Reading Vincent van Gogh

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A Thematic Guide to the Letters

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For Sue Mitchell

The true pain and tension of creating begins at the point where you let go of the description.

VINCENT VAN GOGH, The Hague, 1882

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Preface and Acknowledgements

Since the landmark edition of Vincent van Gogh's collected correspondence in 2009, followed by the selected edition by the same editors in 2014, there has been a surge of interest in Van Gogh as a writer. Translations of his letters have been made, or are in preparation, in at least twenty-five languages, and the literary distinction of Van Gogh's correspondence is now widely acknowledged. Yet reading all the way through the 820 extant letters written by Van Gogh is demanding and time consuming—even the selected edition of 265 letters is a hefty 777 pages. With these points in mind, I provide in the following chapters some suggestions about the thematic coherence of Van Gogh's written work, as well as a distillation, in his own words, of the main lines of his conceptual thinking and imagination. To date, no other book offers this combination of elements.

The present book is the offspring of two earlier volumes, in which I set out to make the case for Van Gogh as a great writer. When I first undertook this project, the high literary quality of Van Gogh's collected correspondence had often been recognized, but there was no extended critical assessment of his extraordinary writerly achievements. Consequently, I attempted in the two previous volumes to bring the collected correspondence into the domain of modern literary criticism, first by way of a practical-critical analysis and then in a more theoretically based study. While the present book is the most straightforward and

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accessible of the three, it could not have been written without its predecessors, which supply both the basic understandings enabling my selection of excerpts and a rationale for organizing the anthology and for the interpretations provided by the brief, interconnected essays. Most importantly, my focus on Van Gogh's literary talents directly influenced the selection of texts that make up the anthology sections of the book. These texts were chosen not only to illustrate the main themes and motifs that provide imaginative and conceptual coherence to the correspondence as a whole but also to exemplify the impressive and captivating quality of Van Gogh's imagination as a writer.

A note on how the book is organized: each chapter begins with a discussion of the broad significance of the topics that it contains. These topics are then dealt with individually, in a series of subsections. Each of these opens with a short introduction that recapitulates the salient points from the opening discussion, expanding on them in a manner pertinent to the topic at hand and making reference (by number) to the excerpts that have been chosen as illustrations. The excerpts themselves then follow, with the letter from which each excerpt was drawn identified by the letter number in brackets. The book is thus designed to bring an increasing intensity of focus to bear on the central themes and motifs of Van Gogh's writing, while at the same time pointing readers to relevant letters. Readers can also consult the anthology selectively, if so desired, without losing touch with the overall design—whether mine or, much more importantly, Van Gogh's.

All quotations from the correspondence are from the six-volume *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters*, edited by Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009). I refer to the letters by letter number, followed by a slash and then the volume and page number: (155/1:247), for example. In transcribing the letters, the editors of the 2009 edition made every effort to

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preserve distinctive features of Van Gogh's handwritten originals, including the use of suspension points (in varying numbers) and of underlining. Van Gogh sometimes underlined a word more than once, and the editors chose to capture the additional emphasis by using small capitals for words underlined twice and full capitals for words underlined three times or more (while using italic for words underlined only once, as is common practice). In quoting from the translations, I have taken care to reproduce them exactly as they appear in that edition.

Excerpts from the letters are used here with the permission of the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, and I gratefully acknowledge help and support received from the staff of the Van Gogh Museum Library. I am, again, very much indebted to Hans Luijten, who read the typescript with great care and, as ever, made numerous insightful comments and useful suggestions. Many thanks to Sue Mitchell, Pater Stoepker, and Henry Summerfield, who have supported and encouraged my work on Van Gogh's letters from the beginning.

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Introduction

The aim of this book is to provide a distillation of the central motifs and patterns of imagery in Vincent van Gogh's extraordinary, voluminous correspondence. Readers setting out to read all the way through the vast collection of his letters soon encounter the formidable challenge of its sheer mass and complexity. Also, although the impact of Van Gogh's writing can be felt immediately in his most interesting letters, it is difficult to discern the imaginative and conceptual designs that transform his correspondence as a whole into something that is widely recognized as a literary achievement of a very high order.

In two earlier books, I provided a critical analysis of the collected correspondence considered specifically as literature and negotiated the complexities of the texts in some detail, while also offering a broad assessment of Van Gogh's achievements as a writer. The present book builds on that work, seeking to present in an accessible form what I take to be the core elements of Van Gogh's writerly vision. As it happens, the letters are often especially arresting and insightful in brief passages that stand out from the more ephemeral discourse of which these passages are a part, and the correspondence thus lends itself well to the kind of anthologizing offered in the following pages. Consequently, the present book can be read both as a synthesis of Van Gogh's leading ideas and as a series of observations exemplifying the riches of his imagination as a writer—riches that a fuller engagement with the collected letters will certainly continue to disclose.

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But first, let me say a little about the part played by the letters in the shaping of Van Gogh's reputation.

Privacy and the Public Record

After his death, Van Gogh's fame developed with the same astonishing rapidity as had his career as a painter, which lasted only a brief ten years. Towards the end of his life (he died at age thirty-seven), his paintings were beginning to win recognition among a few avant-garde critics and artists. But he had made only one significant sale and was reconciled to disappointment, which, combined with his serious mental illness, helps to explain his suicide. During the last decade of Vincent's life, his brother Theo had supported him financially and, in return, had received a steady supply of Vincent's paintings as part of an agreement between the two brothers. Theo had also become increasingly convinced of the high value of Vincent's painting, and, as an art dealer, he was well positioned to promote the developing interest in his brother's work. But Theo died six months after Vincent, and the task of promoting Vincent's painting was subsequently taken up by Theo's wife, Jo van Gogh-Bonger, who dedicated herself to this goal for the rest of her life—with spectacular success, as we now know. Within a few generations, the emergence of Van Gogh as perhaps the most widely recognized painter on the planet was as startling as his astonishing productivity during his brief career.

But Jo inherited not only Theo's collection of paintings and drawings; she also found herself in possession of a massive collection of letters that Vincent had sent to Theo, beginning in 1872, when Vincent was nineteen, and continuing virtually until his death—an unfinished letter was found in his pocket after he shot himself. Jo realized the value of this remarkable correspondence

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as a testament to Vincent's ambitions and trials as an artist, and, in 1914, she published a three-volume edition of the letters to Theo. Yet she was not the first to publicize Vincent's talents as a writer. Comments drawn from the letters had been used in a catalogue of a Van Gogh exhibition in Amsterdam in 1892, and in the following year, further passages were published in a Flemish magazine, *Van Nu en Straks*. Vincent's young painter friend, Émile Bernard, published excerpts from letters that Vincent had sent to him, and, between 1893 and 1897, Bernard placed a substantial selection of Vincent's writing in the influential French magazine *Mercure de France*. In 1905, Van Gogh's letters to his painter friend Anthon van Rappard were published in the Netherlands, and, in 1911, a collected edition of the letters to Bernard appeared in France. Jo's edition was soon translated into several languages, and Van Gogh's fast-growing celebrity as a painter was thus accompanied by a parallel interest in the letters, which did much, in turn, to promote the paintings.

In the early 1950s, a four-volume collected edition was published, which included the letters from Theo to Vincent, as well as the letters to Bernard, Van Rappard, Vincent's sister Willemien, and Paul Gauguin. Jo was the original editor, and after her death in 1925, her son Vincent Willem completed her work. This edition in turn became the primary source for many further editions, as well as for the great amount of research into Van Gogh's life and career that accompanied his fast-growing reputation.

In 2009, the magnificent six-volume edition, *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters*, was published, in Dutch, French, and English. The edition is also available in an expanded version at www.vangoghletters.org. For the first time, the letters are now thoroughly annotated and supplied with a scholarly apparatus. A facsimile of each letter is provided, as is a transcription of the original text, and virtually every work of art mentioned in the correspondence is

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illustrated. New letters have been discovered, the order and dates have been revised, and every effort has been made to preserve the idiosyncrasies and faults of the originals. For readers who might find the six volumes somewhat daunting, the same editors published a single-volume selected edition in 2014.

While the publication history of Van Gogh's correspondence is more complex than I have indicated in this brief outline, my main point is that the letters played an important part in the shaping of Van Gogh's reputation; there is a broad consensus among scholars that this is the case. Still, the reputation in question is mainly that of the painter, and the letters have been used for scholarly purposes mainly by art historians and biographers. Indeed, Van Gogh himself wanted his main contribution to be in the domain of painting and drawing, and he would not have imagined a printed collection of his complete correspondence, especially on the scale of the 2009 edition, which took a team of editors and translators fifteen years to prepare. He would surely have been dismayed to learn that the personal details of his family life (for instance, his angry repudiations of his parents and the embarrassing disasters of his love affairs, as well as the details of his mental illness) would be made public. Nor would he have thought that the tangled, eclectic mass of the almost one thousand documents that remain (perhaps half of the total number actually written) would be read as a riveting narrative of his life and principal concerns.

Although it makes good sense that the letters have been read largely as ancillary to the paintings, a counter-current has nonetheless gathered momentum among commentators on the correspondence, and it is certainly the driving force behind the present book. As the editors of the 2009 edition say, Van Gogh has left "a literary monument" (1:19) that "attains the universality of all great literature" (1:15), and in the selected edition, the same editors

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go on to point out that for many readers his correspondence, "which was never intended for publication, is a highlight of world literature" (38). This opinion is echoed in the acknowledgement in 2010 by the Museum of Dutch Literature that Van Gogh belongs among "our hundred greatest dead writers"; other commentators make similar observations. Still, no serious study of Van Gogh's specifically literary achievement had been published before I attempted to repair something of the omission, first in *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh: A Critical Study* (2014), which was written from a practical-critical perspective, and then in *"My Own Portrait in Writing": Self-Fashioning in the Letters of Vincent van Gogh* (2015), which was written from a standpoint informed by literary theory.

One main aim of these two studies is to enable readers to re-encounter the texts with some degree of enhanced understanding in light of Van Gogh's literary strategies, made accessible by way of critical analysis. Yet, as I have said, Van Gogh's collected correspondence remains a formidable challenge. Consequently, in the following pages, my aim is to draw on my main critical conclusions about Van Gogh's writing in order to compile an anthology of brief excerpts arranged and presented to make the main lines of his thinking accessible, as well as to show the arresting vividness of his writing in a variety of particular cases. With this goal in mind, let me now describe the contents of Van Gogh's collected correspondence in more detail.

Biography and Beyond

Van Gogh's surviving correspondence begins in 1872, when he was nineteen years old, and ends in 1890, when he was thirty-seven. The editors of the 2009 edition estimate that perhaps half of his actual correspondence has been lost. Today, the total number

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of letters known to exist is 903. Of these, Van Gogh wrote 820 and received 83. Most (658) are addressed to Theo, but Vincent also wrote 58 letters to his artist friend Anthon van Rappard, 21 to his sister Willemien, 22 to Émile Bernard, and 4 to Paul Gauguin, as well as a small number to various other recipients. Approximately two-thirds are written in Dutch and one-third in French. There are also a few letters in English, and 242 sketches are dispersed throughout.

As we might expect, individual letters are often gauged to fit the recipient, and Van Gogh frequently adapts his tone of voice to appeal to different readers. His style is often idiosyncratic, with scant attention to such matters as capitalization and punctuation. Although the early letters are carefully written, he increasingly made revisions on the page and added an array of markings, such as underlining, bold capitals, and afterthoughts squeezed into the margins. Together with the letter-sketches, these markings affect the appearance of the letters, which in turn impact the reader.

These several considerations confirm the complexity of interpreting Van Gogh's collected letters as well as the care a reader must take in deducing matters of biographical fact from the many refractions, indirections, calculated concealments, and manipulations running throughout. Nevertheless, a strong biographical narrative does lie at the heart of the collection: for instance, Jo van Gogh-Bonger's lengthy introduction to the 1914 edition focuses on what the letters tell us about Vincent's life. Not surprisingly, the letters have remained the primary source for biographers, as well as for art historians who are interested in what they can tell us about Van Gogh the painter.

Readers who are concerned mainly about Van Gogh's achievements as a writer will also value the biographical aspect of his correspondence, not least because it provides the letters with a compelling narrative. Perhaps the term "quasi-narrative" is more

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helpful here, because the storyline is neither self-consciously constructed nor entirely clear. Rather, it emerges from a kaleidoscope of partial views that the letters provide. The discontinuities (as with the New Testament documents that record the life of Jesus, for example) are often captivating precisely because of their lack of closure, which both reminds us of and enacts, as it were, the provisional nature of personal identity itself. Also, in addition to their quasi-narrative dimension, the letters record a remarkable—again discontinuous—evolution in Van Gogh's thinking, expressed especially by way of an unresolved but engaging dialogue among religion, morality, and art. Each of these topics contends for ascendancy at different phases of Van Gogh's career, yet with none of them totally displacing the others. The biographical quasi-narrative, together with Van Gogh's evolving dialogue of ideas, remain integral to the personal story that the letters record. And although this story is well known in its broad outlines, it will be helpful, for our purposes, to summarize it briefly.

Vincent van Gogh was born on 30 March 1853 in Zundert, the eldest son of the Reverend Theodorus van Gogh (1822–85) and Anna Cornelia van Gogh-Carbentus (1819–1907). Vincent was the first of six surviving children. (A brother, also named Vincent, had been born the previous year but did not survive.) Not much is known about his early schooling, but at age sixteen, Vincent was employed at the Hague branch of the international art dealers, Goupil and Cie.

In 1873, Van Gogh was transferred to Goupil's London branch. While living in London, he may have become infatuated with his landlady's daughter, Eugénie Loyer; whether or not he was smitten by Eugénie, he found that his relationship with the Loyer household was unsustainable, and he left. Partly to allay his ensuing insecurities, he turned increasingly to religion. In 1874, Goupil transferred him to Paris, but, by this time, he had become so

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immersed in his new religious enthusiasm that he failed to meet the expectations of his employer, and he was dismissed in 1876.

Van Gogh then returned to England, where he worked as an assistant teacher, first in Ramsgate and then in Isleworth. He became convinced that he had a religious vocation and declared his desire to become a preacher like his father. With this goal in mind, he returned to Holland in December 1876, and, after working for a short time in a book-and-stationery store in Dordrecht, he moved to Amsterdam in order to prepare for the entrance examination to the University of Amsterdam, where he hoped to study theology. After a year, however, he abandoned his course of studies, and in 1878, he entered a missionary school in Brussels. But things did not work out in Brussels either, and the following year, Van Gogh went as an evangelist to the coalfields of the Belgian Borinage. There, he discovered that the miners needed more than evangelizing to improve their lives, which were ruined by poverty and sickness.

Van Gogh's growing concern for the material well-being of the Borinage miners and their families caused him to question the pre-eminence that he had accorded to religion. Partly as a result of an ensuing crisis of conscience, he turned his attention to art as a means of expressing how troubled he was about the plight of the working poor. He began drawing the miners with a view to publicizing the harsh conditions of their lives and, in so doing, to shape a career for himself as an artist.

In 1881, Van Gogh returned to his parents' home in Etten, and there he met Kee Vos, a recently widowed cousin, whom he had encountered once before, in Amsterdam. Van Gogh fell in love with Kee, who rejected him out of hand. He was devastated, and as a result of the considerable family discord that he had managed to stir up, he moved later that year to The Hague, where he studied painting with his cousin-in-law Anton Mauve. He also

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began a relationship with the unmarried and pregnant Clasina (Sien) Hoornik, who, to ease her dire financial circumstances, had been earning money as a prostitute. Once more, Van Gogh's family was scandalized, but he insisted on setting up house with Sien, declaring that he would marry her, though he never did.

When the relationship with Sien ended in 1883, Van Gogh went to the remote province of Drenthe in order to focus on painting. But after three months, he returned to his parents, who had moved to Nuenen. There, he painted the local weavers and peasants, and, in 1885, produced his first masterpiece, *The Potato Eaters*. While he was in Nuenen, his father died, and soon after, he left for Antwerp, where he enrolled in the Academy of Fine Arts and began to develop an interest in Japanese prints. But he did not take easily to academic instruction, and in early 1886, he left Antwerp for Paris, where he moved in with his brother Theo, an art dealer. Vincent was greatly influenced by the modern French artists, to whom he was exposed through Theo, and also by Fernand Cormon, at whose studio he studied for three months. In Paris, he and Theo also became enthusiastic collectors of Japanese prints.

But life in the big city became arduous for Van Gogh, and in 1888, he headed south, to Arles. With the intention of establishing an artists' community, he invited Paul Gauguin to stay at the Yellow House, which he decorated for Gauguin's arrival with, among other things, his now famous sunflower paintings. Within two months, the relationship with Gauguin was in ruins, coming to a dramatic end when Van Gogh cut off a piece of his own ear. He was confined in a hospital in Arles, and subsequently, in 1889, he went voluntarily to the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole Asylum in St. Rémy. There, despite suffering a series of debilitating attacks that seem to have had an epileptic component, he continued to paint.

In 1889, Theo married Jo Bonger, and the following year, he and Jo had a son and named him Vincent Willem, after his uncle.

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In May 1890, Vincent moved to the village of Auvers-sur-Oise, close to Paris. He took a room at an inn and became friendly with Dr. Paul Gachet, who was also an art collector and an amateur painter. A few months later, on 27 July 1890, Van Gogh suffered a gunshot wound, which he said was self-inflicted. He died on 29 July, with Theo by his side.

This brief recapitulation of the main narrative of Van Gogh's life provides a frame of reference for the passages cited in the following chapters. For the most part, I arrange the excerpts chronologically so that they reflect Van Gogh's changing interests and circumstances. Sometimes, though, in attempting to catch a sense of the correspondence as a whole, I break with a strictly chronological arrangement—for instance, in order to highlight Van Gogh's variations on a key metaphor or idea. Rather than focusing exclusively on the arc of Van Gogh's life, I want to highlight the thematic continuities and patterns of the most characteristic images and ideas that infuse the correspondence.

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CHAPTER ONE

Shaping Commitments

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

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

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Bible frequently and was an avid reader of religious classics by authors such as Thomas à Kempis and John Bunyan.

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

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

The aesthetic did not emerge fully as Van Gogh's governing ideal until he discovered his ability as a painter—and especially as

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

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

As this brief outline suggests, a dialogical interchange among religion, morality, and art operates as a powerful organizing force throughout Van Gogh's correspondence. Within this continuing dialogue, none of these three topics completely displaces the

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others, even though each is in the ascendant at a different phase of his career.

