge a contradiction in his own account:

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> I'm showing you a painter who dreams and who paints from the imagination, and I started off by claiming that the character of the Dutch is that they invent nothing, that they have neither imagination nor fantasy.
>
> Am I illogical? No. Rembrandt invented nothing, and that angel and that strange Christ; it's — that he knew them, *felt* them there. (649/4:197)

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

Throughout his career, Van Gogh sought adequate words to describe imagination in this second sense as a creative, revelatory power, which he realized was essential to a successful painting. He often used the pronoun "it" to indicate (albeit vaguely) the "wondrous" (193/1:340) energy sustaining the manifest world in general, and he applied this pronoun also to artistic achievement. Thus, of Millet's *Angelus,* he says, "That's it, that's rich, that's poetry" (17/1:41). The implication here is that good painting discloses something of the mystery of being, itself, and, as Van Gogh says elsewhere, gives "a sense of the infinite" (652/4:204). He explains that as a painter, he aims to capture that "*je ne sais quoi* of the eternal" (673/4:253), the "mysterious effect" (613/4:237) or "something else" that great art needs besides the representation of

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natural appearances (552/3:340). Consequently, although Rembrandt remains true to nature in the sense that he doesn't invent "fantastic" images, he also "goes into the higher — into the very highest — infinite" (534/3:291). Art is indeed produced by "human hands," but it also "wells up from a deeper source in our soul" (332/2:316), and imagination produces work of a "mysterious character" (719/4:356), revealing the "essence" (336/2:322) of the person or thing depicted. Throughout his correspondence, Van Gogh alludes often to this special imaginative dimension that distinguishes a work of genius from a merely uninspired study.

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

As the above examples show, the ambivalence expressed in Van Gogh's discussions about imagination is registered by way of an unresolved dialogue in which the threatening and creative aspects of imagination remain in contention. On the one hand, his self-fashioning as an artist is closely bound up with creativity; on the other hand, his self-fashioning as a person is especially threatened by

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delusion. The dialogue by means of which these two faces of imagination declare themselves to one another reproduces — as an effect of Van Gogh's rhetoric itself — the complex mix of idealizing aspiration and personal vulnerability in which we recognize the core dynamic of self-fashioning in general.

Safe Enough to Let Go: On Perseverance and Spontaneity

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

Let us begin with Van Gogh's enduring belief in the value of patience and hard work. We can assume that this conviction was, from the beginning, thoroughly enculturated through the upbringing provided by his Calvinist parents.[6] In letters written during his period of study in pursuit of a religious vocation, Van Gogh wonders how long such a course of study would take for someone like his father or Uncle Stricker (both of whom were preachers). He feels that he should live up to their high standards, and yet already at this early stage, he looks to painting for an answer, reminding himself that Corot took "forty years of work, thought and care" to become successful (114/1:160). So also Vincent must "learn to work by working" (115/1:162), and he invokes the "patient continuance" of shipbuilders as a model for his own practice (128/1:189). "What is difficult is good," he declares, "even if one sees no results" (129/1:190). In Brussels, he reminds himself that "things aren't so very easy, and require time and moreover quite a bit of patience" (160/1:259). From The Hague, he writes that Tersteeg accuses

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him of having "too much patience," but Van Gogh objects that "those words aren't right, one can't have *too much* patience in art," and so he will slog on, like "a draught ox or a work-horse" (210/2:36; 211/2:41). He paints all day and into the night (249/2:113; 258/2:138) because he "must persevere" in order to "make progress" (269/2:165), and he is confident that the "invisible iron wall" of resistance will yield if he works at it "slowly and patiently" (274/2:177). "The truth is that there's more toil than rest in life" (291/2:216), he writes. "Making headway is a kind of miner's labour," so "the first things one must hang on to are patience and faith" (327/2:303). "My fear is always not working enough" (344/2:335), he confesses, and on several occasions, he calls on a "*collier's faith*" to sustain him (368/2:391; 397/3:41; 403/3:61). In Antwerp, he praises "patience and perseverance" (561/3:353), and in Arles, he realizes that he must be prepared to look and practice "for a very long time" (689/4:288). In St. Rémy, he explains that he works "very slowly — but from morning till night without respite" (800/5:80), and he acknowledges again that "patience" is "necessary" (806/5:107) and that "slow, long work is the only road" (823/5:154).