Religion

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

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

Van Gogh was also especially sensitive to the problem of suffering, which, in his early years, he thought was unendurable

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without religious faith (4). But in the Borinage another note began to sound, as Van Gogh turned his attention to the "many people" there who were ill (5). His experience among the miners did much to shift his focus away from the orthodox beliefs of his youth and towards a more direct concern with the dire social conditions of the poor.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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whom I name—the more, the better—for behold, that old wine is good and I desire not the new. [109]

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

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

Amsterdam, Wednesday, 30 May 1877.
To Theo van Gogh

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

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

Wasmes, Thursday, 26 December 1878.
To Theo van Gogh

When Van Gogh left Belgium and returned to live with his parents in Etten, tensions rapidly developed because of his infatuation with his widowed cousin, Kee. His parents' disapproval escalated dramatically when Vincent subsequently moved to The

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Hague and set up house with Sien. In asserting the claims of love against the interdictions of his parents' religion, Vincent looked especially to the free-thinking Jules Michelet's books, *La femme* and *L'amour* (6). But he also wrestled with the problem of how to maintain belief in God while declaring his unbelief in the God of conventional religion. Sometimes, he states the problem paradoxically (7, 8) in order to suggest how difficult it is. He also sought alternative ways to define God (9, 10), and he rejected the straightforward charge of atheism (7). However, disrespect for orthodox theology was another matter, and Van Gogh did not hold back from confrontation with the claims and attitudes of conventional believers, especially his father (11, 12).

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

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

By the time Van Gogh went south, first to Paris and then Arles, his difficulties with the religion of his father had loosened their grip on him—which is not to say that religious questions ceased to be a matter of interest and concern. For instance, he registers a note of puzzlement to his sister Willemien on the topic

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of providence (19), and he is satirically amused by the idea that God botched the creation of the world, as if making an artistic blunder (20). These passages suggest a general lightening of Van Gogh's attitude to the God question, even though he continued to search for something to replace the Christianity of his youth (21). In doing so, he found help in Tolstoi's humanist, non-supernatural vision of a renovated Christianity (22, 23).

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

(6) Michelet even says things completely and aloud which the gospel merely whispers to us germinally, and Stowe actually goes as far as Michelet. It should come as no surprise if I tell you, at the risk of your thinking me a fanatic, that I consider it absolutely essential to believe in God in order to be able to love. To believe in God—by that I mean (not that you should believe all those petty sermons of the ministers and the arguments and Jesuitry of the prudish, the sanctimonious, the strait-laced, far from it)—to believe in God, by that I mean feeling that there is a God, not a dead or stuffed God, but a living one who pushes us with irresistible force in the direction of "Love on." That's what I think. Proof of His

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presence—the reality of love. Proof of the reality of the feeling of that great power of love deep within us—the existence of God. Because there is a God there is love; because there is love there is a God. Although this may seem like an argument that goes round in a circle, nevertheless it's true, because "that circle" actually contains all things, and one can't help, even if one wanted to, being in that circle oneself. [189]

Etten, Wednesday, 23 November 1881.
To Theo van Gogh

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

Etten, on or about Friday, 23 December 1881.
To Theo van Gogh

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

The Hague, on or about Tuesday, 16 May 1882.
To Theo van Gogh

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

The Hague, between about Wednesday, 13 December, and about Monday, 18 December 1882.
To Theo van Gogh

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

The Hague, on or about Wednesday, 10 January 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

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

Things actually came to a head because I didn't go to church, and also said that if going to church was something forced and I *had* to go to church, I'd most certainly never go again, not even out of politeness, as I've been doing fairly

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regularly the whole time I've been in Etten. But oh, there's actually much more to it, including the whole story of what happened this summer between me and K.V.

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

The Hague, Thursday, 29 December 1881.
To Theo van Gogh

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

Etten, Monday, 21 November 1881.
To Anthon van Rappard

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

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

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

The Hague, on or about Friday, 27 July 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

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

Nuenen, on or about Tuesday, 16 September 1884.
To Theo van Gogh

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

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

(17) Our goal, first and foremost, is to reform ourselves through craft and contact with nature, believing that it's *our duty first and foremost*, precisely so that we can remain straight with other people, and consistent.

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Our goal is "walking with God"—as against living amid the affairs of the big cities.

We'll do no one any harm by it. [401]

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

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

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

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

Paris, late October 1887. *To Willemien van Gogh*

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

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and for such good, even excellent reasons—we—shouldn't take it for anything other than it is, and we'll be left with the hope of seeing better than that in another life. [613]

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

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

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

(22) It seems that in the book Ma religion, Tolstoy suggests that whatever may occur in the way of a violent revolution, there will also be a private, secret revolution in people, from which a new religion, or rather, something altogether new, will be reborn, which will have no name but which will have the same effect of consoling, of making life possible, that the Christian religion once had. [686]

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

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

Arles, on or about Saturday, 26 August 1888. *To Willemien Van Gogh*

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

Arles, on or about Saturday, 29 September 1888.
To Theo van Gogh

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

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

Arles, on or about Saturday, 29 September 1888.
To Theo van Gogh

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

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

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, on or about Friday,
20 September 1889. *To Theo van Gogh*

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(27) Christ—alone—among all the philosophers, magicians, &c. declared eternal life—the endlessness of time, the non-existence of death—to be the principal certainty. The necessity and the *raison d'être* of serenity and devotion.

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

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

Arles, Tuesday, 26 June 1888. *To Émile Bernard*

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

Arles, Wednesday, 27 June 1888. *To Émile Bernard*

Morality

Van Gogh was highly sensitive to the exploitation and oppression of poor and marginalized people, and when he could no longer subscribe to his parents' religion, he came to feel that "God wants

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the world to be reformed by reforming morals" (187/1:321). Thus, the centre of gravity clearly shifted from religion to morality, which became for Van Gogh (as it would remain) the arbiter of acceptable religious belief. Thus, his main accusation against his father was not that he subscribed to a false religion but that he had wrongly understood Christ's central moral teaching about love.

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

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

The second section deals with the letters written after Van Gogh went to Arles in 1888. Several motifs pertaining to morality carry over from the earlier letters, but the emphasis on social reform now shifts to reforming the art business, in which Van Gogh had taken a renewed interest as he developed plans with Theo to promote the Impressionists. Nonetheless, Vincent goes on complaining about the fickleness of public taste and the

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high personal costs that artists pay in pursuing their careers. The marginalized workers are now replaced by marginalized artists, and, in Van Gogh's own case, by an artist who is also a suffering outcast, confined to an asylum because of a serious mental illness. And so, for Van Gogh, the integrity of the artist's vocation itself becomes a moral matter, even though he insists on the further moral truth that art is not a substitute for life.

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

And so, when Van Gogh dedicated himself as an artist to depicting the lives of poor people, he was driven by a moral concern that combined compassion and defiance (9–11) in order to protest against the triumph of materialism over genuine human relationships (12). He was convinced also that strength lay in solidarity (13) and that the production of an art "of the people and for the people" (291/2:215) would promote the moral reforms he sought.

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Still, Van Gogh distinguished between true morality and conventional moralizing, and a clearcut separation between right and wrong seemed to him often merely a means for confirming the comfortable certainties of a self-righteous majority. Although he himself sometimes took clear, uncompromising positions—as in opposing death sentences (14)—he did so on the grounds that what he opposed was radically life-denying and therefore an offence against what he liked to call the "eternal yea" (358/2:365). But on most matters of practical morality, he was convinced that things aren't so clear (15–17). For instance, art dealers, who often do understand the human value of art, are frequently too much driven by the allure of profit (18, 19). The poor state of public taste (20) also results partly from an exploitation by dealers who "flatter the public in its worst and most barbaric" inclinations (21). The ironic fact that dealers are thought respectable and artists disreputable mirrors Van Gogh's view of prostitutes in relation to the norms of bourgeois society (22). Still, he realized that artists are also often insufficiently supportive of one another (23), and in this regard, he calls for co-operation (24) and warns against the dangers of self-righteousness (25).

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

(1) There's something in Paris, though, that's more beautiful than the autumn and the churches, and that is the poor people there. [92]

Isleworth, Tuesday, 3 October 1876. *To Theo van Gogh*

(2) If one roams the streets there [Theo's neighbourhood in Paris], whether in the morning or evening, or walks in the

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

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

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

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

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

Let your occupation be a modern one, and create in your wife a free, modern soul, free her of the terrible prejudices that restrain her. Do not doubt the help of God if you do what God wants you to do, and in this day and age God wants the

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world to be reformed by reforming morals, by renewing the light and the fire of eternal love.

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

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

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

Etten, on or about Friday, 23 December 1881.
To Theo van Gogh

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

Arles, on or about Sunday, 5 August 1888.
To Émile Bernard

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

Hoogeveen, on or about Friday, 21 September 1883. *To Theo van Gogh*

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

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

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

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

(10) Once I nursed a poor burnt miner for six weeks or 2 months—I shared my food with an old man a whole winter long—and I don't know what else, and now Sien. But to this day I don't believe that this was foolish or bad, I see it as so natural and self-evident that I can't understand how people

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can be so indifferent to each other normally. Let me add that if I did wrong, you also did wrong in helping me so loyally—that would be wrong too, but that would surely be absurd. I've always believed that "love thy neighbour as thyself" isn't an exaggeration but the normal state of affairs. But anyway. [250]

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

(11) You've received my letter in which I wrote about how, while I was working, an idea came to me for making figures *from the people for the people*. How it seemed to me that it would be a good thing if several individuals joined together for this purpose, not for the bookshops but out of charity and duty. [291]

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

(12) How hard-hearted they are, how mistaken, though, if they think they can fool everyone into believing that MATERIAL GREATNESS is of equal weight as MORAL GREATNESS, and that without the latter anything good can be done. [293]

The Hague, on or about Monday, 11 December 1882. *To Theo van Gogh*

(13) And this stands as a truth once and for all, and those who wish can always draw energy from it.

The pity of it is partly that when several people care for the same cause and work on it together, unity is strength, and united they can do more than their separate energies can, each striving in a different direction.

People strengthen each other when they work together, and an entity is formed without personality having to be blotted out by the collaboration. [305]

The Hague, Friday, 26 January, or Saturday, 27 January 1883. *To Theo van Gogh*

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(14) Ah! You see, *when* I sometimes have doubts I ask myself: would you like to be a *judge* passing a death sentence? And always, always I have only one answer: No, once and for all I am for the abolition of statutory and other death sentences, anathemas and other capital punishments. We're called upon to *preserve* life, to respect it, and that is our duty, and we can always justify that even if the world says we're wrong or even if it doesn't bring us good fortune. [349]

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

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

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

The Hague, on or about Friday, 27 July 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

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

The Hague, on or about Friday, 27 July 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

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

Nuenen, on or about Saturday, 15 December 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

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

Nuenen, on or about Thursday, 6 December 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

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

Nuenen, on or about Monday, 17 August 1885.
To Theo van Gogh

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

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

(21) *Pleasing, Saleable* are horrible words to me. And I've never met a dealer who wasn't steeped in that, and it's a plague. Art has no greater enemies, although the managers of the big art firms have a reputation for performing a useful service by taking artists under their wing.

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They don't do it right; although matters are such that, with the public coming to them, not to the artists themselves, the artists are persuaded to resort to them—yet there's not a single artist who doesn't have a spoken or silent complaint against them in his heart. They flatter the public in its worst and most barbaric tendencies and bad taste. Enough. [279]

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

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

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

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

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

(24) I don't have the least desire for exhibitions &c. to stop, but I do desire a reform or rather renewal and strengthening of the

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associations and the collaboration between painters, which would certainly have the kind of influence that would make even exhibitions beneficial. [332]

The Hague, on or about Wednesday, 21 March 1883.
To Anthon van Rappard

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

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

Nuenen, on or about Sunday, 2 March 1884.
To Anthon van Rappard

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

Antwerp, Saturday, 19 December 1885.
To Theo van Gogh

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

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

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

Antwerp, Sunday, 14 February 1886. *To Theo van Gogh*

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

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

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

Arles, on or about Monday, 13 August 1888.
To Theo van Gogh

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

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

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

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

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

Arles, on or about Monday, 13 August 1888.
To Theo van Gogh

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

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Tuesday, 29 April 1890.
To Anna van Gogh-Carbentus and Willemien van Gogh

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

Arles, Tuesday, 18 December 1888. *To Theo van Gogh*

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

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

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

Arles, on or about Sunday, 1 July 1888. *To Theo van Gogh*

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

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

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

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

(37) Speaking of self-knowledge—who has it? Here again "*the* knowledge—*no one* has it." Some knowledge—concerning oneself, concerning one's own bad or good tendencies, everyone—and I begin with myself—is certainly in the utmost need of it. But—don't think that you never deceive yourself for lack of it—don't think that you never hurt others cruelly and undeservedly with superficial judgements.

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I know—*everyone* does that—and people have to manage to get on together *all the same*. [516]

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

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

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

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

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

Paris, late October 1887. *To Willemien van Gogh*

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

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

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Art

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

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

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

When Van Gogh found, to his surprise (257/2:135), that he had a special aptitude for painting, he gradually came to see how the *means* of expression in a work of art contributes to its aesthetic

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effect. In Nuenen, he discovered how complementary and contrasting colours have, in themselves, an emotional impact on a viewer. These ideas about expressive technique and colour enabled the full emergence of Van Gogh's ideology of the aesthetic, which subsumes within itself a quasi-religious sense of the sacred as well as a conscientious moral understanding. The internal dynamics of a work of art, rather than its illustrative aspects, are in themselves acknowledged as a source of power, and personal style is the bearer of the work's most enduring meaning and significance.

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

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

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how art works (11–13). Yet in the end, the aim of art is to be pleasing and thought provoking and to be a sincere expression of real feelings (14, 15).

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

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

London, beginning of January 1874. *To Theo van Gogh*

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

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

(3) I know no better definition of the word *Art* than this, "Art is man added to nature," nature, reality, truth, but with a meaning, with an interpretation, with a character that the artist brings out and to which he gives expression, which he sets free, which he unravels, releases, elucidates.

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A painting by Mauve or Maris or Israëls speaks more and more clearly than nature itself. [152]

Wasmes, on or about Thursday, 19 June 1879.
To Theo van Gogh

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

The Hague, on or about Wednesday, 11 July 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

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

Amsterdam, Wednesday, 9 January, and Thursday, 10 January 1878. *To Theo van Gogh*

(6) [. . .] I want the fine appearance to come from me and not from my material. [222]

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

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(7) When I hear Tersteeg talking about agreeableness and saleability I can only think: work one has slaved away at and done one's best to imbue with character and sentiment can be neither disagreeable nor unsaleable. And perhaps it's better that one doesn't immediately please everyone. [215]

The Hague, on or about Thursday, 6 April 1882.
To Theo van Gogh

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

The Hague, on or about Thursday, 6 April 1882.
To Theo van Gogh

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

The Hague, Saturday, 26 August 1882.
To Theo van Gogh

(10) It seems to me that a painter has a duty to try to put an idea into his work. I was trying to say this in this print—but I can't say it as beautifully, as strikingly as reality, of which this is only a dim reflection seen in a dark mirror—that it seems to me that one of the strongest pieces of evidence for the existence of "something on high" in which Millet

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believed, namely in the existence of a God and an eternity, is the unutterably moving quality that there can be in the expression of an old man like that, without his being aware of it perhaps, as he sits so quietly in the corner of his hearth. At the same time something precious, something noble, that can't be meant for the worms. [288]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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(14) I feel such a need to make something pleasing, something that makes one think. [347]

The Hague, on or about Wednesday, 30 May 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

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

The Hague, on or about Tuesday, 7 August 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

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

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

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

The Hague, Saturday, 18 August 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

(18) And I think moreover that *colour*, that *chiaroscuro*, that *perspective*, that *tone*, that *drawing*, everything in short—

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certainly also have fixed laws that one must and can study like chemistry or algebra.

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

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

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

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

In Antwerp, Van Gogh acknowledges that making art for art's sake is sufficient motivation (22), and he describes himself as a true believer in the ideas about colour that he is now exploring (23, 24). In this context, he confirms how he looks within the work itself to discover its impact rather than to its narrative or referential elements. The aesthetic effect is now seen to be implicit in the style (25) rather than in the artist's intent to be expressive. Colour is a powerful means of communication in itself (26, 27), and its effectiveness in a painting resides in the artist's distinctive use of contrast and complementarity (28, 29). Later, Van Gogh states this idea repeatedly, often with specific reference to his own paintings

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(30, 31). For instance, he claims that qualities such as anguish and gratitude are communicated directly through a painting rather than imparted to it by the artist's strength of feeling, as he once maintained (32, 33).

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

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

Nuenen, on or about Monday, 13 July 1885.
To Anthon van Rappard

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

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

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

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(21) It's very good that Claude Monet found a way of making these ten pictures between February and May.

To work quickly isn't to work less seriously, it depends on the confidence and experience one has.

In the same way, Jules Gérard the lion-hunter says in his book that at the beginning young lions have a lot of trouble killing a horse or an ox, but old lions kill with a single well-judged strike from a claw or a tooth, and have an amazing sureness for that job. [630]

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

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

Antwerp, on or about Tuesday, 2 February 1886. *To Theo van Gogh*

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

Arles, on or about Friday, 16 March 1888. *To Theo van Gogh*

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

Arles, on or about Sunday, 20 May 1888. *To Theo van Gogh*

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

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Sunday, 9 June 1889.
To Theo van Gogh

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

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

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

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

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

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

(28) There you have *basics* that one can subdivide further, can elaborate, but enough to show you without a painting that

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there are colours that make each other shine, that make a *couple*, complete each other like man and wife. [626]

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

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

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

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

All of that in an ambience of a hellish furnace, in pale sulphur.

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

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

(31) This time it's simply my bedroom, but the colour has to do the job here, and through its being simplified by giving a grander style to things, to be suggestive here of rest or of *sleep* in

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general. In short, looking at the painting should rest the mind, or rather, the imagination. [705]

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

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

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

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

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

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

(34) Gauguin, Bernard or I will all remain there perhaps, and won't overcome but neither will we be overcome. We're

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perhaps not there for one thing or the other, being there to console or to prepare for more consolatory painting. [782]

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

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

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

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

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

Auvers-sur-Oise, Wednesday, 23 July 1890. *To Theo van Gogh*

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CHAPTER TWO

Enduring Adversity

Van Gogh maintained the optimistic position that suffering can help a person to grow and is indispensable in the development of creativity. His statements about such matters are often paradoxical, but they are also designed partly to deflect the full force of the scandal of unjust suffering and to prevent it from becoming overwhelming for him. A poignant contrast also emerges between the confidence frequently expressed in Van Gogh's response to suffering in his early letters and his brave but frightened struggles with his own illness towards the end of his life.

The asceticism that accompanied Van Gogh's willing embrace of suffering is consistent with (and helps to explain) the high value he placed on perseverance—the determination, that is, to stick things out—which is one of his most strongly marked personal characteristics. He was convinced that perseverance is the only path to real achievement, and he never tired of saying so, regardless of the utopian ideal he was pursuing at the time. Patience, deliberation, and repetition were, for Van Gogh, the foundations of virtue, whether in the moral life or in art. As far as painting is concerned, he believed that creative spontaneity is acquired only

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by a great deal of labour and persistence, especially in the face of the discouragements that come from our unavoidable failures and from the storms of life in general.

The inevitability of suffering and failure was also a constant reminder for Van Gogh that experience often falls short of our hopes and aspirations, and in this context, the idea of imperfection was highly significant for him. Just as he felt that his embrace of Sien Hoornik's imperfections was a sign of his moral superiority to his denigrators, so he also came to believe that the deliberate inclusion of imperfection—expressed even as "ugliness," as he says—is a marker of authenticity and of true beauty in a work of art.

Suffering

Repeatedly, Van Gogh maintains that suffering is a stimulus to creativity. The persistent ascetic strain in his personality led him even to seek out suffering, and he recommends deliberately exposing oneself to danger so that an ordeal can be endured and overcome. He also remained convinced that a special value attaches to beauty that emerges from hard and bitter experience. And yet we might also feel that Van Gogh sometimes tried to mitigate his extreme sensitivity to suffering with an overly emphatic insistence on its benefits. It is as if in order to manage his fear of a dreaded enemy, he rushed straight at it.

During his religious phase, Van Gogh favoured St. Paul's injunction to be "sorrowful yet always rejoicing" (2 Corinthians 6:10). Here, St. Paul interprets Jesus's death and resurrection in a highly compressed form, acknowledging sorrow as a prior condition through which (and in spite of which) we discover a greater joy.

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But Van Gogh was never much interested in Christ's crucifixion. He was, however, attracted to the related idea that those closest to God are afflicted by suffering as a sign of divine favour (1), and he drew some uncomfortable conclusions from this point—for instance, that suffering is better than mirth or laughter (2, 4) and that we should hate this life and despise ourselves (3). Offsetting these opinions, he also maintained that suffering and illness are God's opportunity to allow us to make new, life-enhancing discoveries (4).

While giving up his allegiance to orthodox religion, Van Gogh describes his "moulting" as painful but necessary if he is to emerge "renewed" (5). Later, he applies the idea of rebirth through suffering to art, claiming that he can't draw sorrow unless he feels it first (6). Writing to Van Rappard, he uses Jesus's words to confirm his own self-sacrifice—"whosoever will lose his life shall find it" (7)—going on to claim that painting is more important to him than health.

Van Gogh also liked the idea of exposing himself to the storms of life on the grounds that he would grow in the tempest (8, 9). He states a preference for "the drama of a storm in nature" because the garden of Christ's suffering (Gethsemane) is preferable to any unchallenging paradise or "paradou" (10). His ascetic habits even drove him sometimes to choose to paint rather than buy food, so that he had to battle resolutely against exhaustion and depression (11, 12). He also records a wide range of setbacks, disappointments, illnesses, and painful altercations with his family, but he offers reassurances as well, expressing a life-affirming defiance in the face of the suffering (13, 14) that he resolutely refuses to avoid (15). In brief, he claims that his desire to paint remains stronger than the deprivations he endures because of it (16), and he goes on proclaiming the positive value of misfortune (17, 18). And so he wonders at a beautiful blossom, magically produced from a gnarled, old branch, twisted and bent by bitter experience: such is the artist's life (19), given over to the transfiguration of suffering by beauty.

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(1) The Christian life nevertheless has its dark side too; it is mainly men's work.

Those who walk with God, God's friends, God's pious followers, those who worship Him in Spirit and in Truth, have been proved and tried, and have oft-times received from God a thorn in the flesh; blessed will we be when we can repeat after our father, Paul: when I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child: but now that I have become a man, I put away childish things, and I became, and God made me: sorrowful, yet always rejoicing. [51]

Paris, Monday, 27 September 1875. *To Theo van Gogh*

(2) [. . .] it's also true that there is no joy without insufficiency.

Sorrow is better than joy, and it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasts, for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better.

Even in mirth the heart is sad. [90]

Isleworth, between about Saturday, 2 September, and Friday, 8 September 1876. *To Theo van Gogh*

(3) Then one indeed understands a little why He uttered these words "He who hate not, even his own life also, he cannot be My disciple," because there is reason to hate that life and what is called "the body of this death." And it has indeed been rightly said: If you desire to learn or know anything to your advantage, then take delight in being unknown and unregarded. A true understanding and humble estimate of oneself is the highest and most valuable of all lessons. To take no account of oneself, and always to think well and highly of others is the highest wisdom. [135]

Amsterdam, Saturday, 24 November, and Sunday, 25 November 1877. *To Theo van Gogh*

(4) "My illness is not a bad thing." No, for Sorrow is better than laughter. No, being ill and supported by God's arm, and

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acquiring new ideas and resolutions during the days of one's illness, which couldn't occur to us when we weren't ill, and acquiring clearer faith and firmer trust during those days, that's not a bad thing. [95]

Isleworth, between Monday, 23 October, and on or about Wednesday, 25 October 1876. *To Theo van Gogh*

(5) That's why, first of all, so I'm inclined to believe, it is beneficial and the best and most reasonable position to take, for me to go away and to remain at a proper distance, as if I didn't exist. What moulting is to birds, the time when they change their feathers, that's adversity or misfortune, hard times, for us human beings. One may remain in this period of moulting, one may also come out of it renewed, but it's not to be done in public, however; it's scarcely entertaining, it's not cheerful, so it's a matter of making oneself scarce. Well, so be it. [155]

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

(6) And well—yes, I know that Ma is ill—and I also know many more sombre things, both in our own and in other families.

And I'm not insensitive to them, and it seems to me that I couldn't draw Sorrow if I didn't feel it myself. [217]

The Hague, on or about Friday, 14 April 1882. *To Theo van Gogh*

(7) [. . .] I brazenly acted against the doctor's advice in some respects, not because I thought his advice was wrong or that I knew better, but because I reasoned to myself: I live to paint and not primarily to conserve my constitution. Sometimes the mysterious words, whosoever will lose his life shall find it, are as clear as daylight. [341]

The Hague, on or about Wednesday, 9 May 1883. *To Anthon van Rappard*

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(8) The fishermen know that the sea is dangerous and the storm fearsome, *but could never see that the dangers were a reason to continue strolling on the beach*. They leave that wisdom to those to whom it appeals. When the storm comes—when night falls—what's worse: the danger or the fear of danger? Give me reality, the danger itself. [228]

The Hague, on or about Tuesday, 16 May 1882.
To Theo van Gogh

(9) [. . .] don't think that I have high opinions of my present work. No, I don't, for example, attach any market value to it, but my idea is that I want to work without more protection than other people have, and so I'll throw myself into it not because I'm already there *now*, but because I believe "I will mature in the storm." [406]

Nieuw-Amsterdam, Monday, 12 November, or Tuesday, 13 November 1883. *To Theo van Gogh*

(10) Yes, for me the drama of a storm in nature, the drama of sorrow in life, is the best. A "paradou" is beautiful, but Gethsemane is more beautiful still.

Oh, there must be a little bit of air, a little bit of happiness, but chiefly to let the form be felt, to make the lines of the silhouette speak. But let the whole be sombre. [381]

The Hague, on or about Wednesday, 5 September 1883. *To Theo van Gogh*

(11) I also believe that it may happen that one succeeds and one mustn't begin by despairing; even if one loses here and there, and even if one sometimes feels a sort of decline, the point is nevertheless to revive and have courage, even though things don't turn out as one first thought. [274]

The Hague, Sunday, 22 October 1882.
To Theo van Gogh

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(12) I've been feeling very weak of late—I fear that I've rather overworked myself—and those "dregs" of working, those afterpains of exertion, how horrible they are. Then life has the colour of dirty water, it's like a rubbish dump.

At those times one would like to have a friend near one. Sometimes that clears up the dim mist.

On such days I sometimes worry terribly about the future and am melancholy about my work, and feel powerless. But it's dangerous to speak too much of this or to keep thinking about it, so enough. [306]

The Hague, Saturday, 3 February 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

(13) I tell you frankly that I'm beginning to fear I shan't get through in this way, for my constitution would be good enough if I hadn't had to fast for a long time, but again and again it was a question of either fasting or working less, and as far as possible I chose the first, so that now I'm too weak. How to endure that? [366]

The Hague, on or about Tuesday, 24 July 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

(14) In my view we all have moments of melancholy, of stress, of anguish, to a greater or lesser extent, and this is a condition of every *self-conscious* human life. Some apparently have no self-consciousness. But those who have such moments, although then sometimes in an anxious state, aren't unfortunate *because* of that, and nothing unusual is happening to them. [327]

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

(15) [. . .] I would rather have my sorrow about one thing and another than forget or become indifferent—if you could feel precisely the extent to which I draw my serenity from *worship of sorrow* and not from illusion—perhaps even for you brother,

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my inner self would be very different and more detached from life than you can now imagine. [382]

The Hague, on or about Thursday, 6 September 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

(16) You might not be able to understand it, but it's true—when I receive money, my greatest hunger, even if I've fasted, isn't for food, but is even stronger for painting—and I set out hunting models right away, and I carry on until it's gone. [550]

Antwerp, Monday, 28 December 1885.
To Theo van Gogh

(17) How much sadness there is in life. Well, one may not become melancholy, one must look elsewhere, and to work is the right thing, only there are moments when one only finds peace in the realization: misfortune won't spare me either. [386]

Hoogeveen, on or about Friday, 14 September 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

(18) It seems to me that there are those moments in life when it's better that the blow should fall, albeit it hard, than that one should be liable to be *spared* by the world. As to me, I'm bound to misfortune and failure, it's damned hard sometimes, but there it is. I still don't envy the so-called fortunate and eternally successful ones, since I see too much behind it. [418]

Nuenen, on or about Friday, 28 December 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

(19) What you write about Serret interests me greatly. A man like that who eventually produces something heart-rending as blossom from a hard and difficult life is a phenomenon like the blackthorn, or better yet a gnarled old apple tree which suddenly bears blossoms that are among the tenderest and most *"pure"* things under the sun.

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When a rough man *blossoms*—it's indeed a beautiful sight—but HE has had to endure an awful lot of cold winters before then—more than even the *later* sympathizers know.

The *artist's life* and WHAT *an artist is*, that's very curious—how deep is it—infinitely deep. [408]

Nieuw-Amsterdam, Saturday, 1 December 1883.

To Theo van Gogh

In Arles, Van Gogh declares that the main lesson in life is how to deal with suffering (20), and in St. Rémy, he repeats the paradox from his Isleworth days—that illness helps to heal us (21). Yet, in these later letters, the focus shifts to the inner landscape of Van Gogh's personal suffering, and especially to the anguish caused by his illness. Already in 1888, he found it difficult to handle his "mental emotions" (22), and his confinement in hospital was difficult albeit sometimes comforting (23). He is now not so sure as he was before about being able to rejoice in affliction or to find meaning in pain (24), and he admits to being frightened (25, 26). There is poignancy in these passages, but, as Van Gogh assures Willlemien, he is reconciled to the suffering that he can't avoid (27), and he affirms his belief that happiness and unhappiness are inextricably bound up together in human life (28).

(20) What can you say, to suffer without complaining is the only lesson that has to be learned in this life. [750]

Arles, Tuesday, 19 March 1889. *To Theo van Gogh*

(21) Although being ill isn't a cause for joy, I nevertheless have no right to complain about it, for it seems to me that nature sees

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to it that illness is a means of getting us back on our feet, of healing us, rather than an absolute evil. [849]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Saturday, 1 February 1890.
To John Peter Russell

(22) Because loneliness, worries, vexations, the need for friendship and fellow-feeling not sufficiently met, that's what's very bad, the mental emotions of sadness or disappointments undermine us more than riotous living: us, that is, who find ourselves the happy owners of troubled hearts. [611]

Arles, on or about Sunday, 20 May 1888.
To Theo van Gogh

(23) I'm "in a hole" in life, and my mental state not only *is* but also *has been*—distracted.

So that whatever might be done for me I *can't* think of a way of balancing my life. Where I *must* follow a rule, like here at the hospital, I feel more tranquil. [767]

Arles, Thursday, 2 May 1889. *To Theo van Gogh*

(24) It is precisely in learning to suffer without complaining, learning to consider pain without repugnance, that one risks vertigo a little; and yet it might be possible, yet one glimpses even a vague probability that on the other side of life we'll glimpse justifications for pain, which seen from here sometimes takes up the whole horizon so much that it takes on the despairing proportions of a deluge. Of that we know very little, of proportions, and it's better to look at a wheatfield, even in the state of a painting. [784]

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

(25) In the crises I feel cowardly in the face of anguish and suffering—more cowardly than is justified, and it's perhaps

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this very moral cowardice which, while before I had no desire whatsoever to get better, now makes me eat enough for two, work hard, take care of myself in my relations with the other patients for fear of relapsing—anyway I'm trying to get better now like someone who, having wanted to commit suicide, finding the water too cold, tries to catch hold of the bank again. [801]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Tuesday, 10 September 1889. *To Theo van Gogh*

(26) Well yes—we're not the master of that—of our existence, and it's a matter, seemingly, of learning to want to live on, even when suffering. Ah, I feel so cowardly in that respect, even as my health returns. I still fear. So who am I to encourage others, you'll rightly say to me, it hardly suits me. [842]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Monday, 20 January 1890. *To Joseph Ginoux and Marie Ginoux-Julien*

(27) It's very likely that I have a lot more to suffer. And that doesn't suit me at all, to tell you the truth, for I wouldn't wish for a martyr's career in any circumstances.

For I've always sought something *other* than the heroism I don't have, which I certainly admire in others but which, I repeat, I do *not* believe to be my duty or my ideal. [764]

Arles, between about Sunday, 28 April, and Thursday, 2 May 1889. *To Willemien van Gogh*

(28) The difference between happiness and unhappiness, both are necessary and useful, and death or passing away … it's so relative—and so is life.

Even in the face of an illness that's unsettling or worrying, this belief is absolutely unshaken. [805]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, on or about Friday, 20 September 1889. *To Theo van Gogh*

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Perseverance

There are close links between Van Gogh's attitudes to suffering and his willingness to undergo hardship and deprivation, especially in acquiring his craft as an artist—a task that called for a high degree of self-reliance and self-motivation. In undertaking this task, Van Gogh placed a high value on perseverance. The deliberateness and patience with which he set about his apprenticeship as a draughtsman and a painter do much to qualify the once widespread view that he was a spontaneous, misunderstood genius—a romantically heroic victim of the philistine prejudices of an indifferent bourgeois society. To the contrary, the letters show that he thought carefully about how he might best shape his career in relation to the professional art world of his day, to which he hoped to make his own distinctive contribution. He knew that the road would be difficult, and he repeatedly extols perseverance as a way of buoying up his spirits in the face of obstacles and, when he became ill, as a way of maintaining stability in an unpredictable world.

Van Gogh's religious convictions did much to establish the strong link that he continued to feel between commitment and a willingness to stick to a task despite discouragement (1). In Amsterdam, he describes his favourite plant, ivy, as a figure for patient endurance (2), and he holds that a worthwhile task justifies the effort regardless of whether or not the result is successful (3, 4). In preparing for the religious life, Van Gogh affirms a principle that will continue to inform his practice as an artist—namely, that proper foundations are necessary and are acquired only by a long apprenticeship (5). At the end of his stay in the Borinage, when he is filled with uncertainty about his new vocation, his decision

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simply to persevere is in itself sustaining: "to keep on, keep on, that's what's needed" (6).

(1) [. . .] one can't become *simple* and true all at once. But let's persevere nonetheless, *but above all be patient, those who believe shall not make haste*. [56]

Paris, Thursday, 14 October 1875. *To Theo van Gogh*

(2) I have a lot of work already, and it isn't easy, but meekness will help one to get used to it. I only hope to bear in mind the ivy, "which stealeth on though he wears no wings." [114]

Amsterdam, Saturday, 19 May 1877. *To Theo van Gogh*

(3) [. . .] and yet the days fly by, as I have lessons daily and have to study for them, and would even so much like the days to be a little longer in order to get more done, because it's not always easy work, and even if one has been at it for some time, it gives but little satisfaction, enfin, what is difficult is good, I feel convinced of that even if one sees no results. [129]

Amsterdam, Tuesday, 4 September 1877.
To Theo van Gogh

(4) 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]

Amsterdam, Wednesday, 3 April 1878.
To Theo van Gogh

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(5) A person doesn't get *it* all at once, and most of those who have become something very good have gone through a long, difficult period of preparation that was the rock upon which their house was founded. [137]

Amsterdam, Sunday, 9 December 1877.
To Theo van Gogh

(6) But on the road that I'm on I must continue; if I do nothing, if I don't study, if I don't keep on trying, then I'm lost, then woe betide me. That's how I see this, to keep on, keep on, that's what's needed.

But what's your ultimate goal, you'll say. That goal will become clearer, will take shape slowly and surely, as the croquis becomes a sketch and the sketch a painting, as one works more seriously, as one digs deeper into the originally vague idea, the first fugitive, passing thought, unless it becomes firm. [155]

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

As he struggled with his personal shortcomings (7), Van Gogh returned often to the idea that slowness, deliberation, and repetition are indispensable in the production of an authentic work of art. However spontaneously a successful painting might be executed, it is actually the product of a long period of prior calculation and practice (8). You can't have too much patience, Vincent assures his erstwhile boss, Hermanus Tersteeg (9), and every discouragement is to be resisted (10).

Towards the end of his life, perseverance also served to provide stability and to enable him to keep going despite the unpredictable epileptic attacks that laid him low for weeks on

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end (22). In Arles, he recommends staying silent in order to study for ten years (23), but in St. Rémy, he states, ruefully, that such a plan didn't work for him. Still, his misfortune has been good because it gave him time to keep on producing more preparatory studies (24, 25). Once again, he concludes that slow, long work is the only way, a fact that is all the clearer now that he has set aside his earlier ambitions for success (26).

(7) Certainly it's presumptuous to feel sure of one's success, and yet one may believe: my inner struggle will not be in vain, and I want to fight it; despite all my own weaknesses and faults I want to fight it as best I can.

Even if I fall down 99 times, the hundredth time, too, I'll get up! [187]

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

(8) Don't believe, then, that I would artificially maintain a feverish state—but you should know that I'm in the middle of a complicated calculation that results in canvases done quickly one after another but calculated long *beforehand*. And look, when people say they're done too quickly you'll be able to reply that they looked at them too quickly. [635]

Arles, on or about Sunday, 1 July 1888.
To Theo van Gogh

(9) Although at times I'm overwhelmed by worries, all the same, I'm calm, and my calmness is based on my serious approach to my work and on reflection. Although I have moments of passion, and my disposition tends to make them worse, nonetheless I'm composed, as His Hon., who's known me long enough, very well knows. Now he even said to me: you have too much patience.

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Those words aren't right, one can't have *too much* patience in art, that word is beyond the pale. Perhaps in my case Mr H.G.T. [Hermanus Tersteeg] has *too little patience*. [210]

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

(10) Art demands persistent work, work in spite of everything, and unceasing observation.

By persistent I mean in the first place continued labour, but also not abandoning your approach because of what someone else says. [249]

The Hague, on or about Friday, 21 July 1882.
To Theo van Gogh

(11) For the great doesn't happen through impulse alone, and is a succession of little things that are brought together.