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

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thirty painted studies that are completed (645/4:190). "I'm going like a painting-locomotive," he says (680/4:268), and we can hardly doubt it.

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

Here, it is interesting also to note that for Van Gogh, a further key characteristic of a painter working directly under the influence of imagination is, simply, speed of execution. Again, this point stands in sharp contrast to the assurance that working slowly and patiently (like an ox or a collier) is the best way forward. However, as Van Gogh

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points out, there are sound practical reasons for drawing and painting quickly. For instance, an artist working in the street might need to capture an image on the spot (264/2:154), and watercolours often have to be put down rapidly because of the nature of the medium (322/2:286). There was also a more mundane reason for speed: Van Gogh says he sometimes has to work quickly because he can't afford to pay his models to pose for a longer time (327/2:305). And when he writes to Van Rappard that he can now make quick drawings of people in action, the point is that he has learned to capture the fleeting moment (263/2:152).

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

We see, then, that Van Gogh placed a high value on inspiration, spontaneity, and speed of execution, even though he was wary about giving himself over to these impulses because of his sensitivity to

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

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

Conclusion: Managing the Dialogue

In this chapter, I have tried to show how Van Gogh communicates in the letters something of his need for stability — a concern that emerges from the very emphasis with which he asserts the necessity of staying in contact with the common world and of developing dependable habits for retaining that contact. Yet he also realized that without taking

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the risk of self-surrender, the good of the work of art is not served, and his emphasis on spontaneity, speed, and self-forgetfulness suggests how the creative process takes us beyond our predictable, everyday world. But precisely because he was highly sensitive to his personal instability, the prospect of self-surrender was all the more risky for him. His elated insistence on the virtues of speed, reckless abandon, and spontaneity unfettered by self-regard is therefore accompanied by apprehension: if imagination can put us in touch with ideal beauty, it can also lead us into nightmare and delusion.

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

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CONCLUSION

Envoi

In the development of literary studies since, roughly, the mid-twentieth century, a predominant focus on the close reading of works of literature, which for this purpose were considered as unitary and complete in themselves, yielded to a predominant interest in situating a wide variety of texts ("literary" and otherwise) within a complex of further, culturally coded and historically specific discourses. Yet the "new criticism" of the mid-twentieth century was not conducted without theoretical reflection, and the new literary theory of the late twentieth century routinely sought confirmation in perceptive readings of texts on the older model. The domains of criticism and theory were therefore not mutually exclusive; indeed, neither of them flourishes well in isolation from the other. Criticism without theoretical reflection divorces the text from the actualities of culture and history; theory without critical practice readily becomes a hall of mirrors, endlessly reproducing speculations untested by the rough entanglements of actual works of literature.

Consequently, although the present theory-based study remains distinct from my earlier mainly critical one, it is not wholly separate, and my aim is that the two books should work together as a means of bringing Van Gogh's collected correspondence into the domain of modern literary studies, both critical and theoretical — as is long overdue.

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With these points in mind, in my introductory discussion of the literary status of Van Gogh's correspondence, I do not supply a hard and fast definition of "literature." Rather, I offer a set of suggestions about "literature-talk" that are appropriate for the materials under consideration, drawing especially on Mikhail Bakhtin, whose ideas about self-fashioning have considerable explanatory power when brought to bear on Van Gogh's letters. But I also emphasize the points made by Merleau-Ponty and Eagleton about how texts embody "intentions" over and above the author's conscious design. Such a view entails that the self-fashioning recorded in Van Gogh's letters is not confined to the factual record of his interesting but fraught life. Rather, the letters are dialogical in nature, raising from within themselves, as part of their own "intentional" structure, questions and issues to which they also respond. This internal "conversation" in turn reproduces the structure of Bakhtin's "I/other" — the fundamental *élan vital* of self-fashioning as he describes it. Throughout, I have suggested that the letters thematize this process by foregrounding it within their own discourse, and this fact, or strategy, is a significant marker of the literary dimension of Van Gogh's correspondence.