What is drawing? How does one get there? It's working one's way through an invisible iron wall that seems to stand between what one *feels* and what one *can do*. How can one get through that wall?—since hammering on it doesn't help at all. In my view, one must undermine the wall and grind through it slowly and patiently. [274]

The Hague, Sunday, 22 October 1882.
To Theo van Gogh

(12) For you'll understand that sometimes I'm burdened with cares. Still, we must make shift with what we have, and undermine with patience the things we can't lift with strength. [337]

The Hague, on or about Saturday, 21 April 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

(13) To me, the drawings I'm doing now are a shadow of what I mean, but a shadow that already has a certain shape, and what I seek, what I'm after, isn't something vague but things from

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full reality that can only be mastered by patient and regular work.

Look, imagining how I would have to work in fits and starts is a ghastly prospect for me. [365]

The Hague, Monday, 23 July 1883. *To Theo van Gogh*

(14) People said that I was going mad; I myself felt that I wasn't, if only because I felt my own malady very deep inside myself and tried to get over it again. I made all sorts of forlorn attempts that led to nothing, so be it, but because of that *idée fixe* of getting back to a normal position I never confused my own desperate doings, scrambling and squirmings with I myself. At least I always felt "let me just do something, be somewhere, it *must* get better, I'll get over it, let me have the patience to recover." [394]

Hoogeveen, Friday, 12 October 1883. *To Theo van Gogh*

(15) [. . .] I don't in the least seek flattery, or that people should say "I think it beautiful" when they think it ugly; no, what I want is an intelligent honesty that isn't vexed by failures. That would say to me if I had failed 6 times, just as *my* courage failed me, now you really must try again for the 7th time. You see, I can't do without that push. And I think that you would understand it and I would benefit tremendously from you. [397]

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

(16) [. . .] the issue is to really go on trying to find a better system of working. So, patience and perseverance. [561]

Antwerp, on or about Thursday, 11 February 1886. *To Theo van Gogh*

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(17) And in any case, there's nothing better to do than to wait without getting impatient, even if one has to wait for a long time. [696]

Arles, Wednesday, 3 October 1888. *To Émile Bernard*

(18) It remains the cause of a kind of disappointment to me that I don't yet see in my drawings what I wanted to have in them. The difficulties really are many and great, and not to be overcome at a stroke. Making headway is a kind of miner's labour that doesn't go as quickly as one would wish and as others expect. But if one is faced by such labour, the first things one must hang on to are patience and faith. [327]

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

(19) [. . .] that our love for art might inspire in us a collier's faith to say what others have said before and will say again after us. Namely that even if the situation is ominous, and even if we're very poor &c. &c., *yet we firmly concentrate on one single thing, on painting, naturally.* [404]

Nieuw-Amsterdam, on or about Thursday,
8 November 1883. *To Theo van Gogh*

(20) There's a saying of Gustave Doré's that I've always found exceedingly beautiful—I have the patience of an ox—right away I see something good in it, a certain resolute honesty; in short there's a lot in that saying, it's a real artist's saying. When one thinks about people from whose mind something like this springs, it seems to me that the sort of arguments one all too often hears in the art trade about "gift" is such a hideous croaking of ravens. "I have the patience," how calm that is, how dignified that is. They wouldn't even say that if it weren't precisely because of all that croaking of ravens. I'm not an artist—how coarse that is—even to think it of oneself—should one not have patience, not learn patience from nature, learn patience from seeing the wheat slowly come up, the growing

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of things—should one think oneself such a hugely dead thing that one believed one wouldn't grow? Should one deliberately discourage one's development? [400]

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

(21) The symbol of Saint Luke, the patron of painters, is, as you know, an *ox*; we must therefore be as patient as an ox if we wish to labour in the artistic field. But bulls are pretty glad not having to work in the filthy business of painting. [628]

Arles, on or about Tuesday, 19 June 1888.
To Émile Bernard

(22) [. . .] I'm ploughing on like a man possessed, more than ever I have a pent-up fury for work, and I think that this will contribute to curing me.

Perhaps something will happen to me like the thing E. Delacroix speaks of—"I found painting when I had neither teeth nor breath left," in this sense that my sad illness makes me work with a pent-up fury—very slowly—but from morning till night without respite—and—*this* is probably the secret—work for a long time and slowly. [800]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Thursday, 5 September, and Friday, 6 September 1889. *To Theo van Gogh*

(23) Me, I'd be quite happy to stay silent for 10 years doing nothing but studies, then do one or two figure paintings.

The old plan, so often recommended and so rarely carried out. [657]

Arles, Wednesday, 8 August 1888. *To Theo van Gogh*

(24) [. . .] I myself am very, very discontented with my work, and the only thing that consoles me is that experienced people say that one must paint for 10 years for nothing. But what I've done is only those 10 years of unfortunate studies that didn't

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come off. Now a better period could come, but I'll have to strengthen the figure work, and I must refresh my memory by very close study of Delacroix, Millet. Then I'll try to sort out my drawing. Yes, every cloud has a silver lining, it gives one more time for study. [805]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, on or about Friday, 20 September 1889. *To Theo van Gogh*

(25) You'll see that I'm gaining a little patience, and that persevering will be a result of my illness. [806]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Saturday, 28 September 1889. *To Theo van Gogh*

(26) [. . .] I end up resigning myself by saying, it's experience and *each day's* little bit of work alone that in the long run matures and enables one to do things that are more complete or more right. So slow, long work is the only road, and all ambition to be set on doing well, false. For one must spoil as many canvases as one succeeds with when one mounts the breach each morning. [823]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Tuesday, 26 November 1889. *To Theo van Gogh*

Imperfection

Imperfection is closely linked to Van Gogh's ideas about suffering and perseverance: that is, people suffer because of the physical afflictions that attend our natural condition and because human sympathy and understanding are limited. In his early letters, Van Gogh writes that religion is helpful in that it encourages people to deal with these problems by loving one another despite their vulnerabilities and failures. But when he rejected organized

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religion and was himself subsequently rejected by Kee, he turned to Sien partly *because* of her imperfections, as a demonstration to his detractors of his moral superiority to their self-righteous religious orthodoxy. In so doing, he retained the spirit of the Christian injunction to love your (flawed) neighbour as yourself, even though he had parted company with official Christianity. It is as if he secularized the idea of spiritual consolation by insisting on its moral rather than its religious significance.

Van Gogh took his thinking about imperfection a step further by suggesting that authentic works of art are likewise validated—humanized, brought to life—by how they thematize imperfection within themselves. For instance, when he writes about the working poor, he extols both his imperfect suffering subjects and the artistic effectiveness of depicting them in a deliberately unfinished, or imperfect, manner.

In Arles, Van Gogh was especially interested in how painting transfigures the ordinary world, not by accurate representation but by calculated exaggeration, and even by sometimes deliberately making things look ugly. The idea of imperfection was now fully integrated into his aesthetic theory. One result was that Van Gogh not only called attention to the imperfect condition of the suffering world that he depicted; he also made that world poignantly and vividly present through a calculated incorporation of imperfection within the work of art itself.

Van Gogh acknowledges that he has to make mistakes in order to learn (1), and he claims that for a person to be without imperfection is itself an imperfection (2). Later, with some ironic admiration, he applies this idea to Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson*, declaring that its only fault is that it is faultless (3).

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In his relationships with Kee and Sien, Van Gogh's thinking about imperfection took on a strong further significance. That is, although he acknowledges a personal weakness in falling for Kee, he insists also that this weakness is admirable (4). Then, after Kee rejected him and he took up with the unfortunate Sien, he interpreted his dedication to someone so destitute and forsaken as a sign of his own integrity (5). There is a certain appeal, he argues, in the very fadedness of such women as Sien (6), and there is something beautiful even in her ugliness (7). Although Sien is neither nice nor good—well, neither is Vincent (8–10). Still, even in an imperfect world, the ideal continues to attract (11), enhanced by the special poignancy that attends our human failure to attain it.

Van Gogh's experience with Sien and his insights into the beauty of imperfection were soon transferred to his thinking about art. Increasingly, he argued that imperfect and unfinished works can be all the more affecting because of their deliberately thematized shortcomings. His moral experience is thus transferred to his understanding of the aesthetic (12–15), and, interestingly, he makes the same point to Theo about writing, when he admits that he doesn't always find the right words and, as a writer, has no "claim to perfection" (16).

(1) If we but try to live uprightly, then we shall be all right, even though we shall inevitably experience true sorrow and genuine disappointments, and also probably make real mistakes and do wrong things, but it's certainly true that it is better to be fervent in spirit, even if one accordingly makes more mistakes, than narrow-minded and overly cautious. [143]

Amsterdam, Wednesday, 3 April 1878.
To Theo van Gogh

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(2) [. . .] it is good to have love one to another namely of the best kind, that believeth all things and hopeth all things, endureth all things and never faileth.

And not troubling ourselves too much if we have shortcomings, for he who has none has a shortcoming nonetheless, namely that he has none, and he who thinks he is perfectly wise would do well to start over from the beginning and become a fool. [143]

Amsterdam, Wednesday, 3 April 1878.
To Theo van Gogh

(3) It put me in mind of what Bürger or Thoré, I think, said about Rembrandt's Anatomy lesson. That painting's only fault is not to have any faults. [171]

Etten, Friday, 26 August 1881. *To Theo van Gogh*

(4) I *felt* with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my mind, "She and no other." You show weakness, passion, ignorance, worldly inexperience if you say "she and no other," some might suggest, "don't commit yourself, find a way round it." God forbid! May this weakness of mine be my strength, I want to be dependent on "her and no other" and even if I could, I shouldn't like to be independent of *her*. [180]

Etten, Monday, 7 November 1881. *To Theo van Gogh*

(5) Well, gentlemen, I'll tell you—you who set great store by manners and culture, and rightly so, provided it's the real thing—what is more cultured, more sensitive, more manly: to forsake a woman or to take on a forsaken one?

This winter I met a pregnant woman, abandoned by the man whose child she was carrying.

A pregnant woman who roamed the streets in winter—who had to earn her bread, you can imagine how.

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I took that woman as a model and worked with her the whole winter. I couldn't give her a model's full daily wage, but all the same, I paid her rent and have until now been able, thank God, to preserve her and her child from hunger and cold by sharing my own bread with her. [224]

The Hague, on or about Sunday, 7 May 1882.
To Theo van Gogh

(6) Theo, I find such infinite charm in that *je ne sais quoi* of withering, that drubbed by life quality. Ah! I found her to have a charm, I couldn't help seeing in her something by Feyen-Perrin, by Perugino. Look, I'm not exactly as innocent as a greenhorn, let alone a child in the cradle. It's not the first time I couldn't resist that feeling of affection, particularly love and affection for those women whom the clergymen damn so and superciliously despise and condemn from the pulpit. [193]

Etten, on or about Friday, 23 December 1881.
To Theo van Gogh

(7) I hear gossip about how I'm always together with her, but why should I let that bother me?—I've never had such a good assistant as this ugly??? wasted woman. To me she's beautiful, and I find in her exactly what I need. Life has given her a drubbing, and sorrow and adversity have left their mark on her—now I can make use of it.

If the earth hasn't been ploughed you can't do anything with it. She has been ploughed—so that in her I find more than in a whole batch of the unploughed. [232]

The Hague, Sunday, 28 May 1882.
To Anthon van Rappard

(8) She isn't kind, she isn't good, but neither am I, and serious attachment existed throughout everything as we were. [382]

The Hague, on or about Thursday, 6 September 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

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(9) But as one realizes more and more that one isn't perfect and has shortcomings, and that others do too, and thus there are continual difficulties that are the opposite of illusions, so I believe that those who don't lose heart and don't become apathetic as a result mature through it, and one must endure in order to mature. [310]

The Hague, Thursday, 8 February 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

(10) You and I likewise, we occasionally do something that's perhaps a sin, but after all we're not merciless and we do feel compassion, and precisely because we don't consider ourselves to be without fault and know how these things work, we don't scold fallen or weak women as the ministers do, as if it were all their own fault. [348]

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

(11) [. . .] imperfect and full of faults as we are, we're never justified in stifling the ideal, and what extends into the infinite as if it were no concern of ours. [341]

The Hague, on or about Wednesday, 9 May 1883.
To Anthon van Rappard

(12) In short, I want to reach the point where people say of my work, that man feels deeply and that man feels subtly. Despite my so-called coarseness—you understand—perhaps precisely because of it. [249]

The Hague, on or about Friday, 21 July 1882.
To Theo van Gogh

(13) So too with engraving—the reproduction through photogravure of the needlework school by Israëls, say, or the painting by Blommers or the one by Artz, is superb, as published by G&Cie. But if this process were to completely

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replace true engraving I think the ordinary engravings would eventually be missed, with all their shortcomings and imperfections. [295]

The Hague, on or about Friday, 22 December 1882.
To Theo van Gogh

(14) Or rather, my position is that for my part I'd rather see studies like these, even though they're unfinished and even if much is completely neglected, than drawings that have a subject, because through them I get a vivid memory of nature itself. [298]

The Hague, Wednesday, 3 January 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

(15) My aim is to do a drawing that not exactly everyone will understand, the *figure* expressed in its essence in simplified form, with deliberate disregard of those details that aren't part of the true character and are merely accidental. Thus it shouldn't, for example, be the portrait of Pa but rather the *type* of a poor village pastor going to visit a sick person. The same with the couple arm in arm by the beech hedge—the type of a man and woman who have grown old together and in whom love and loyalty have remained, rather than portraits of Pa and Ma, although I hope they'll pose for it. But they must know that it's serious, which they might not see for themselves if the likeness isn't exact. [361]

The Hague, on or about Wednesday, 11 July 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

(16) Because I myself am not one of those who don't fail in words either—such people would be perfect—and don't make the slightest claim to perfection. [351]

The Hague, on or about Thursday, 7 June 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

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In Drenthe, Van Gogh continues to emphasize the necessary imperfection of the human condition (17). Later, he writes that we should keep striving to do better (18) and should not fear making mistakes (19). Again, he argues that what holds true for people holds true for art, and neither the best people nor the best paintings are free of faults (20). Just so, his own work will remain imperfect because it will never be finished (21).

Van Gogh also insists with increasing vigour on the affective aspects of imperfection in a painting, where the right kind of misrepresentation can make a positive contribution by imparting a quality of life and energy that are missing from merely correct academic studies (22–25). Although a painting might be crude, it can be all the more heartbreaking because of that (26). The same is true in actual life, where, for instance, an apparently plain girl might have real beauty, such as Frans Hals would paint (27). We just have to learn to look in order to discover that a certain kind of imperfection hurls error into the shade (25, 28), even though the deliberate introduction of imperfection into a work of art can easily be mistaken for mere lack of technique (29).

In Arles, Van Gogh developed his thinking about the expressive vitality of imperfection by attending more closely to the means by which it is produced. For instance, exaggeration and simplification (30–33) can be used to distort the actual appearances of things in the interests of an enhanced aesthetic effect, so that beauty is discovered even in what at first seems ugly (31, 34). Admittedly, Van Gogh makes risky arguments here, because imperfection and ugliness are not commendable in themselves, and everything depends on how they are incorporated into the work. As he writes to Willemien—clarifying the basic idea on which he had insisted in The Hague—ordinary, imperfect things

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can be transfigured by the alchemy of art (35). In this process, art does not itself pretend to perfection; rather, it re-enacts within its own practice something of the imperfect world that it depicts.

(17) It's also true in life that the good is such a high light that it goes without saying that we can't reach *that*. If we set our spectrum lower and nonetheless try to remain bright and not lapse into lifelessness, this is the most reasonable thing to do, and makes life less impossible. [395]

Nieuw-Amsterdam, Friday, 12 October, or Saturday, 13 October 1883. *To Theo van Gogh*

(18) And if one has to see to it that one learns something by experience, it would be mightily pleasant if one was good and the world was good &c.—yes indeed—but it seems to me that one increasingly comes to realize that we ourselves are as bad as the world in general—of which we are a speck of dust—and the world as bad as we are—whether one does one's very best or acts more indifferently, it always becomes something else—works out differently—from what one actually wanted. But whether it turns out better or worse, happier or unhappier, doing *something* is better than doing *nothing*. [434]

Nuenen, between about Wednesday, 5 March, and about Sunday, 9 March 1884. *To Theo van Gogh*

(19) I tell you, if one wants to be active, one mustn't be afraid to do something wrong sometimes, not afraid to lapse into some mistakes. To be good—many people think that they'll achieve it by *doing no harm*—and that's a lie, and you said yourself in the past that it was a lie. That leads to stagnation, to mediocrity. [464]

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

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(20) It's neither the best paintings nor the best people—in which there are no errors or bias. [465]

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

(21) Still, what should I do with the painting? It's as big as last year's woman spinning. I've got it in the cottage again to do more things to it from life. I believe I'll finish it though—in a manner of speaking—for I myself will actually never think my own work finished or ready. [499]

Nuenen, on or about Saturday, 2 May 1885.
To Theo van Gogh

(22) At least it's a thing that I've felt, and one such that I would be able to point to defects and *certain errors* in it myself, just as well as other critics.

Yet there's a certain *life* in it, and perhaps more than in certain paintings in which there are no errors at all. [494]

Nuenen, on or about Saturday, 18 April 1885.
To Theo van Gogh

(23) When I see in the Salon issue, for instance, so many paintings which are impeccably drawn and painted in terms of technique, if one will, many of them bore me stiff all the same, because they don't make me feel or think anything, because they've evidently been made without a certain passionateness. And there's something passionate in what I'm sending you. [500]

Nuenen, Monday, 4 May, and Tuesday, 5 May 1885.
To Theo van Gogh

(24) But I want to point out something that's perhaps worth noting. All academic figures are constructed in the same way and, let's admit, one couldn't do better. Impeccable—without

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faults—you'll already have seen what I'm driving at—*also without giving us anything new* to discover.

Not so the figures of a Millet, a Lhermitte, a Régamey, a *Lhermitte*, a Daumier. They're also well constructed—*but not the way the academy teaches, after all*. [515]

Nuenen, on or about Tuesday, 14 July 1885.
To Theo van Gogh

(25) And—there'll be mistakes both in the drawing and in the colour or tone that a REALIST *wouldn't readily make*. Certain inaccuracies of which I'm convinced myself, which if need be I myself will sometimes point out more severely than other people. Inaccuracies sometimes, or imperfections.

And yet I believe that—*even if I keep producing work* in which people, if they want to look at it precisely from that angle and with that aim, can find *faults*—it will have a certain life of its own and *raison d'être* that will overwhelm those faults—in the eyes of those who appreciate character and *mulling things over in their minds*. [528]

Nuenen, on or about Tuesday, 18 August 1885.
To Anthon van Rappard

(26) One more effort that's far from finished—but one at least where I'm attempting something more heartbroken and therefore more heartbreaking. [634]

Arles, on or about Thursday, 28 June 1888.
To Theo van Gogh

(27) There were very good-looking girls there, the best-looking of whom was ugly. I mean, a figure that struck me like an amazingly beautiful Jordaens or Velázquez or—Goya—was one in black silk, probably some inn landlady or other, with

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an ugly and irregular face, but with vivacity and piquancy à la Frans Hals. [546]

Antwerp, on or about Sunday, 6 December 1885.
To Theo van Gogh

(28) But when Israëls or when Daumier or Lhermitte, say, draw a figure, one will *feel* the *form* of the body much more and yet—this is why I particularly want to include Daumier—the proportions will sometimes be almost *random*, the anatomy and structure often completely wrong *"in the eyes of the academicians."*

But it will live. And above all Delacroix, too.

It still isn't expressed properly. Tell Serret *that I would be desperate if my figures were* GOOD, tell him that I don't want them academically correct. Tell him that I mean that if one *photographs* a digger, then he would *certainly not be digging*. Tell him that I think Michelangelo's figures magnificent, even though the legs are definitely too long—the hips and buttocks too broad.Tell him that in my view Millet and Lhermitte are consequently the true painters, because they don't paint things as they are, examined drily and analytically, but as *they*, Millet, Lhermitte, Michelangelo, feel them. Tell him that my great desire is to learn to make such inaccuracies, such variations, reworkings, alterations of the reality, that it might become, very well—lies if you will—but—truer than the literal truth. [515]

Nuenen, on or about Tuesday, 14 July 1885.
To Theo van Gogh

(29) I won't go into generalities about technique, but I do foresee that, precisely when I become stronger in what I'll call *power*

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of expression than I am at this moment, people will say, not less but in fact *even more* than now, that I have *no* technique. [439]

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

(30) But imagining the terrific man I had to do, in the very furnace of harvest time, deep in the south. Hence the oranges, blazing like red-hot iron, hence the old gold tones, glowing in the darkness. Ah, my dear brother— —and the good folk will see only caricature in this exaggeration. [663]

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

(31) The idea of the sower still continues to haunt me. Exaggerated studies like the sower, like the night café now, *usually* seem to me atrociously ugly and bad, but when I'm moved by something, as here by this little article on Dostoevsky, then they're the only ones that seem to me to have a more important meaning. [680]

Arles, on or about Tuesday, 11 September 1888.
To Theo van Gogh

(32) The olive trees with white cloud and background of mountains, as well as the Moonrise and the Night effect—

These are exaggerations from the point of view of the arrangement, their lines are contorted like those of the ancient woodcuts. [805]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, on or about Friday,
20 September 1889. *To Theo van Gogh*

(33) While always working directly on the spot, I try to capture the essence in the drawing—then I fill the spaces demarcated by the outlines (expressed or not) but felt in every case, likewise with simplified tints, in the sense that everything that will be earth will share the same purplish tint, that the whole

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sky will have a blue tonality, that the greenery will either be blue greens or yellow greens, deliberately exaggerating the yellow or blue values in that case. [596]

Arles, on or about Thursday, 12 April 1888. *To Émile Bernard*

(34) Now as for recovering the money paid to the landlord through my painting, I'm not making a point of it, because the painting is one of the ugliest I've done. It's the equivalent, though different, of the potato eaters.

I've tried to express the terrible human passions with the red and the green. [676]

Arles, Saturday, 8 September 1888. *To Theo van Gogh*

(35) I've just finished the portrait of a woman of forty or more, insignificant. The face faded and tired, pockmarked, an olive-tinged, suntanned complexion, black hair.

A faded black dress adorned with a soft pink geranium, and the background in a neutral tone between pink and green.

Because I sometimes paint things like that—with as little and as much drama as a dusty blade of grass by the side of the road—it's right, as it seems to me, that I should have an unbounded admiration for De Goncourt, Zola, Flaubert, Maupassant, Huysmans. [804]

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

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CHAPTER THREE

What Holds at the Centre

Van Gogh frequently repudiated what he took to be restrictions imposed on his liberty, whether by religion, the academy, or social convention. Yet he was far from being an anarchist and he believed in co-operation, both in the production of art and in the making of a good society. Also, as we have seen, in learning his trade as a painter, he subjected himself to a highly disciplined regimen, thereby imposing severe restrictions on himself. For Van Gogh, then, freedom lay in the ability to make self-determining choices and in the anchoring of these choices in an all-consuming dedication and patient practice. Conceived in this way, freedom is at once a liberating and a grounding experience, and Van Gogh frequently depicts the stable boundaries of a true home and the free flight of the creative spirit as interdependent. He uses images of cages, imprisonment, confinement, freezing, petrification, hardness, armour, and the like to represent the tyrannical prejudices that impose negative constraints upon freedom. By contrast, the flight of imagination, the adventurous sea-voyage of discovery, and the compensatory, safe, and restorative enclosure of home are the hallmarks of true liberation, which, in turn, Van Gogh

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maintained is inseparable from love. After his failed relationships with Kee and Sien, he argued that without love, one cannot be an artist, and towards the end of his life, he acknowledged that the love of people is more important even than art.

Not surprisingly, Van Gogh placed a high value on the free flight of the creative imagination, which, he says, takes one out of oneself into an exalted state of self-forgetfulness. In turn, this exalted state is dependent on learning the techniques of painting and drawing "by heart," so that one can lose oneself in the creative moment. Yet Van Gogh knew that a free-ranging imagination could also be dangerous—a source of illusion and deception as well as of inspiration. When he became mentally ill, he was deeply concerned about confusing his hallucinations with the real world, and as a painter, he had always been wary about working from imagination alone. Throughout his career, he found reassurance through contact with actual objects, even though he allowed that the creative imagination might distort the appearance of things in the interests of producing an effective painting.

Although freedom, love, and imagination were closely interconnected for Van Gogh, his treatment of these topics also registers a deeply felt understanding of their ambivalence. As we see, freedom requires the constraints of self-dedication; love can exercise its own kind of tyranny; imagination can be revelatory but also a source of delusion.

Freedom

The paradox that freedom requires commitments that in turn impose limits on freedom is central to Van Gogh's reflections on this topic. As he well knew, freedom is exercised within the

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bounds of a particular undertaking, with specific requirements and obligations.

Insofar as freedom is non-coercive (and uncoerced), Van Gogh typically associates it in his writing with the flight of birds, sea journeys, and the creative imagination. Yet these activities are not safely undertaken without skill and knowledge—the necessary limitations by which freedom is both enabled and enhanced. He also represents the condition of being unfree with images of forcible restraint such as cages, imprisonment, and oppressive systems of various kinds. Thus, he sets up a counterpoint between the limits entailed by freely undertaken commitments and the restraints imposed merely to effect curtailment or suppression.

Van Gogh realized that the ideal combination of freedom and equality that he hoped would occur "after the revolution" was a utopian dream. Still, he insists on the value of working with others in the interests of a future that he knew could be better imagined than realized. He returns often to the uncertainly defined space between the ideal and the actual, and in this context, his reflections on the meaning of home are especially interesting. On the one hand, Van Gogh thought of home as providing particular material comforts for the creative adventurer returning from the dangerous freedoms of a sea voyage or a flight that braves the perils of a storm. On the other hand, he treats home as a state of mind, as when he talks about being homesick for the land of paintings or being a cosmopolitan who is at home anywhere and tied to no place in particular.

The various oppositions by which Van Gogh explores the question of freedom are thus best seen as a set of binaries, each of which carries a trace of the other: liberty-constraint, commitment-obligation, journey-home, ideal-actual, local-cosmopolitan. The result is a vivid and captivating evocation of how we are required

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constantly to negotiate the difficult path between freedom and necessity.

From his earliest surviving letters until those written at the end of his religious phase in 1880–81, Van Gogh returns often to what home means to him. As a young man, he had aspirations to be a cosmopolitan traveller. And yet in the years after he left his native Netherlands, he was homesick; his letters are filled with poignantly solicitous enquiries and concerns about family members left behind. Yet the call to new freedoms and new horizons also rings out clearly, as Van Gogh seeks to fashion a new kind of home, whether "the world as my mother country" (1), or a place of fellowship (2), or "the country of paintings" (3), or even "everything that surrounds you" as well as all that "you have loved" (4). Later, he declares straight out that "painting is a home" (5)—in contrast to his actual parental home in Nuenen, which had been the scene of a major crisis in Vincent's relationship with his family, culminating in his father's death there in 1885. When he subsequently went to Antwerp, Vincent expresses to Theo his relief at being free from the "family stranger than strangers" that his own family has become (6). Still, he admits also to being distressed at this separation from the home to which he had been closely attached.

In counterpoint to the restrictions that we know Vincent felt were imposed by his family, he imagines journeying into the open sea. As a result, he experiences "the secret of the deep"—"the intimate, serious charm of the Ocean," which is also that "of the artist's life" (7), a life that, because free, is truly capable of sustaining love (8). Although the sea journey is dangerous, it brings serenity, which for Van Gogh is everywhere also a hallmark of freedom (9).

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In 1877, Van Gogh likened freedom to the song of a lark (10) and, in 1880, to a bird longing to fly free (11). But he realized that impediments to such freedom lie everywhere. They might be the steel armour of convention and prejudice (12), the entrapments of circumstance (13), the confinements of systems and schools (14), or, in general, whatever prevents him from acting in ways that are not harmful to others (15). Specifically, he objects to his father's icy coldness and hardness (16), which is equated to "the black ray" (17), the "everlasting no" that extinguishes the higher reason, a harbinger of freedom (18, 19).

Throughout his life, Van Gogh was convinced that liberation is best effected by people working together, because the power of goodness is enhanced by co-operation (20). He thought that the revolution (when it came) would liberate people and ensure their equality (21). Yet he was also skeptical about the effectiveness of actual revolutions (22), and he settled instead for friendship and co-operation (23) as the most effective means of providing a foretaste of the utopian free society to which he aspired and of which he thought painting a harbinger. In Arles, he hoped that an artists' co-operative would be a new kind of family, a new home that would realize his ideal of serenity and freedom (24). But, yet again, Van Gogh's utopian aspiration became a means for him to discover the negative contrast by which the world opposes utopianism in general. His confinement in St. Rémy was a reminder of the failed artists' co-operative in Arles, but it was also a new awakening—now, as at the beginning of his artistic career—to a special camaraderie among his confined and suffering companions.

(1) I have a rich life here, "having nothing, yet possessing all things." Sometimes I start to believe that I'm gradually

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beginning to turn into a true cosmopolitan, meaning not a Dutchman, Englishman or Frenchman, but simply a man.

With the world as my mother country, meaning that tiny spot in the world where we're set down. But we aren't there yet, but I follow after, if that I may apprehend.

And as our ideal that which Mauve calls "that's it." [18]

London, Monday, 9 February 1874.
To Caroline van Stockum-Haanebeek

(2) The country and the people here appeal to me more each day, one has here a familiar feeling as though on the heath or in the dunes, there's something simple and kind-hearted about the people. Those who have left here are homesick for their country, just as, conversely, foreigners who are homesick may come to feel at home here. [150]

Wasmes, between Tuesday, 4 March, and Monday, 31 March 1879. *To Theo van Gogh*

(3) When I was in different surroundings, in surroundings of paintings and works of art, you well know that I then took a violent passion for those surroundings that went as far as enthusiasm. And I don't repent it, and now, far from the country again, I often feel homesick for the country of paintings. [155]

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

(4) You'll find in Souvestre's Le philosophe sous les toits how a man of the people, a simple workman, very wretched, if you will, imagined his mother country, "Perhaps you have never thought about what your mother country is, he continued, putting a hand on my shoulder; it's everything that surrounds you, everything that raised and nourished you, everything you have loved. This countryside that you see, these houses,

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these trees, these young girls, laughing as they pass by over there, that's your mother country!" [155]

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

(5) But otherwise—painting and, to my mind, particularly painting peasant life, gives peace of mind, even though one has a lot of scraping along and wretchedness on the *outside* of life. I mean painting is a *home*, and one doesn't have that *homesickness*, that peculiar thing that Hennebeau had. [509]

Nuenen, on or about Monday, 22 June 1885. *To Theo van Gogh*

(6) But anyway—the family stranger than strangers—is *one* fact—Holland behind me. THAT COMES AS QUITE A RELIEF. You see that's my only feeling, and yet I had been so attached that at first the estrangement drove me mad, as it were.

But I've seen through it all too well to hesitate. And I've recovered my self-confidence and serenity. [551]

Antwerp, on or about Saturday, 2 January 1886. *To Theo van Gogh*

(7) If, on the contrary, you now persevere even *more*, you seek your own diligence, your own *craft* even *more* and say, I won't hesitate, I'll risk it, I'll push off from the shore into the open sea, you'll get a certain sombre seriousness straightaway—something mightily serious rises up from inside—one looks at the calm shore, very well, it's very pleasant—but the secret of the deep, the intimate, serious charm of the Ocean, of the artist's life—with the SOMETHING ON HIGH above it—has taken hold of you. [396]

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

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(8) Now you'll say that I'm actually a headstrong person and that I'm in fact preaching a doctrine.

Well, if you want to take it that way, so be it, I don't necessarily have anything against it, I'm not ashamed of my feelings, I'm not ashamed of being a man, of having principles and faith. But where do I want to drive people, especially myself? 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]

Etten, Monday, 21 November 1881.
To Anthon van Rappard

(9) [. . .] sometimes when cares weigh heavily on me it's as if I were on a ship in a storm. Anyway, though I know very well that the sea holds dangers and one can drown in it, I still love the sea deeply and despite all the perils of the future I have a certain serenity. [307]

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

(10) And yet we are so attached to that old life because there is cheerfulness to counter despondency, and our heart and our soul are gladdened, just as the lark who cannot help singing in the morning, even if our soul is sometimes cast down within us and is disquieted in us. [117]

Amsterdam, Wednesday, 30 May 1877.
To Theo van Gogh

(11) In the springtime a bird in a cage knows very well that there's something he'd be good for; he feels very clearly that there's something to be done but he can't do it; what it is he can't clearly remember, and he has vague ideas and says to himself, "the others are building their nests and making their little ones and raising the brood," and he bangs his head against the

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bars of his cage. And then the cage stays there and the bird is mad with suffering. "Look, there's an idler," says another passing bird—that fellow's a sort of man of leisure. And yet the prisoner lives and doesn't die; nothing of what's going on within shows outside, he's in good health, he's rather cheerful in the sunshine. But then comes the season of migration. A bout of melancholy—but, say the children who look after him, he's got everything that he needs in his cage, after all—but he looks at the sky outside, heavy with storm clouds, and within himself feels a rebellion against fate. I'm in a cage, I'm in a cage, and so I lack for nothing, you fools! Me, I have everything I need! Ah, for pity's sake, freedom, to be a bird like other birds! [155]

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

(12) You must know that it's the same with evangelists as with artists. There's an old, often detestable, tyrannical academic school, the abomination of desolation, in fact—men having, so to speak, a suit of armour, a steel breastplate of prejudices and conventions. Those men, when they're in charge of things, have positions at their disposal, and by a system of circumlocution seek to support their protégés, and to exclude the natural man from among them. [155]

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

(13) Then there's the other idler, the idler truly despite himself, who is gnawed inwardly by a great desire for action, who does nothing because he finds it impossible to do anything since he's imprisoned in something, so to speak, because he doesn't have what he would need to be productive, because the inevitability of circumstances is reducing him to this point. Such a person doesn't always know himself what he could do,

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but he feels by instinct, I'm good for something, even so! I feel I have a *raison d'être!* I know that I could be a quite different man! [155]

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

(14) As far as Mauve is concerned—yes of course I'm very fond of M., and sympathize with him, I like his work very much—and I consider myself fortunate to learn something from him, but I can't shut myself up in a system or school any more than Mauve himself can, and in addition to Mauve and Mauve's work, I also like others who are very different and work very differently. [199]

The Hague, Sunday, 8 January, or Monday, 9 January 1882. *To Theo van Gogh*

(15) Know, in short, that I believe I'm allowed to do anything that doesn't harm anyone else, and that freedom, to which not just I but, in my view, every human being has the full, self-evident right—that freedom, I say, I have a duty to uphold as being *the only position* that I have to uphold. I really do ask: will I harm someone with this or that before I act? But unless people really prove to me that I would harm someone with something that I do, I don't have to refrain from doing it. So, I who don't coerce also don't want to be coerced—I who respect others' freedoms also insist on my own. [418]

Nuenen, on or about Friday, 28 December 1883. *To Theo van Gogh*

(16) [. . .] there's a certain steely hardness and icy coldness, something in Pa that grates like dry sand, glass or tin. [410]

Nuenen, on or about Friday, 7 December 1883. *To Theo van Gogh*

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(17) My youth has been austere and cold, and sterile under the influence of the black ray. And, brother, your youth too, in fact. Old chap—I don't want to flatter you this time. Anyway, but I don't want to blame anyone for it but myself. All the same, the black ray is unspeakably cruel—unspeakably. And at this moment I feel as many pent-up tears about many things as there are in a figure by Mantegna! [403]

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

(18) To me Tersteeg will I think remain *the everlasting* NO.

Not only I but almost all who seek their own way have something like this behind or beside them as a perpetual discourager. Sometimes one is burdened by it and feels wretched and, so to speak, overwhelmed.

But, as said, it's the everlasting no. Against that, one finds an everlasting *yes* in the example of men of character, and sees *collier's faith* in them. [358]

The Hague, Monday, 2 July 1883. *To Theo van Gogh*

(19) Live—do something—and that's more enjoyable, that's more positive.

In short. A kind of taking society as it is but feeling oneself completely free, not believing in one's own intellect but in "*reason*"; believing my own intellect, although I don't confuse that with "reason"—(my intellect is human, reason is divine, but there's a link between the one and the other), my own conscience is the compass that shows me the way, although I know that it doesn't work exactly accurately. [400]

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

(20) [. . .] the influence exercised by a good person sometimes extends a long way. The comparison with leaven is well taken.

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Two good people—man and woman united—wanting and intending the same, steeped in the same earnestness, what couldn't they achieve! I've thought about that often. For by uniting, the force for good is not only doubled but doubled many times—as if raised to a higher power, to put it in mathematical terms. [331]

The Hague, on or about Wednesday, 21 March 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

(21) For me personally, there's a cardinal point of distinction between *before* and *after* the revolution—the reversal of the social position of the woman, and the collaboration one wants between men and women with equal rights, with equal freedom. [473]

Nuenen, on or about Saturday, 6 December 1884.
To Theo van Gogh

(22) And particularly the one you mentioned, Turgenev, and Daudet—they don't work without a goal or without looking towards the other side.

Only they all, and rightly, avoid prophesying utopias and are pessimists in so far as if one analyzes, one sees so terribly in the history of this century the way the revolutions fail, no matter how nobly they begin.

You see, where one gets support is when one doesn't always have to walk alone with one's feelings and thoughts, when one works and thinks in a group of people together. [560]

Antwerp, on or about Tuesday, 9 February 1886.
To Theo van Gogh

(23) The more energy the better. And in hard times—one must especially seek a way out in friendship and collaboration. [558]

Antwerp, on or about Thursday, 4 February 1886.
To Theo van Gogh

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(24) There is and there remains and it always comes back at times, in the midst of the artistic life, a yearning for—real life—ideal and not attainable.