At the conclusion of their important study, *Mikhail Bakhtin,* Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist point out that "no word is final" and that here they "pay homage" to Bakhtin's thinking about "the impossibility of endings."[1] The reasons for this open-endedness are implicit in the epistemology of self-fashioning and the "heteroglossia" that it entails, as I have explained in the introduction. As Clark and Holquist say, dialogism assumes "the necessary presence of gaps in all our fondest schemes and most elaborate systems."[2]

Just so, the present study has offered a certain interpretation, supported by particular readings that, although far from exhausting the hermeneutic potential of the texts under consideration, provide what I hope is a helpful account of the power and enduring significance of Van Gogh's writing. But as a way now of shaping my argument towards a conclusion — despite the "impossibility of endings" — a brief consideration of Wolfgang Iser's influential contribution to reader-response theory can help to clarify the relationship between

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the necessary open-endedness of critical discussion, on the one hand, and coherent interpretation, on the other.

In *The Act of Reading,* Iser, like Bakhtin, insists that interpretation is unfinalizable and that the text is "an open event."[3] He goes on to explain that "total organization" would be the death of literature because there would be "nothing left for the reader to do" (86). By contrast, literature works "to stimulate the imagination" (87), so that meaning emerges from the reader's imagination-infused engagement with the possibilities of interpretation offered by a text. In turn, these possibilities are organized in two main ways. First, a text has a "repertoire," comprising common knowledge that, it is assumed, readers share and recognize and that draws from "material selected from social systems and literary traditions" (86). Second, the "strategies" of a text are the means by which it organizes or works upon the repertoire in a way that discloses aspects of experience and understanding occluded by conventional knowledge and belief. Readers are thereby enabled to take a "fresh look" at ideas that they "may hitherto have accepted without question" (74), and they can come to see things "in a new light" (69) while also acquiring a more discerning view of how provisional self-knowledge is. Iser refers to this process as a "dialogue" (80), and because different readers interact with the text in different ways and various interpretations invite comparison with one another, this dialogue is never finalized. Open-endedness, however, does not entail mere relativism, because the strategies of a text impose constraints that serve as common reference points. That is, although the strategies do not impose specific interpretations, they offer certain possibilities, which a reader then fills out.

Even this brief summary shows how strong are the similarities between Iser's thinking and the main ideas set out in the introduction. That is, like Bakhtin, Iser insists on the centrality of dialogue to interpretation and on the idea that interpretation is unfinalizable. Iser's theories about "strategies" also directly influenced Eagleton's use of the same term. Eagleton even quotes Iser's claim that literature is "a reaction to the thought systems which it has chosen and incorporated in its own repertoire," as a way of showing how "strikingly close" Iser

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comes to Jameson's concept of the "self-fashioning artifact," whereby literary texts raise problems and issues to which they also respond.[4] And when Iser points to how "the ultimate function of the strategies is to *defamiliarize* the familiar" (87), he echoes the Heideggerian idea that art discloses fresh aspects of ordinary things. He also cites Merleau-Ponty in describing this defamiliarizing as a "coherent deformation" (81) — a means, as Merleau-Ponty says, of expressing a "way of seeing" that is an "emblem" of a particular manner of interpreting the world and that a reader takes up and fills out.[5]

Yet if Iser offers such a convenient reprise of some of the main ideas described in the introduction, the question arises as to why I did not make him a central point of reference there, instead of Bakhtin. The answer is that Iser is mainly concerned about the interplay of textual codes and structures, and his hypothetical reader remains more a theoretical construct than an actual grappler with complex problems and ideas. As Eagleton says, with Iser, "it is as though the true referent of the literary work is not so much the social reality as the conventions that regulate it" (95). Iser has little interest in the rough terrain covered by Bakhtin's brand of self-fashioning, which is not just about reading but also about the conflicted situation of the radically insecure "I" and the ambivalently attractive and threatening "other." The felt sense of recalcitrant biographical facts and of contending ideologies is the very stuff also of Van Gogh's letters, but not of Iser's analysis of the reading process.