And we sometimes lack the desire to throw ourselves head first into art again and to build ourselves up for that. We know we're cab-horses and that it'll be the same cab we're going to be harnessed to again. And so we don't feel like doing it and we'd prefer to live in a meadow with a sun, a river, the company of other horses who are also free, and the act of generation. [611]

Arles, on or about Sunday, 20 May 1888.
To Theo van Gogh

Love

For Van Gogh, love liberates us from the prison house of "prejudice, misunderstanding, fatal ignorance of one thing or another, distrust, false shame" (155/1:199). During his religious phase, and then while he was infatuated with Kee, Van Gogh remained an idealist about love, but when he took up with Sien he encountered head-on the daily challenge of actually getting along with her and her children. Later, in Nuenen, his disastrous relationship with one of his father's parishioners, Margot Begemann, confirmed how difficult it was for him to find the love he desired. In the affecting struggle, recorded in his letters, between a continuing belief in the redemptive power of love—a belief shaped especially by his reading of Jules Michelet—and his increasing realization of how severe were the impediments to its realization, Van Gogh extended his understanding of love itself, equating it eventually to the "germinating force" in nature.

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After he went to Paris in 1886, Van Gogh increasingly proclaimed his love of painting as the central concern of his life. In his last years, however, he became concerned that his dedication to art had prevented him from finding the personal kind of love that he had once desired and that he now realized was more important to him even than painting.

During his religious phase, Van Gogh maintained that the love of many things is the way to God (1, 2) and that loving things by way of a "high serious intimate sympathy" and with "intelligence" (2) and "serious attachment" frees us from prejudice, ignorance, and distrust (3). Later, he virtually identifies love with freedom, insisting that without love there is no liberty (4).

During his infatuation with Kee, Van Gogh's high opinion of love is strongly foregrounded, as he proclaims his dedication (5), his sense of discovery (6), and his total commitment (7). Even being an artist seems impossible to him without love (8).Yet Van Gogh also realized that this kind of intensity might lead to dangerous extremes. He explains to Theo that the passions of youth are like the sails of a small boat catching too much wind and threatening to capsize the vessel. Still, he prefers this condition to the "despair" of those whose excessive prudence has prevented their sails from catching any wind at all (9). The main warning here is against "extremes"—either giving or receiving too much (10). Repeatedly, Van Gogh insists that love is a moral force counteracting the lovelessness exemplified by his parents' religion. Without love, he writes, life is sinful (11).

(1) It is good to love as much as one can, for therein lies true strength, and he who loves much does much and is capable of

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much, and that which is done with love is well done. [143]

Amsterdam, Wednesday, 3 April 1878.
To Theo van Gogh

(2) [. . .] I'm always inclined to believe that the best way of knowing God is to love a great deal. Love that friend, that person, that thing, whatever you like, you'll be on the right path to knowing more thoroughly, afterwards; that's what I say to myself. But you must love with a high, serious intimate sympathy, with a will, with intelligence, and you must always seek to know more thoroughly, better, and more. That leads to God, that leads to unshakeable faith. [155]

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

(3) You know, what makes the prison disappear is every deep, serious attachment. To be friends, to be brothers, to love; that opens the prison through sovereign power, through a most powerful spell. But he who doesn't have that remains in death. But where sympathy springs up again, life springs up again.

And the prison is sometimes called Prejudice, misunderstanding, fatal ignorance of this or that, mistrust, false shame. [155]

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

(4) But I seriously think that your attention, meaning your best, your most concentrated attention, should be focused at this time on the development of a vital force not yet fully awakened in you: Love. Your best efforts must be directed at that wing which is the weakest, the least developed in you. For truly, it is of all powers the most powerful, it makes us only seem to be dependent—the truth is, there is no true liberty, no true freedom, no irrefutable independence, than

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through it. Without it, sooner or later we fall. With it, we win in the end. [189]

Etten, Wednesday, 23 November 1881.
To Theo van Gogh

(5) Love is indeed something positive, something strong, something so real that it's just as impossible for someone who loves to take back that feeling as it is to take one's own life. If you reply to this by saying "but there are in fact people who take their own life," then I simply answer: I don't really think that I'm a man with such inclinations.

I've acquired a great appetite for life and I'm very glad that I love. My life and my love are one. [180]

Etten, Monday, 7 November 1881. *To Theo van Gogh*

(6) I think that nothing sets us down in reality as much as a true love. And he who is set down in reality, is he on the wrong path? I think not. But what should I compare it to, that strange feeling, that strange discovery of "loving"? For it's truly the discovery of a new hemisphere in a person's life when he falls seriously in love. [180]

Etten, Monday, 7 November 1881. *To Theo van Gogh*

(7) If you ever love, don't refuse to commit yourself, or I'd rather say, if you ever love, you won't think of not committing yourself. [182]

Etten, Thursday, 10 November, or Friday,
11 November 1881. *To Theo van Gogh*

(8) *You* will understand what I tell you, that to work and be an artist one needs *love*. At least someone who strives for feeling in his work must first feel and live with his heart. [186]

Etten, Friday, 18 November 1881. *To Theo van Gogh*

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(9) I maintain that love, if it develops, fully develops, produces people of better character than the opposing passion Ambition & Co.

But precisely because love is so strong, we are, especially in our youth (I mean now, 17, 18, 20 years old), usually not strong enough to maintain a straight course.

The passions are the ship's sails, you see. And someone of 20 who gives himself over completely to his feelings catches too much wind and his boat fills with water and—and he founders or ..... he surfaces again.

On the other hand, someone who hoists the sail of Ambition & Co. and none other, sails through life on a straight course without mishap, without rocking the boat until—until at last—at last circumstances arise in which he notices, I don't have enough sail—then he says, I would give everything, everything I have, for one more square metre of sail and I don't have it! He despairs. [183]

Etten, Saturday, 12 November 1881. *To Theo van Gog*h

(10) It is written, thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. One can turn aside to the right or to the left, and that's just as bad.

It seems to me, exchanging everything for everything is the real, true thing, that's *it*, and now both extremes, first asking everything without giving anything, second asking nothing and giving everything.

Two wholly—fatal—bad things. Both damned bad. [183]

Etten, Saturday, 12 November 1881. *To Theo van Gogh*

(11) Clergymen call us sinners, conceived and born in sin. Bah! I think that damned nonsense. Is it a *sin* to love, to need love, not to be able to do without love? I consider a life without love a sinful condition and an immoral condition. [193]

Etten, on or about Friday, 23 December 1881.
To Theo van Gogh

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Van Gogh realized that his love for Sien was different from the love he had for Kee: "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, especially after being disappointed in that first passion" (234/2:84). He explains to Van Rappard that although disappointment in love can inflict an incurable wound, a new kind of sympathy might emerge for some other, equally unhappy person (12). Van Gogh does not name names (Van Rappard was not sufficiently a confidant), but he is clearly writing here about Kee and Sien.

Van Gogh realized that love isn't just a feeling (13), nor, he says, is it always as delightful as picking strawberries in spring (14). Rather, it has to be tested and it can be depressing and difficult (14). Still, he remains positive about love (15), and he affirms the irreducible sacredness of a personal love relationship beyond the inquisitive eyes of others (16). Despite hardships, love is as natural and enduring as the sea (17), and, like the sea, it ebbs and flows but does not die (18). In its essence, it is untouched by the vicissitudes of life, and it makes a person clearer, more active, and better able to work (19).

Love also calls for discernment, and Van Gogh explains the different appeal of a "true love," such as is offered by Dame Nature, and a "mistress," such as the Academy (20). "Let us love what we love" (21), he advises Van Rappard, and let us give ourselves wholeheartedly to whatever task fulfills us, mindful that anyone who does not do so is doomed (22).

The scope of this broad view of love differs from the similarly all-encompassing view expressed in the letters written during Van Gogh's religious phase, because his early idealism has been chastened by experience. And so he corrects the idea that love

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cannot die, affirming instead that its revival gives strength (23), just as its difficulties can be energizing (24). Referring to Tolstoi's call for a new religion, he recommends a renovated love as an antidote to suffering and despair (25).

Towards the end of his life, Van Gogh again affirmed the broad view that love is the source of vitality itself, equating it to the "power to germinate" in a grain of wheat (26). In 1887, he writes that love is more important than art (27) and that he is saddened, at age thirty-five, to think that he might never have a wife and children. Writing to Bernard in 1888, he acknowledges that art has indeed cost him love, and yet he allows himself also to hint at another, scarcely imaginable transfiguration that might bring his love of art to some further glorious fruition, as improbable and yet as real as the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly (28).

(12) [. . .] suppose someone experiences a disappointment through wounded love *so* deep that he's *calmly* desperate and desolate—such a condition is possible and is something like *white*-hot steel or iron. To feel that one is irrevocably and absolutely disappointed, and to carry the awareness of that in one like a mortal, or at least irreparable, wound, and to still go about one's business with an impassive face.

Would you find it inexplicable if someone in this state met someone else who was deeply unhappy, and perhaps also irreparably unhappy, and felt a special sympathy, quite unwittingly and without himself seeking it? And if this sympathy or love or tie, arising from chance as it were, were nonetheless strong and remained so? If "love" is dead, couldn't "charity" then be alive and well? [309]

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

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(13) The more one loves, the more one will act, I believe, for love that is only a feeling I wouldn't even consider to be love. [345]

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

(14) By that I mean that you feel what love is best when you sit beside a sickbed, sometimes without a penny in your pocket. This isn't picking strawberries in the spring—that only lasts a few days and most months are drab and more sombre, but in that sombreness one learns something new. [228]

The Hague, on or about Tuesday, 16 May 1882.
To Theo van Gogh

(15) I would like something more succinct, something simpler, something sounder; I would like more soul and more love and more heart. [293]

The Hague, on or about Monday, 11 December 1882.
To Theo van Gogh

(16) *There is love between her and me, and promises of mutual loyalty between her and me.*

There may be no tampering with this, Theo, for it's the holiest thing there is in life. [247]

The Hague, Tuesday, 18 July 1882. *To Theo van Gogh*

(17) What a riddle life is, and love is a riddle within a riddle. Staying the same is the only thing that it certainly doesn't do in a literal sense, but on the other hand the changes are a kind of ebb and flow and make no difference to the sea itself. [310]

The Hague, Thursday, 8 February 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

(18) [. . .] no, no, there's a wilting and a budding again in love as in the whole of nature, but not a dying for ever. There's ebb and

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flow, but the sea remains the sea. And in love, whether for a woman or for art, for instance, there are times of exhaustion and powerlessness, but not a lasting disenchantment.

I regard love—as I do friendship—not only as a feeling but chiefly as an *action*—and particularly when it involves working and is an effort, it has another side of fatigue and powerlessness.

Where people love sincerely and in good faith, they are blessed I believe, although that doesn't dispel difficult times. [312]

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

(19) It seemed to you perhaps as if the sun shone brighter and everything had acquired a new charm. At any rate, I believe this is always the effect of a serious love, and that's a delightful thing. And I believe those who say that one doesn't think clearly then are mistaken, for it's then that one thinks very clearly and does more than otherwise. And love is something eternal, it changes its aspect but not its foundation. And there's the same difference between someone who loves and the same man before as between a lamp that is lit and one that isn't. *The lamp was there and was a good lamp, but now it gives light as well and has its proper function.* And one becomes calmer regarding many things, and precisely because of that one is more fit for one's work. [330]

The Hague, Sunday, 18 March 1883. *To Theo van Gogh*

(20) However, without being aware of it yourself, without knowing it, that academy is a mistress who prevents a more serious, a warmer, a more fertile love from awakening in you. Let the mistress go and fall madly in love with your true love, Dame Nature or Reality.

I've also fallen in love like that, madly in love with a Dame Nature or Reality, and have felt so happy ever since, even

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though she's still resisting me strenuously and doesn't want me yet, and often raps my knuckles if I dare over-hastily to think of her as mine. So I'm far from saying that I've already got her, but I'm courting her and seeking the key to her heart despite the painful knuckle-rapping. [184]

Etten, Saturday, 12 November 1881.
To Anthon van Rappard

(21) And as regards that doctrine I'm preaching. That tenet of mine, "people, let us love what we love," is based on an axiom. I thought it unnecessary to mention that axiom, but now for the sake of clarity I'll spell it out. That axiom is "People, we love." [190]

Etten, Wednesday, 23 November 1881.
To Anthon van Rappard

(22) First, a man who flatly refuses to love what he loves drives himself into the ground. [190]

Etten, Wednesday, 23 November 1881.
To Anthon van Rappard

(23) Moreover, I have faith that where love is true it doesn't die, at least not when one acts with reason at the same time. Yet I would like to cross that out as well, because it's not right. For love can indeed die, in a way—but there's something like a power of renaissance in love. [337]

The Hague, on or about Saturday, 21 April 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

(24) Love always causes trouble, that's true, but in its favour, it energizes. [434]

Nuenen, between about Wednesday, 5 March, and about Sunday, 9 March 1884. *To Theo van Gogh*

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(25) He [Tolstoi] believes—I've perhaps written you it already, in non-violent revolution, through the need for love and religious feeling which must manifest itself in people as a reaction against scepticism and desperate and appalling suffering. [687]

Arles, Tuesday, 25 September 1888. *To Theo van Gogh*

(26) 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. [574]

Paris, late October 1887. *To Willemien van Gogh*

(27) It was Richepin who said somewhere

the love of art makes us lose real love.

I find that terribly true, but on the other hand real love puts you right off art.

And sometimes I already feel old and broken, but still sufficiently in love to stop me being enthusiastic about painting.

To succeed you have to have ambition, and ambition seems absurd to me. [572]

Paris, between about Saturday, 23 July, and Monday, 25 July 1887. *To Theo van Gogh*

(28) Nevertheless—our own real life—is humble indeed—our life as painters.

Stagnating under the stupefying yoke of the difficulties of a craft almost impossible to practise on this so hostile planet, on the surface of which "love of art makes one lose real love."

Since, however, nothing stands in the way—of the supposition that on the other innumerable planets and suns there may also be lines and shapes and colours—we're still at liberty—to retain a relative serenity as to the possibilities of

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> doing painting in better and changed conditions of existence—an existence changed by a phenomenon perhaps no cleverer and no more surprising than the transformation of the caterpillar into a butterfly, of the white grub into a cockchafer. [632]
>
> Arles, Tuesday, 26 June 1888. *To Émile Bernard*

Imagination

For Van Gogh as a painter, imagination is especially the means by which a preliminary study is transformed into a work of art. This process does not occur only as a result of deliberate effort, intention, or desire; nonetheless, without a foundation in technique laid down by conscientious practice, there will be no adequate means to express the spontaneous, visionary insight that imagination provides. In itself, imagination is irreducible, placing us "in the midst of magic" (726/4:376), and Rembrandt, whom Van Gogh placed among the greatest of painters, is also the "magician of magicians" (550/3:334).

Van Gogh is keen also to insist that the creative imagination is not escapist, and he was constantly on guard against what he calls "just talking hot air" (396/3:36), by which he means mere flights of fancy insufficiently anchored by direct reference to the actual world. He worried that this escapist kind of imagination would lead eventually to delusion (or, in his own case, to hallucinations). Even so, he realized that the creative imagination takes liberties and that the best paintings do not merely reproduce the natural appearances of things. Strictly accurate descriptions are not art, and Van Gogh deplored the kind of academicism that puts too high a value on correctness and verisimilitude.

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Memory is also a significant concept in Van Gogh's thinking about imagination, and he refers to memory in two main ways. The first corresponds to the escapist aspect of fancy, or "talking hot air." In this sense, random mental images are gathered and combined in the mind's eye, and Van Gogh objected to paintings being made from memory in this fashion. In the second sense, memory is connected to the value of careful, repeated study. As a result of what Van Gogh calls learning "by heart," techniques for depicting people and objects become so imprinted in memory that they do not have to be deliberately attended to in the heat of the creative moment. The way is then left open for imagination to effect its "magical" transfiguration of mere technical accuracy into real painting.

For Van Gogh, creativity is frequently accompanied also by a sense of being taken out of oneself. As we might expect, he was careful to distinguish between the terrifying loss of self that could be an effect of mental illness, on the one hand, and a self-transcending, creative freedom, on the other. One criterion that he used to help distinguish between these opposites is that creative self-forgetfulness is accompanied by serenity, which, in turn (as we have seen), is a marker both of love and freedom.

Throughout his painting career, Van Gogh insisted on working directly from the model—whether a person or an object. This preference reflects his concern to anchor imagination in some recognizable aspect of the common world, as he thought all good painting should do. But he was careful to maintain a balance between the contribution made by his models and by his imagination (1, 2). Too much attention to "the figures" can dampen imagination (3), which must be allowed free expression (4), and Van Gogh points to Rembrandt as an example of how

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imagination's transcendence of nature is "a revelation," even though Rembrandt's departure from strict verisimilitude may seem exaggerated (5). Just so, simplification, when it is inspired by imagination, can catch "the expression in a figure" (6) beyond what a stricter verisimilitude could provide, and "instinct—inspiration—impulse" often are better guides than some "calculating" people might think (7).

Yet Van Gogh insists also that technique, practice, and the patient production of studies in which "no creative process may take place" (8–10) help to keep imagination grounded in the world of common experience. At one point he even worries that Theo will think his letters are merely "a trick of my imagination" and his words "without foundation" (11). What applies to painting applies here also to writing, and Van Gogh shows that as a writer, he was self-conscious in assessing what we might justifiably describe as the literary impact of his words.

Van Gogh returns frequently to the idea that the creative imagination takes one out of oneself and into an enhanced, dreamlike state and that to lose oneself in a task is the "surest way" to be creative (12). The great painters "forget themselves in— being true" (13), and for Van Gogh, such an experience is exalting (14). He describes the loss of self in the creative moment as dreamlike (15), the result being that painting is less difficult than the tedious work of making studies (16). Nonetheless, studies enable a painter to learn "by heart," which in turn enables the creative imagination to soar while remaining grounded in nature (17).

Under Gauguin's influence, Van Gogh was for a brief time persuaded to let imagination have free play (18–20), but the experiment failed to convince him, and he ended up accusing Gauguin of being irresponsibly "led by his imagination" (21). One reason why Van Gogh was concerned to keep imagination anchored in the world of recognizable objects was his own fear of falling prey

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to illusion, and during his mental illness, he did in fact confuse the real and the imaginary (22). Still, he found that a truly creative imagination is an effective antidote to delusion, and with this reassurance in mind, he planned to paint, for instance, a bookshop that would be "a figurative source of light" (23). Until the end of his life, he continued to believe in the blessedness of the mysterious "ray from on high" to provide inspiration for the production of beautiful things, such as his sunflowers and cypresses (24). As he explains to Bernard, only by developing our imaginations can we discover the creative freedom that will enable the making of art that offers consolation to a suffering humanity (25).

(1) I see no other way than to work with models. One very definitely shouldn't snuff out one's power of imagination, but it's precisely the constant looking at nature and the struggle with it that sharpens the power of imagination and makes it more accurate. [272]

The Hague, Sunday, 15 October 1882. *To Theo van Gogh*

(2) Two things that remain eternally true and complement each other, in my view are: don't snuff out your inspiration and power of imagination, don't become a slave to the model; and, the other, take a model and study it, for otherwise your inspiration won't take on material form. [280]

The Hague, Sunday, 5 November 1882.
To Theo van Gogh

(3) Do you remember that in the very beginning I once sent you sketches of a sort, "Winter Tale," Shadows passing, etc.?