Still, a further question now presses from the opposite direction. If Bakhtin offers a more helpful way to approach Van Gogh, why, in conclusion, do I turn to Iser? The answer is that he is especially helpful in clarifying how, in retrospect, we might think about the specifically aesthetic dimension of literature conceived as dialogue. In my earlier book *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: A Critical Study,* I dealt with key patterns of metaphors and concepts. These standard topics of conventional literary criticism can help to show how Van Gogh's writerly imagination offers new ways of seeing as he uses language in a heightened or figurative way, contending with matters of significant human value in a style that is often arresting and distinctive. But in the present study,

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I describe the aesthetic dimension of Van Gogh's writing by means that lie outside the range of the critical practice exemplified by my earlier book. And in the present context, Iser can help, in conclusion, to describe the aesthetic dimension of literature conceived as a set of self-referential strategies in fruitful but unfinalizable dialogue, such as I have been claiming — by way of Bakhtin — is a main aspect of Van Gogh's achievement as a writer. Although Iser is mainly interested in fiction, his analysis of the aesthetic has a strong explanatory power when brought to bear on what I have described as the literary structure of Van Gogh's letters.

In brief, Iser is not so much interested in what a text means as in what it does, and he locates the aesthetic in the "effect" a text has on a reader (54). Yet because different readers respond to texts in different ways, an aesthetic effect cannot be prescribed or seen as, somehow, inhering in the text alone. It is, instead, best thought of as a *potential* of the text — a possible effect, actualized by the reader's experience of the particular kind of "coherent deformation" that a reading produces. Consequently, "aesthetic value is something that cannot be grasped"; rather, it is manifest "in the alteration of what is familiar," as a result of a particular reading. Literary value thus emerges in an indeterminate way as an effect of a dialogue between reader and text, actualizing the further interplay within the text, between strategies and repertoire.

The analyses I have offered of Van Gogh's letters fit well with this broad understanding of the aesthetic. As Clark and Holquist say, there is no final word, and just so, my readings of Van Gogh are a means of describing certain effects, in Iser's sense. Still, in turn, these readings cannot be separated from their dialogical interinvolvement with the ideas set out in the introduction. This is so because, as I mentioned above, theoretical considerations need to produce sound critical readings, just as criticism needs to be theoretically informed if the explanatory power of each of these aspects of literary study is to be effectively realized.

Much indeed is left undone, and critical discussion of Van Gogh's correspondence is, today, in its early stages. Further questions and issues, both critical and theoretical, spring readily to mind, but for the

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meantime, I must settle for the readings I have presented in the previous pages. Thus, chapters 1 to 4 confirm the explanatory framework offered by the introduction, and in each of these central chapters, I engage the reader critically in some hitherto undiscussed aspect of Van Gogh's writing.

Chapter 1 deals with a pervasive tension throughout the letters between narrative and pictorial elements of the writing. The restless mobility of the (temporal) narrative in relation to the (spatial) stability of conventional "word painting" reproduces the relationship between "I" and "other" — the basic dialogical exchange, as Bakhtin says, by which self-fashioning is conducted.

Chapter 2 explores Van Gogh's frequent use of binary constructions such as paradoxes, contradictions, strong juxtapositions, and the like. Among other things, these constructions express an energy of the will bent on realizing an ideal while remaining aware of the destabilizing, negative-contrast experiences that the ideal itself enables us to see. Often, Van Gogh's most pressing contradictions are not resolved; rather, they remain as part of a continuing re-evaluation, inseparable from the always unfinished quest for stability and self-realization.

There are to date no sustained critical assessments of Van Gogh's 242 letter-sketches in relation to his letters. With this in mind, I provide in chapter 3 a general account of the sketches, but the main focus of the chapter is on the dialogical interaction between the sketches and the texts of the letters in which they occur. Although the sketches sometimes confirm what the letters say, they also focus on matters that the letters suppress or elide, thereby enabling us to interpret the letters themselves in new ways. Considered as an integral part of Van Gogh's correspondence, the letter-sketches play a significant, if minor, role in the drama of self-fashioning that lies at the heart of his literary achievement.

Chapter 4 deals with the rich, apparent confusion of Van Gogh's discussions of imagination, fantasy, illusion, belief, self-surrender, and the value of common experience. A clarification of these topics is afforded by considering them as a set of polarities by means of which Van Gogh's unusually vulnerable ego aspires to stability, but without

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ceasing to be creative. In this context, his concern about the ambivalence of imagination, as a source of creative power and yet also as a dangerous delusion, is a figure for the aspirations and anxieties of self-fashioning itself.

Throughout the book, I have argued that the literary dimension of Van Gogh's letters resides not so much in the fact that they provide information about the narrative of his personal life as in how they thematize within their own discourse the structure of the self-fashioning process itself as a multi-faceted dialogue between I and other. In so doing, the letters enable readers to recognize how necessary yet open-ended, constrained yet liberating, confined yet unpredictable, are the means by which people seek to shape a place for themselves in the world. And because such a process is inherently dialogical, open-ended, and plural, it is especially amenable to literary representation. The genius of Van Gogh's letters is that they implicitly grasp the significance of this fact, so compellingly embodied as a strategy, or intention, of the texts themselves.

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NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1 W. H. Auden, *Forewords and Afterwords,* ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1973), 294.

2 Vincent Van Gogh, *Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters*, ed. Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker, 6 vols. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2009). All references are to this edition, and letter numbers are indicated in the text, with the volume and page number following the slash. The 2009 edition also contains twenty-five "related manuscripts" (RM); these consist of stray pages that could not be situated within the correspondence, as well as some drafts and a few letters that were never sent. An expanded version of the printed edition can be searched free of charge at http://www.vangoghletters.org.

3 Sjraar van Heugten, "Joining Forces: Multidisciplinary Research into the Studio Practice of Van Gogh and His Contemporaries," in *Van Gogh's Studio Practice,* ed. Marije Vallekoop, Muriel Geldof, Ella Hendriks, Leo Jansen, and Alberto de Tagle (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2013), 31–32.

4 Sir John Leighton, keynote address to the symposium, "Van Gogh's Studio Practice in Context," organized by the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, 24 June 2013.

5 Leo Jansen, *Van Gogh and His Letters* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2007), 5; Dick van Halsema, "Vincent Van Gogh: A 'Great Dutch Writer' (Between Marcellus Emants and Willem Kloos)," in *Van Gogh: New Findings*, ed. Chris Stolwijk, Van Gogh Studies 4 (Zwolle: Wbooks; Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2012), 19.

6 Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 19. Further page numbers are cited in the text.

7 Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 4. Further page numbers are cited in the text.

8 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 287. Further page numbers are cited in the text.

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9 Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London: Routledge, 1990), 19. Further page numbers are cited in the text. My discussion here summarizes Holquist's main argument.

10 Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* 287. The term "polyphonic" is often used in this context as a way of describing the multiplicity of dialogues that constitute the fabric of cultural exchange. As Holquist says, "the simultaneity of these dialogues is merely a particular instance of the larger polyphony of social and discursive forces that Bakhtin calls 'heteroglossia'" (69).

11 The question of the author's difference from his characters poses problems here. See Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984; first published as *Michaïl Bakhtine: le principe dialogique* [Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1981]), 98–101. Todorov discusses Bakhtin's two-stage theory of the creative act, whereby the author identifies with the character and yet stands apart in order to shape the character. Again, the relationship between author and character is best described dialogically.

12 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964; first published 1960), 42, 73.

13 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Studies in the Literary Use of Language," in *In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. John Wild, James Edie, and John O'Neill (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988; *Éloge de philosophie*, first published 1953; *Résumés de cours, Collège de France, 1952–1960*, first published 1968), 82.

14 Ibid., 82, 83. Further page numbers are cited in the text.

15 Wouter van der Veen, *Van Gogh: A Literary Mind — Literature in the Correspondence of Vincent Van Gogh,* Van Gogh Studies 2 (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers; Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2009), 171.

16 Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Van Gogh: The Life* (New York: Random House, 2011), 43, 519–20, 717.

17 Albert J. Lubin, *Stranger on the Earth: A Psychological Biography of Vincent Van Gogh* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996; first published 1972), 8, 9.