You said at the time that you thought the action of the figures was insufficiently expressed—do you remember? Now that was entirely true, but for a few years now I've been toiling solely on the figure in order to get some action and also some structure into it. And precisely because of that toil, I

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had rather lost my enthusiasm for composing and for making my imagination work once more. [347]

The Hague, on or about Wednesday, 30 May 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

(4) The creative power can't be held back, what one feels must come out. [348]

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

(5) [. . .] one finds the same thing in Rembrandt's portraits, for example—it's more than nature, more like a revelation. And it seems good to me to respect that, and to keep quiet when it's often said that it's overdone or a manner. [361]

The Hague, on or about Wednesday, 11 July 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

(6) Simplifying the figures is something that very much preoccupies me. Anyway, you'll see some for yourself among the figures I'll show you. If I went to Brabant, it should certainly not be an excursion or pleasure trip, it seems to me, but a short period of very hard work at lightning speed. Speaking of expression in a figure, I'm becoming more and more persuaded that it lies not so much in the features as in the whole manner. [361]

The Hague, on or about Wednesday, 11 July 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

(7) What shall I say to you?—some day the future and experience will say—what I can't find the right words for. I mean—that enthusiasm sometimes counts for more than even the calculating types who consider themselves "above it all." And instinct—inspiration—impulse—conscience—guide more truly than many people think. And be that as it may, for my

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part I agree with it, better to die of passion than to die of boredom. [506]

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

(8) What I can do, I can do, some aspects of drawing, yes and even some aspects of painting are firmly ingrained in me, and not in the least coincidentally but acquired through honest work. I say, yet another guarantee that we aren't just talking hot air. [396]

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

(9) [. . .] I believe that people should—I don't say ignore—but thoroughly scrutinize, verify and— —very substantially alter the old-fashioned ideas of innate genius, inspiration &c. in art.

I don't deny the existence of genius, though, nor even its innate nature. But I do deny the inferences of it, that theory and training are always useless by the very nature of the thing. [450]

Nuenen, mid-June 1884. *To Theo van Gogh*

(10) But in the painting I let my own head, in the sense of *idea* or *imagination*, work, which isn't so much the case with *studies*, where no creative process *may* take place, but where one obtains *food* for one's imagination from reality so that it becomes right. [496]

Nuenen, on or about Tuesday, 28 April 1885.
To Theo van Gogh

(11) But I'm afraid you regard what I say as a trick of my imagination, my words as up in the air and without foundation. [406]

Nieuw-Amsterdam, Monday, 12 November, or Tuesday, 13 November 1883. *To Theo van Gogh*

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(12) That absorption in the moment—that being so wholly and utterly carried away and inspired by the surroundings in which one happens to be—what can one do about it? And even if one could resist it if one wanted to, what would be the point, why shouldn't one give oneself over to that which is in front of one, as this, after all, is the surest way to create something? [430]

Nuenen, between Monday, 18 February, and Saturday, 23 February 1884. *To Theo van Gogh*

(13) And an Ingres, a David, painters who really don't always paint beautifully, how tremendously interesting even they become when, putting their pedantry aside, they forget themselves in—being true—in capturing a character—like in the two heads in the Musée Moderne. [551]

Antwerp, on or about Saturday, 2 January 1886. *To Theo van Gogh*

(14) But in isolation I can count only on my excitement at certain moments, and then I let myself run to extravagances. [631]

Arles, on or about Monday, 25 June 1888. *To Theo van Gogh*

(15) I have a terrible clarity of mind at times, when nature is so lovely these days, and then I'm no longer aware of myself and the painting comes to me as if in a dream. I am indeed somewhat fearful that that will have its reaction in melancholy when the bad season comes, but I'll try to get away from it by studying this question of drawing figures from memory. [687]

Arles, Tuesday, 25 September 1888. *To Theo van Gogh*

(16) We shouldn't make a big thing of the studies, which take more trouble but which are less attractive than the paintings that are their outcome and fruit, and which one paints as if in a

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dream, and without suffering so much for it. [699]

Arles, Monday, 8 October 1888. *To Theo van Gogh*

(17) Although I believe that the finest paintings are made relatively freely from the imagination, I *can't* break with the idea that one can't study nature, swot even, too much.

The greatest, most powerful imaginations have also made things directly from reality that leave one dumbfounded. [537]

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

(18) But I remember that I haven't yet told you that my friend Paul Gauguin, an Impressionist painter, now lives with me and that we're very happy together, he encourages me a lot often to work purely from the imagination. [720]

Arles, on or about Monday, 12 November 1888. *To Willemien van Gogh*

(19) I'm going to set myself to work often from memory, and the canvases done from memory are always less awkward and have a more artistic look than the studies from nature, especially when I'm working in mistral conditions. [718]

Arles, Saturday, 10 November 1888. *To Theo van Gogh*

(20) Gauguin gives me courage to imagine, and the things of the imagination do indeed take on a more mysterious character. [719]

Arles, Sunday, 11 November, or Monday, 12 November 1888. *To Theo van Gogh*

(21) Several times over I've seen him do things that you or I wouldn't permit ourselves to do, having consciences that feel things differently—I've heard two or three things said of him in the same vein—but I, who saw him at very, very

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close quarters, I believed him led by his imagination, by pride perhaps but— —quite irresponsible. [736]

Arles, Thursday, 17 January 1889. *To Theo van Gogh*

(22) What consoles me a little is that I'm beginning to consider madness as an illness like any other and accept the thing as it is, while during the actual crises it seemed to me that everything I was imagining was reality. [760]

Arles, Sunday, 21 April 1889. *To Theo van Gogh*

(23) [. . .] I keep telling myself that I still have it in my heart to paint a bookshop one day with the shop window yellow-pink, in the evening, and the passers-by black—it's such an essentially modern subject. Because it also appears such a figurative source of light. I say, that would be a subject that would look good between an olive grove and a wheatfield, the sowing of books, of prints. I have that very much in my heart to do, like a light in the darkness. [823]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Tuesday, 26 November 1889. *To Theo van Gogh*

(24) It requires a certain dose of inspiration, a ray from on high which doesn't belong to us, to do beautiful things. When I'd done those sunflowers I was seeking the contrary and yet the equivalent, and I said, it's the cypress. [850]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Saturday, 1 February 1890. *To Theo van Gogh*

(25) Certainly—imagination is a capacity that must be developed, and only that enables us to create a more exalting and consoling nature than what just a glance at reality (which we perceive changing, passing quickly like lightning) allows us to perceive. [596]

Arles, on or about Thursday, 12 April 1888. *To Émile Bernard*

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CHAPTER FOUR

The Power of Words

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

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

After his move to Paris in 1886, Van Gogh's tastes moved towards lighter reading as he ceased to wrestle with the major ideological conflicts that had shaped his earlier career. He now preferred the likes of Verne, Loti, Voltaire, and Daudet, but in St. Rémy, he returned to his old favourites, especially Dickens and Shakespeare.

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The close links that Van Gogh felt between writing and painting—the "sister arts," as they were called—help to explain the strong tendency to vivid pictorialism throughout his letters. The idea that the "sister arts" shared the same goal was widespread in the nineteenth century and was reflected in the convention of so-called word-painting. The idea was, simply, to have writing achieve pictorial vividness by using strong visual descriptions and by drawing on terms and ideas about composition borrowed from the visual arts. Two of Van Gogh's favourite novelists, George Eliot and Émile Zola, were self-conscious producers of these kinds of word-paintings, and Van Gogh's correspondence is abundantly supplied with his own examples. Sometimes these are descriptions of landscapes and sometimes of landscape paintings, or even of landscapes that are compared to actual paintings or are composed as if they were paintings. But Van Gogh's word-paintings are, for the most part, not just embellishments that add local colour to a letter. Frequently, an ideal expressed in spatial (visual) imagery stands in contrast to the temporal (auditory) narrative of the letter, thus setting up a contrast between the stability of the spatial image and the existential urgency of the narrative. This tension, in turn, imparts to Van Gogh's writing a captivating vigour and complexity.

Literature

Van Gogh did not provide detailed discussions of the many literary texts that he cites. Rather, his voracious reading fed directly into the development of his own opinions, and he seized upon whatever aspects of his favourite authors seemed to confirm his favourite ideas. Mainly, he found confirmation among the great nineteenth-century novelists for his lifelong concerns about the

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plight of the poor, but he also found validation among many of his admired writers for his own favourite theories about artistic production. For instance, he thought that distinguished authors (like painters) do not simply reproduce natural appearances; rather, they often use exaggeration and simplification to achieve imaginative power.

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

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

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of great authors could provide strong moral examples, as is the case with Turgenev, for instance (13).

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

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

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

(2) All those French paintings about the days of the Revolution, such as The Girondists and Last victims of the terror and Marie Antoinette by Delaroche and Muller, and that Young citizen and other paintings by Goupil, and then Anker and so many others, what a beautiful whole they form with many books, such as those by Michelet and Carlyle and also Dickens

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(Tale of two cities). In all of that combined there's something of the spirit which is that of the Resurrection and the Life, which shall live though it seems dead, for it is not dead, but it sleepeth.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Balzac I portrays the society of 1815–1848, Zola begins where Balzac leaves off and goes on to Sedan or rather to the present day.

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I think it's absolutely superb. Now I must ask you what you think of Mme François, who picks up poor Florent as he lies unconscious in the middle of the road where the vegetable carts are passing, and lets him ride with her. Although the other vegetable sellers shout: "Leave him lying there, the drunk! We've no time to pick up men lying in the gutter," &c. The figure of Mme François stands against the background of the Halles throughout the book, contrasting with the brutal egoism of the other women, so calm and so dignified and so sympathetic.

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

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

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

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

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

(8) Do you have the portrait of Carlyle—that beautiful one in The Graphic? At the moment I'm reading his "Sartor resartus"—the philosophy of old clothes—under "old clothes" he includes all manner of forms, and in the case of religion all dogmas. It's beautiful—and honest—and humane. There's been a lot of grumbling about this book, as with his other books. Many regard Carlyle as a monster. One nice comment on "the

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philosophy of old clothes" is the following. Carlyle not only strips mankind naked but skins it too. Something like that. Well, that isn't true, but it's true that he's honest enough not to call the shirt the skin—and far from finding a desire to belittle man in his work, I for one see that he puts man in a high position in the universe. At the same time, more than bitter criticism, I see love of mankind in him, a great deal of love. He—Carlyle—learned much from Goethe, but even more I believe from a certain man who wrote no books but whose words have survived nonetheless, although he didn't write them down himself, i.e., Jesus. Before Carlyle he included many forms of all kinds under "old clothes." [325]

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

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

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

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

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

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

(11) I mean that while many regard, for instance, reading books or something else as what they'd call a waste of time, it seems to me on the contrary that—far from working less or less well

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if one attempts to learn about another area that's nonetheless directly related—one works more and better as a result—and at any rate the point of view from which one sees things and one's approach to life is a matter of importance and a great influence on the work. [345]

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

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

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

(13) The books of the present, since Balzac, say, are unlike anything written in other centuries—and better perhaps.

I'm really looking forward to Turgenev just now because I've read a piece about him by Daudet in which both the man himself as a character and his work were analyzed—extremely good. For he's an example as a person, and in his old age he was still young as regards continuing to work, as regards always being dissatisfied with himself, and trying to do it better and better all the time. [565]

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

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

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

(15) Am reading Pierre et Jean by Guy de Maupassant. It's beautiful—have you read the preface explaining the freedom

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the artist has to exaggerate, to create in a novel a more beautiful, simpler, more consoling nature, and explaining what Flaubert's phrase might have meant, *"talent is long patience"*—and originality an effort of will and intense observation? [588]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Arles, on or about Friday, 15 June, and Saturday, 16 June 1888. *To Theo van Gogh*

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(20) [. . .] we've read La terre and Germinal, and if we paint a peasant we'd like to show that this reading has in some way become part of us. [663]

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

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

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

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

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

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

Arles, on or about Monday, 12 November 1888.
To Willemien van Gogh

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

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

Word-Painting

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

Van Gogh's detailed descriptions of actual landscapes are often compared to paintings, which, in turn, frequently influence how he writes about the scene in question. But he can also describe paintings as if he were looking directly at a scene in nature, and sometimes his verbal descriptions embody ideas that he favoured at the moment, such as his thinking about imperfection or his preoccupation with colour.

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In The Hague, Van Gogh explains that "drawing in words" is an art that, like painting, releases a "hidden force latent inside" (1). The special power of words to which he alludes here is exemplified in a further passage in which he provides a detailed account of a cityscape, going on to say that he would try to draw it, but he hasn't the time. Here, a word-painting replaces a drawing, and the care Van Gogh expends on the written description exemplifies his claim about the aesthetic effectiveness and power of language (2).

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

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the "word-paintings" of the novelist Victor Hugo are adduced to enable us better to imagine it (9).

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

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

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

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

Schenkweg runs through the foreground as a glistening line through the wet, the poplars have yellow leaves, the banks of the ditch and the meadow are deep green, figures are black.

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I would draw it, or rather try to draw it, if I hadn't spent the whole afternoon toiling at figures of peat carriers which are still too much in my mind for there to be room for something new, and must remain there. [274]

The Hague, Sunday, 22 October 1882.
To Theo van Gogh

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

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

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

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

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curious things in other countries, too—but last Sunday when I was walking alone on that dyke, I thought how good that Dutch soil was. [102]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(7) Flat planes or strips differing in colour, which grow narrower and narrower as they approach the horizon. Accentuated here

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

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

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

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

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

In the foreground a fisherman on a horse, a tall, singular, dark silhouette standing out against the white, foaming waves. This figure is speaking with people on board a pink floating in the middle ground. On deck people are busy

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with a lantern, and they're evidently speaking to the man on horseback about the anchor, which he must come and fetch. It was a large, important drawing, broadly done and so powerful that, as I said, nothing else could hold a candle to it. [166]

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hoogeveen, Sunday, 16 September 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

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

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

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

After Van Gogh moved to Arles, the brilliant word-paintings in his letters reflect his intense interest in colour. For instance, he cites the colourist extraordinaire, Claude Monet, while recalling a sunset at Mont Majour, which is itself described in language evoking a blaze of colour (12). Likewise, Van Gogh describes a seashore

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with a cataract of colour images (13), as he does his own paintings of a starry night (14), the Yellow House (15), and olive trees at St. Rémy (16). An interesting variation occurs in an account of an olive grove in Arles, which Van Gogh says is "too beautiful for me to dare paint" and which is evoked instead by way of a vivid word-painting. This same passage alludes to painters who produce effects analogous to those that Van Gogh himself will not attempt to capture in a picture (17). His aim here is to provide an account of what the olive grove looks like and also to give some sense of the mysterious atmosphere of the place. Again, in a remarkable description of his painting of the asylum garden in St. Rémy, Van Gogh explains how colour communicates the "sensation of anguish" that the asylum patients feel. But we then realize also that his verbal description reproduces a felt sense of that same emotion (18).

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

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

Arles, Monday, 28 May 1888. *To Theo van Gogh*

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(13) I took a walk along the seashore one night, on the deserted beach. It wasn't cheerful, but not sad either, it was—beautiful.

The sky, a deep blue, was flecked with clouds of a deeper blue than primary blue, an intense cobalt, and with others that were a lighter blue—like the blue whiteness of milky ways. Against the blue background stars twinkled, bright, greenish, white, light pink—brighter, more glittering, more like precious stones than at home—even in Paris. So it seems fair to talk about opals, emeralds, lapis, rubies, sapphires. The sea a very deep ultramarine—the beach a mauvish and pale reddish shade, it seemed to me—with bushes. [619]

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

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

Two small coloured figures of lovers in the foreground. [691]

Arles, on or about Saturday, 29 September 1888. *To Theo van Gogh*

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

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blood circulates normally. I'm in really much better health here than in Paris. [678]

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

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

Auvers-sur-Oise, Sunday, 25 May 1890. *To Joseph Isaäcson*

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

It's too beautiful for me to dare paint it or be able to form an idea of it.

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The oleander—ah—it speaks of love and it's as beautiful as Puvis de Chavannes' Lesbos, where there were women beside the sea. But the olive tree is something else, it is, if you want to compare it to something, like Delacroix. [763]

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

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

This dark giant—like a proud man brought low—contrasts, when seen as the character of a living being, with the pale smile of the last rose on the bush, which is fading in front of him. Under the trees, empty stone benches, dark box. The sky is reflected yellow in a puddle after the rain. A ray of sun—the last glimmer—exalts the dark ochre to orange—small dark figures prowl here and there between the trunks. You'll understand that this combination of red ochre, of green saddened with grey, of black lines that define the outlines, this gives rise a little to the feeling of anxiety from which some of my companions in misfortune often suffer, and which is called "seeing red." And what's more, the motif of the great tree

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struck by lightning, the sickly green and pink smile of the last flower of autumn, confirms this idea. [822]

Arles, on or about Tuesday, 26 November 1889.

To Émile Bernard

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CHAPTER FIVE

Matter and Spirit

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

Despite a great many difficulties, Van Gogh did not make a complete break with his family, towards whom he continued to remain both appreciative and resentful. Even his bitter quarrels with his father failed to bring about a full emancipation from the paternal influence, and Vincent also sought alternative father-figures—for instance, his old boss Hermanus Tersteeg, Paul Gauguin, and even his brother Theo, to whom at one point, with some irritation, he refers as "Pa II" (482/3:204). In a similar fashion, the admired historian and philosopher Jules Michelet becomes

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"père Michelet" and the painter Jean-François Millet, "père Millet" (414/3:84). In addition, Van Gogh longed for a family of his own, only reluctantly acknowledging that this would not happen. Then, as a substitute for his failed ambition to be a family man, he imagined creating a family of artists at the Yellow House in Arles.

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

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

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The Law of the Father

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

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

Vincent expresses a high degree of ambivalence about these various fraught relationships. Although he often felt alienated from his family, he was also strongly attached to it, and in his last years, in a spirit of reconciliation, he sought increased contact with several family members.

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In Amsterdam, Van Gogh writes enthusiastically that he would thank God for the opportunity to become a clergyman like his father (1). Later, when his father left after a visit, Vincent admits to crying "like a child" (2). In the Borinage, he thanks Theo warmly for visiting, and confesses how much he needs family and friends (3). Throughout his early letters, as well as those written during his religious phase, Vincent is repeatedly solicitous about the welfare of family members; his close ties with his family are often at the forefront of his concern.

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

Yet there is something poignant in Vincent's continuing appreciation of his parents' virtues (9): his vulnerability is evident, for instance, when he reassures Theo that they are not only brothers but also "friends and kindred spirits" (10). Here, he acknowledges the family bond while hoping for Theo's acceptance of his autonomy despite his parents' disapproval. In The Hague, he goes on to explain that the inner lives of family members are more important than what is expressed outwardly, which might only be for show (11). Again, in this example, Vincent hints that Theo's inner disposition could remain favourable despite the disapproval that he knew Theo shared with their parents.

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Vincent's ambivalence is again evident when his father sent a package containing a woman's winter coat, thereby silently acknowledging Sien. Vincent feels gratitude, but his appreciation is immediately qualified in a not too gracious manner as his conflicted feelings prevail (12). Elsewhere, he acknowledges his ambivalence by declaring that he disagrees fundamentally with his father, even while accepting that there is a real bond between them (13).

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

By the time Van Gogh went to Arles, his head-on struggles with his family were, for the most part, over. But his preoccupation with the family drama continued in his concerns about other people's families. For instance, he bitterly criticizes Bernard's family (20), and he sees the patients in the asylum at St. Rémy as a special kind of family, their forced confinement notwithstanding (21). Most importantly, he has fond recollections about his own family (22), and he is deeply touched by Theo's impending fatherhood (23). He even recommends that Theo name his little boy after their father (24), although Theo insisted on naming him Vincent. An increased burden of anxiety about becoming a financial drain on Theo's young family possibly contributed to Vincent's decision to take his own life. If this is the case, his ambivalence about family ties clearly continued to be deeply troubling until the end.

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(1) If I may become a clergyman, if I fulfil that position so that my work is equal to that of our Father, then I shall thank God. [118]

Amsterdam, Thursday, 31 May 1887. *To Theo van Gogh*

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

Amsterdam, Sunday, 10 February 1878.
To Theo van Gogh

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

Cuesmes, between about Monday, 11 August, and Thursday, 14 August 1879. *To Theo van Gogh*

(4) Without wishing to, I've more or less become some sort of impossible and suspect character in the family, in any event, somebody who isn't trusted, so how, then, could I be useful to anybody in any way?

That's why, first of all, so I'm inclined to believe, it is beneficial and the best and most reasonable position to take,

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for me to go away and to remain at a proper distance, as if I didn't exist. [155]

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

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

Etten, Friday, 18 November 1881. *To Theo van Gogh*

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

Etten, Friday, 18 November 1881. *To Theo van Gogh*

(7) We now stand as adults, as soldiers in the ranks of our generation. We don't belong to the one Pa and Ma and J.P.S. belong to, we must be more faithful to the modern than to the old. Looking back at the old is fatal. We mustn't get upset if the older generation doesn't understand us, and we must go

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our own way, even going against their wishes. Later on they'll say, yes, you were right after all! [187]

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

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

Etten, on or about Friday, 23 December 1881.
To Theo van Gogh

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

The Hague, Saturday, 26 August 1882.
To Theo van Gogh

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

Etten, Tuesday, 8 November, or Wednesday,
9 November 1881. *To Theo van Gogh*

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(11) Many people pay more attention to the outward appearance of a family than to its inner life, and imagine they do good in that way. Society is full of that, seeming instead of being. Again, these people are not bad *because* of this, but they are foolish. [338]

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

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

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

The Hague, on or about Thursday, 7 June 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

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

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

The Hague, Saturday, 18 August 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

(14) Pa doesn't know remorse as you and I and everyone who is human does. Pa believes in his own righteousness while you,

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I and other human beings are permeated with the feeling that we consist of mistakes and forlorn attempts.

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

Nuenen, on or about Friday, 7 December 1883.
To Theo van Gogh

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

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

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

But brother, my very sorrow about so much proves to me that I've *finished* dealing with those systems. I've suffered from

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them, but at bottom I no longer belong on that side. And now, I say as brother to brother, as friend to friend, although our youth was austere and went against the grain, *from now on* let's seek the gentle light, since I know no other name for it but the white ray or goodness. [403]

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

(17) I don't differ with Pa when I consider Pa in himself, but I do differ with Pa when I compare Pa with the great père Millet, say. [414]

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

(18) Only it's certain that Ma simply cannot comprehend that painting is *a faith* and that it brings with it *the duty* to pay no heed to public opinion—and that in it one conquers by *perseverance* and not by *giving in*. And—"I can't give you faith" is also the case between Her Hon. and me—just as it was and remained with Pa too. [490]

Nuenen, Monday, 6 April 1885. *To Theo van Gogh*

(19) [. . .] I'll tell you straight out what I think about that—that in common with Pa, who often acts thus, you are *cruel* in your worldly wisdom. [418]

Nuenen, on or about Friday, 28 December 1883. *To Theo van Gogh*

(20) Bernard is being pestered more and more by his father, it's becoming even more of a hell in that house.

And the worst is that there isn't much one can do about it, as soon as you put your hand in there you put it into a real wasps' nest. [738]

Arles, Saturday, 19 January 1889. *To Theo van Gogh*

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(21) I must say this, that the neighbours &c. are particularly kind towards me, everyone here suffering either from fever or hallucinations or madness, we get along like members of the same family. [745]

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

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

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

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

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

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

(24) Now in thought I remain with you all as I finish my letter. May Jo long remain for us all that she is. Now as for the little

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one, why then don't you call him Theo in memory of our father, that would certainly give me so much pleasure. [850]

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Saturday, 1 February 1890.
To Theo van Gogh

Nature

Van Gogh repeatedly emphasizes the restorative and life-affirming power of nature. Although he warns that alienation from nature is dehumanizing, he also maintains that a fruitful relationship with nature involves struggle and contest. Art is one consequence of this struggle, and although art is grounded in nature, the artist must also strive to transcend nature. Van Gogh cites the seventeenth-century English philosopher Francis Bacon's definition of art as "man added to nature," as well as the closely allied notion derived from Émile Zola that art is "a corner of nature seen through a temperament" (361/2:373). That is, although people are *in* nature, they are not entirely *of* nature. Consequently, art does not merely reproduce the appearances of things; rather, it reveals something humanly significant in and through those appearances. To accomplish this revelation, artists exaggerate or simplify, or they foreground the medium of expression itself as a means of enabling us to see something newly significant in the familiar world that we might think we know well enough already. And yet Van Gogh also insists that an authentic work of art must make reference to the natural world. Excessive abstraction, for instance, cuts art off from the sustaining power of nature, without which art cannot survive.

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In a letter from London in 1874, Van Gogh describes how art is rooted in nature, even though art also teaches us to see nature in new ways (1). Later, he states that the right kind of connection with nature enhances "the genuinely human" (2). But Van Gogh also returns often to the idea that nature "always begins by resisting" and must be actively engaged (3), because nature "demands that you struggle with her" (4). Although this struggle is difficult (5), without it an artist will not find success (6, 7). Rather, artists must labour like Robinson Crusoe (8), and in St. Rémy, Van Gogh recommends working as if one were making a pair of shoes, without any "artistic preoccupations" at all (9).

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

In St. Rémy, Vincent suggests to Theo that his wife and child could be a way of bringing Theo back to nature, as an antidote to the alienating effects of Paris (19). But then he reminds himself that, in his own situation, too much attention to painting is also unhealthy, and nature will take revenge (20). In an evocative

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passage, he describes how, as an artist, he turns away from nature in order to make a picture, but he fears turning away too far (21). And although he exaggerates for effect, he knows that what he wants is already there in nature, waiting to be disclosed (22). In The Hague, he writes that "nature or God" explains the mystery of our existence for many people (23), yet Van Gogh does not simply equate nature and God—he was not a pantheist. He acknowledges "something on high" but insists that it is impossible to find an adequate name for this transcendent dimension (24). The ways in which he attempts to deal with what he acknowledges as an encompassing mystery is the topic of the next section, "The Ineffable."

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

London, beginning of January 1874. *To Theo van Gogh*

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

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

(3) Nature always begins by resisting the draughtsman, but he who truly takes it seriously doesn't let himself be deterred by that resistance, on the contrary, it's one more stimulus to go on fighting, and at bottom nature and an honest draughtsman see eye to eye. Nature is most certainly "intangible" though, yet one must seize it, and with a firm hand. And now, after spending some time wrestling and struggling with nature, it's starting to become a bit more yielding and submissive, not

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that I'm there yet, no one is less inclined to think so than I, but things are beginning to go more smoothly. [175]

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

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

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

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

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

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

I think that if one has tried to follow the masters attentively, one encounters them all at certain moments, deep in reality. I mean—what are called their *creations*—one will also see in reality to the extent that one—has—similar eyes—similar sentiment—to them. And so I also believe this—if the critics or connoisseurs were more familiar with nature, their judgement would be better than now, when it's the routine to live only among paintings and to compare them with one another.

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Which, of course, is *right* in its context as one side of the question, but lacks a solid basis if one forgets nature and doesn't look deeply into it. [480]

Nuenen, on or about Monday, 26 January 1885.
To Theo van Gogh

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

Nuenen, on or about Monday, 26 January 1885.
To Theo van Gogh

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

The Hague, on or about Tuesday, 19 September 1882.
To Anthon van Rappard

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

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Tuesday, 26 November 1889.
To Theo van Gogh

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(10) I've tried to imbue the landscape with the same sentiment as the figure.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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(13) One never finds oneself exactly in a book, only some things from nature in general that one finds vague and ill-defined in one's own heart. [309]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(17) But, again, anyone who works with love and with intelligence has a kind of armour against people's opinion in the sincerity of his love for nature and art.

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Nature is severe and hard, so to speak, but never deceives and always helps you to go forward.

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

The Hague, Wednesday, 26 July 1882.
To Theo van Gogh

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

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

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

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

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

(20) And then—yes there's something in life other than paintings, and this something else one neglects and nature seems to avenge itself then, and besides, fate is bent on thwarting us.

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I think that in these circumstances one must keep to the paintings as much as duty demands but no more. [820]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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(24) What I think is the best life, oh without even the slightest shadow of a doubt, is a life made up of long years of being in touch with nature out of doors—and with the something on high—unfathomable, *"awfully Unnameable,"* because one can't find a name for it—above that nature. [403]

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

The Ineffable

As we saw in the first section of chapter 1, Van Gogh sought an alternative kind of understanding—"something altogether new" that "will have no name" (686/4:282)—to replace the traditional Christianity that he had rejected in the Borinage. Yet he did not cease to be preoccupied by the questions that he first encountered through Christianity, questions having to do with the meaning of suffering, the mysteries of the universe and of our conscious selves, and the affirmation of what he calls (drawing on Thomas Carlyle) the "eternal yes." His address to these matters developed from his early religious upbringing in much the same way as his creative autonomy as an artist developed from the family that he did not entirely reject, despite often being at loggerheads with it. In both cases, his solution to the problem on hand was personal and distinctive. As in his painting, so in his personal search for the elusive "something altogether new," the transcendent mystery remained immanent in the familiar objects of the world. In the last year of his life, he described Christ as the greatest of artists. In so doing, he was not making a conventionally religious statement, but we are reminded that his "spiritual but not religious" sensibility cannot be well understood

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without reference to his observations in the section on religion with which this book began.

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

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

In addition to "it," Van Gogh uses various, similarly vague terms to catch a sense of the "something altogether new" that he hoped would replace Christianity and of which, for him, art was a harbinger. Thus, he refers to "Something on high" (8), a "je ne

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sais quoi" that is infinitely above us (9), a "white ray" that he hopes to see when he dies (10) and that, meanwhile, is reflected in great painters such as Millet and Corot (11). Likewise, Rembrandt and Delacroix go "into the very highest," the "infinite" (12), and there are no words in any language for how deeply "mysterious" (13) Rembrandt is. Van Gogh himself attempts to paint "the infinite" and to create a "mysterious effect" (14), reaching for something "almost magical" (15). In communicating a sense of "something on high" that is also "familiar," Millet restores the human "soul" (16), as do Corbet and Degas in making "the infinite tangible" (17).

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

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

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

(2) Uncle told me that Daubigny has died, I freely admit that it made me sad to hear it, just as it did to hear that Brion had died (his Saying grace is hanging in my room), because the

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work of such men, if one understands it, moves one more deeply than one is aware of. [142]

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

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

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

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

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

The Hague, on or about Friday, 21 July 1882. *To Theo van Gogh*

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

Amsterdam, Monday, 18 February, and Tuesday, 19 February 1878. *To Theo van Gogh*

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(6) Meryon, even when he's drawing bricks, granite, the iron bars or the parapet of a bridge, puts something of the human soul, shaken by I know not what heartache, into his etching. I've seen drawings of Gothic architecture by V. Hugo. Well, without having Meryon's powerful and masterly execution, there was something of the same sentiment. What is this sentiment? It has some kinship with that which Albrecht Dürer expressed in his *Melancholy*, which in our times James Tissot and M. Maris also have (however different these two may be one from the other). Some profound critic rightly said of James Tissot "He's a soul in need." But in any event, there's something of the human soul there; it's for that reason that that is great, immense, infinite, and put Viollet-le-Duc beside it, it's stone, and the other (namely Meryon), that's *Spirit*. [158]

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

(7) How much good it does a person if one is in a gloomy mood to walk on the empty beach and look into the grey-green sea with the long white lines of the waves. Yet if one has a need for something great, something infinite, something in which one can see God, one needn't look far. I thought I saw something—deeper, more infinite, more eternal than an ocean—in the expression in the eyes of a baby—when it wakes in the morning and crows—or laughs because it sees the sun shine into its cradle. If there is a "ray from on high," it might be found there. [292]

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

(8) I'm not saying that one must expect the something on High to do absolutely everything, no, but the Something on high exists, nonetheless; at least if Millet believed in it you'll

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obviously want to trust him in this—that he wasn't sitting dozing when he knew that it existed. [397]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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a convention compared with the lightness of Millet and Corot, for instance. [403]

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

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

Nuenen, on or about Saturday, 10 October 1885. *To Theo van Gogh*

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

Nuenen, on or about Saturday, 10 October 1885. *To Theo van Gogh*

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

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

I make a simple background of the richest, most intense blue that I can prepare, and with this simple combination,

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the brightly lit blond head, against this rich blue background achieves a mysterious effect, like a star in the deep azure. [663]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(17) But there you are; I'm so far from eccentric. A Greek statue, a peasant by Millet, a Dutch portrait, a nude woman by Courbet or Degas, these calm and modelled perfections are the reason that many other things, the primitives as well as the Japanese,

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seem to me .... like WRITING WITH A PEN; they interest me infinitely .. but something complete, a perfection, makes the infinite tangible to us.

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

Arles, Sunday, 29 July 1888. *To Émile Bernard*

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

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

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APPENDIX ONE

Some Facts About the Letters

Total number of letters surviving: 903
Number written by Van Gogh: 820
Number written to Van Gogh: 83

Approximately two-thirds are in Dutch and one-third in French. Six are in English. The actual correspondence perhaps comprises as many as two thousand items, approximately half of which have not survived. See *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters*, 6:41.

Number of letters to:

- Theo van Gogh and Jo van Gogh-Bonger: 659 (Theo: 651; Theo and Jo: 7; Jo: 1)
- Anthon van Rappard: 58
- Émile Bernard: 22
- Willemien van Gogh: 21
- Vincent's parents (Theodorus van Gogh and Anna van Gogh-Carbentus): 17 (both parents: 5; mother: 8; mother and Theo: 1; mother and Willemien: 3)

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Anton Kerssemakers (an amateur artist to whom Van Gogh gave lessons in Nuenen): 5
Paul Gauguin: 4

There are seventeen other recipients. See *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters*, 6:40.

Number of letters from:

Theo van Gogh and Jo van Gogh-Bonger: 46 (Theo: 39; Theo and Jo: 2; Jo: 5)
Paul Gauguin: 16

There are fifteen other senders. See *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters*, 6:41.

Van Gogh preferred to use sheets of paper folded in four, and on average, his letters consist of one sheet of four pages. The letters range in length from one to sixteen pages. Approximately 1,200 sheets survive, with approximately 3,800 pages. There are 242 letter-sketches, including sketches inserted into a letter, as an accompaniment.

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APPENDIX TWO

Suggestions for Further Readings

The present book is primarily concerned with Van Gogh's achievements as a writer and is addressed mainly to readers of the correspondence translated into English. The following suggestions for further reading take these constraints into account. Still, the simple fact remains that very little critical attention has been paid to the (widely acknowledged) literary distinction of Van Gogh's letters, and readers who are interested in this topic and who have found the present book helpful might feel encouraged to consult its two predecessors: *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh: A Critical Study* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2014), and *"My Own Portrait in Writing": Self-Fashioning in the Letters of Vincent van Gogh* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2015). In keeping with the main concerns addressed in these books, the following suggestions provide pointers towards a further engagement with Van Gogh's remarkable genius and shed additional light on the astonishing symbiosis of writing and painting that his work as a whole achieves.

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Editions

Vincent van Gogh: The Letters, ed. Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker, 6 vols. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009). A treasure; the *non pareil*; magnificent and complete. Fifteen years in the making, this edition heralds a new era in the study of Van Gogh's letters.

Ever Yours: The Essential Letters of Vincent van Gogh, ed. Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). The best selection available, by the same editors as the 2009 complete edition.

The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh. Introduction by V. W. Van Gogh; preface and memoir by Jo van Gogh-Bonger, 3 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., first published 1958, 3rd edition, 2000). This is the English translation of the groundbreaking four-volume *Verzamelde brieven* (*Collected Letters*), which appeared in 1952–54. It is the version most widely known to readers of the letters in English. Though superseded by the 2009 edition, it retains a special appeal.

Biography

Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Van Gogh: The Life* (New York: Random House, 2011). Exhaustive, brilliantly researched and documented, but an unrelentingly negative depiction of its subject.

Julian Bell, *Van Gogh: A Power Seething* (Boston and New York: New Harvest, 2014). Brief, captivating, and perceptive. Like his subject, Bell is a gifted painter who is also a gifted writer.

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Albert J. Lubin, *Stranger on the Earth: A Psychological Biography of Vincent van Gogh* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972). An often thought-provoking psychoanalytical assessment. Sometimes it's a stretch, but it is frequently insightful.

Irving Stone, *Lust for Life* (London: Longmans Green, 1934). Billed as "the classic biographical novel of Vincent van Gogh"—and so it is. Stone gives us Van Gogh the romantic, tormented outsider. The book was made into a film, with the same title. Both remain interesting, if outdated, and both have contributed much to popular perceptions of Van Gogh.

Other

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). An important book on Van Gogh's extensive reading.

Leo Jansen, *Van Gogh and His Letters* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2007). A brief, expert, and luminous introduction to the main aspects of the letters.

Van Gogh: A Retrospective, ed. Susan Alison Stein (New York: Park Lane, 1986). A collection of memoirs, reviews, newspaper articles, and the like documenting the early shaping of Van Gogh's reputation.

Vincent's Choice: Van Gogh's Musée Imaginaire, ed. Chris Stolwijk, Sjraar van Heugten, Leo Jansen, and Andreas Bluhm. Exhibition catalogue (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum; London: Thames

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and Hudson, 2003). A rich collection of essays pertaining especially to the shaping of Van Gogh's imagination. Well worth the effort of tracking a copy down.

Brief Happiness: The Correspondence of Theo van Gogh and Jo van Gogh-Bonger, ed. Leo Jansen and Jan Robert; introduction and commentary by Han van Crimpen (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum; Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 1999). Theo's courtship of Jo, with many fascinating sidelights on Vincent—not least an appreciation of the "great mind" (194) at work in his letters.

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