18 Simon Schama, *Simon Schama's Power of Art* (Toronto: Penguin Group, 2006), 324.

19 Philip Callow, *Vincent Van Gogh: A Life* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1990), 36–37, 254, 270.

20 Leo Jansen, *Van Gogh and His Letters* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2007), 41, 17.

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CHAPTER 1
THE PAINTERLY WRITER

1 Hans Luijten, who is working on Jo's biography, pointed this out.

2 Leo Jansen, *Van Gogh and His Letters* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2007), 77.

3 For a thoughtful account of these issues, see Wendy Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation Between Modern Literature and Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), and *Pictures of Romance: Form Against Context in Painting and Literature* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988). See also the groundbreaking study by Jean Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism from Dryden to Gray* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

4 See Steiner, *Colors of Rhetoric*, xii.

5 See Steiner, *Pictures of Romance*, 8.

6 Steiner, *Colors of Rhetoric*, 39.

7 See especially, Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 19.

8 Judy Sund, *True to Temperament: Van Gogh and French Naturalist Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 18. Further page numbers are cited in the text.

9 In a further interesting, admittedly unusual example, Vincent writes to Theo, describing his relationship with Kee Vos as if it were a painting: "Forgive the rather harsh terms I'm using to make my position clear to you. I admit that the colours are a little harsh and the lines are drawn a bit too hard" (179/1:302).

10 Van Gogh wonders if his uncle C.M. (Cornelis Marinus Van Gogh, who is also referred to as Uncle Cor) is being hesitant about his drawings because C.M. prefers watercolours: "I readily admit that, to an eye used only to watercolours, drawings which have been scratched by pen or had lights scraped off or put back on in body-colour may seem a little harsh" (235/2:88).

11 There are many accounts of Chevreul's influence on painters. I draw here especially on Laura Coyle, "Strands Interlacing: Colour Theory, Education and Play in the Work of Vincent Van Gogh," *Van Gogh Museum Journal* (1996): 119–31; Pierre Boudrieu, "The Link Between Literary and Artistic Struggles," in *Artistic Relations: Literature and the Visual Arts in Nineteenth-Century France*, ed. Peter Collier and Robert Lethbridge (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 89–93; and Maite van Dijk, "Van Gogh and the Laws of Colour: An Introduction," in *Van Gogh's Studio Practice*, ed. Marije Vellekoop, Muriel Geldof, Ella Hendricks, Leo Jansen, and Alberto de Tagle (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2013), 216–25.

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12 See Muriel Geldof, Luc Megens, and Johanna Salvant, "Van Gogh's Palette in Arles, Saint-Rémy and Auvers-sur-Oise," in Vellekoop et al., *Van Gogh's Studio Practice*, 238–39, 254.

CHAPTER 2
BINARIES, CONTRADICTIONS, AND "ARGUMENTS ON BOTH SIDES"

1 Johanna Van Gogh Bonger, "Memoir of Vincent Van Gogh," in Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh,* 3rd ed. (London: Little, Brown, 2000), 1:xli.

2 Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London: Routledge, 1990), 28, 36.

CHAPTER 3
READING VAN GOGH'S LETTER-SKETCHES

1 See Vincent Van Gogh, *Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters,* ed. Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2009), 6:34, where the editors write that the sketches "provide evidence of an earlier version of a work or one that has since been lost" and also have value because "they forced Van Gogh to depict the essence of a drawing or painting." See also Leo Jansen, *Van Gogh and His Letters* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2006), 61: "An attractive feature of Van Gogh's letters, and one that adds immensely to their art-historical value, is their frequent embellishment with a small drawing or the inclusion of a loose-leaf sketch, which he referred to as 'krabbetjes' (little scratches) or 'croquis' (sketches)."

In the following discussion, I consider the loose-leaf sketches as part of the correspondence. The online edition of *Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters,* http://www.vangoghletters.org, makes it possible to view all of the letter-sketches, including those reproduced in this volume. In the "Search" box, enter the number of the letter in which the sketch occurs and press the double arrow. Then click on "facsimile," and the sketch will download, together with the letter. Double-click to enlarge the sketch, if required. In addition, clicking on "with sketches" will produce a list of all the letters that contain them, from which individual letters can again be downloaded.

2 Albert J. Lubin, *Stranger on the Earth. A Psychological Biography of Vincent Van Gogh* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996; first published 1972), 71, links Van Gogh's "queer and angular" sentences to the "Tachtigers," a group of experimental Dutch writers of the 1880s who, for instance, eschewed grammatical correctness and conventional punctuation. See also Judy Sund, *True to Temperament: Van Gogh and French Naturalist Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 52, again on the Tachtigers.

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3 See *Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters*, 6:70: Vincent "decides to become an artist, probably on Theo's advice." References are given to letters 156 and 214. In letter 156, from Cuesmes, 20 August 1880, Vincent writes about his drawings in a manner which assumes that Theo is both understanding and encouraging. In letter 214, from The Hague, 2 April 1882, Vincent writes: "I remember very well that when you spoke to me back then about my becoming a painter, I thought it very inappropriate and wouldn't hear of it." This suggests that Theo encouraged Vincent to take up painting. For an imaginatively rendered reconstruction of Van Gogh's troubles at the time, see Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Van Gogh: The Life* (New York: Random House, 2011), 205–10.

4 Carol Zemel points out that Van Gogh addresses the bourgeois themes illustrated in magazines focusing on the plight of the poor. But he also "reverses the narrative fantasy" — for instance, by showing women and children in profile, or looking away, thereby short-circuiting the sentimental intimacy of the forlorn gaze directed at the viewer. I will return to this point about Van Gogh's portrayal of people with their heads turned or looking away. For now, it is sufficient to note that Van Gogh reproduces the conventional themes and narratives, even as he registers some degree of discomfort with them. See Carol Zemel, *Van Gogh's Progress: Utopia, Modernity, and Late-Nineteenth-Century Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 32.

5 Vincent left Drenthe on 5 December 1883. His parents had moved from Etten to Nuenen in August 1882.

6 Wouter van der Veen, *Van Gogh: A Literary Mind — Literature in the Correspondence of Vincent Van Gogh*, Van Gogh Studies 2 (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers; Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2009), 193–212.

7 See *Arles, Saint Rémy and Auvers-sur-Oise, 1888–1890*, ed. Marije Vellekoop and Roelie Zwikker, with the assistance of Monique Hageman, trans. Diane Webb, vol. 4 of *Vincent Van Gogh Drawings* (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers; Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2007), 183–409 (drawings 351–456).

8 Cornelia Homburg, *The Copy Turns Original: Vincent Van Gogh and a New Approach to Traditional Art Practice* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1996), 76.

9 Ibid., 77.

10 Vincent drew the map with his brother Cor. See 145/1:230.

11 Simon Schama points to two paintings that add up to Van Gogh's "visual signature: the beaten up boots and the cut sunflowers, the wayfarer and the mysteries of organism." See *Simon Schama's Power of Art* (Toronto: Penguin Group, 2006), 320.

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CHAPTER 4
IMAGINATION AND THE LIMITS OF SELF-FASHIONING

1 Letter from Anna Cornelia Van Gogh-Carbentus, December 1888. The letter is translated in Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Erik Fokke, "The Illness of Vincent Van Gogh: A Previously Unknown Diagnosis," *Van Gogh Museum Journal* 3 (2003): 115.

2 For Van Gogh's utopianism, see Carol Zemel, *Van Gogh's Progress: Utopia, Modernity, and Late-Nineteenth-Century Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

3 See letter 358/2:365, and note 11 to the letter.

4 For an analysis of the mistral in Van Gogh's letters, see Patrick Grant, *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: A Critical Study* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2014), chap. 4.

5 See note 4 to letter 732/4:380.

6 For a concise and helpful account, see Joan Greer, "'Christ, This Great Artist': Van Gogh's Socio-Religious Canon of Art," in *Vincent's Choice: The Musée Imaginaire of Van Gogh*, ed. Chris Stolwijk, Sjraar van Heugten, Leo Jansen, and Andreas Blühm (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2003), 61–72.

CONCLUSION

1 Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 348.

2 Ibid., 347.

3 Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 70. Further page numbers are cited in the text.

4 Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 188. The quotation is from Iser, *Act of Reading*, 72.

5 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964; first published 1960), 53–54. The term "coherent deformation" is used on pp. 54–55.

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