

The Creative Genius of Vincent Van Gogh: a Bowen Family Systems View

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Van Gogh: The Life by Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith is the definitive biography of the artist.¹ An outcome of ten years of research and writing, the work taps the intimacy of hundreds of letters exchanged and curated by the Van Gogh family. The biography, which this article relies on and summarizes, offers a rare multi-generational perspective of a complex family that is at once a product of its time and yet, an example for all time. If any one life is the outcome of an emotional unit, a family, Vincent Van Gogh's life is a relevant study of how a system can operate towards, or against, artistic genius.

What is the family and societal context for genius? What is a genius? Are there common factors in the emergence of remarkable talent? How does an ugly duckling become a swan? In Vincent's case, what prompts the appearance of a black swan? What did Vincent Van Gogh overcome or profit by to successfully produce some of the world's most recognizable and beloved art? What is the role of innate talent versus the environment in creativity?

Questions like these have perplexed thinkers and researchers over time. Van Gogh's story, well-known due to Vincent's self-destructive, erratic behavior and untimely, mysterious death, has invited much speculation about his illnesses and his family life. Dozens of diagnoses by reputable professionals have been put forth, and many meetings and at least one conference have been devoted to parsing the symptoms of the painter. Does Bowen theory with its wide-angle lens on the milieu of the human experience have explanations to contribute?

Vincent Van Gogh died penniless and friendless, his loyal but beleaguered brother Theo, at his side. Only one of Vincent's paintings sold in his lifetime, a brief life of thirty-seven years. Vincent was always outside the community of artist, a rich and highly competitive social network captained by such masters as Claude Monet and Camille Pissaro. While he lived, Vincent was almost completely dismissed, much to his misery. However, within a few years of his death Van Gogh fame would begin to kindle, mostly through prescient actions from within the family. The artistic legacy was preserved, paving the way for the spectacular success that is the Van Gogh of today.

It could not have been predicted.

Vincent was the oldest child of a large sibling group raised by parents who lived parsimonious, tense lives. Vincent's mother, in particular, was descended from

generations who had clawed their way to survival. The generation that spawned Anna Carbentus, Vincent's mother, was the first to live in conditions outside of violent societal upheaval. In the Netherlands, the Carbentus family had lived—and mostly died-- through the Eighty Years War, an extended period of chaos and panoramic bloodletting between the Dutch and the conquering Spaniards bent on seizing land and imposing their religion. Vincent's maternal grandfather was raised by a widowed mother; her husband, Vincent's great grandfather was beaten and left for dead on his way home from work, leaving Vincent's grandfather and siblings to survive under austere circumstances ushered in by another period of societal cataclysm, the tide of Napoleonic conquest which upended life in Holland in the late eighteenth century. Eventually, the period of disturbance ended, allowing this grandfather to prosper during calmer times. Anna's father Willem established a successful book bindery that provided financial stability for future generations. Willem was, however, destined for an untimely death at age fifty-three from a "mental disease."² He was not alone in mental affliction. Another of his siblings died of "epilepsy" (which is how mental illness was often described) and another brother died by suicide.

Life for Vincent's mother was perilous in ways outside of warfare and mental affliction. The lowlands of the Netherlands flooded frequently and had done so since the end of the Ice Age. Maintenance of dams and dykes was a shared community responsibility and concern. People lived with an acute sense of the precariousness of life. Whole villages disappeared overnight at times, and the Carbentus clan had experienced their share of sudden catastrophe.

So, Anna, the third of six children born to this book binding father, grew up anxious and fearful. She kept herself constantly busy and developed a love of order and normalcy.³ Routine and vigilance for the welfare and behavior of others informed her days and became a shaping force for the family she partnered with Vincent's father, Theodorus Van Gogh.

Theodorus, "Dorus" was the seventh of eleven children, fifth of six sons. He was descended from men who made their way in the world through the ministry (the family was Protestant in a largely Catholic country), or through business ventures, many of which had been quite financially successful and brought wealth to the family. Dorus's father had combined the ministry with wealth by marrying into a well-off family and Dorus grew up in an affluent, if crowded, household of thirteen. None of the males except Dorus had any interest in the ministry and although he was ill-suited to this calling, he took it up. His next older brother Vincent, (called Cent by the family) uncle of our painter, was said to be better equipped for the ministry due to his social grace and speaking ability but this brother begged off, leaving Dorus the last hope of his father for the continuation of God's work in the family. Dorus was

described as constitutionally weak since birth, often ill, a conscientious but plodding learner, and prone to moodiness and reclusiveness. He finished his university studies with difficulty and was without a parish for three years before he finally secured a position in a remote country outpost.

Late to marry, Dorus managed to bring a bride to his new position through the happenstance of his brother Cent's betrothal to Anna Carbentus's younger sister Cornelia. Anna had been approaching spinsterhood when Cornelia introduced her to Dorus. Their engagement was announced a short time later, solving the problem of unattached young adults for both families. The marrying of sisters to brothers drew the two families together in a tight circle which was made tighter when Cent and Cornelia failed to have children of their own. The children of Anna and Dorus became the probable heirs to "Uncle Cent" which had implications for the life of his nephew and namesake, the painter Vincent.

The Van Gogh family had named a Vincent in each generation for as long as anyone could remember. In fact, Dorus and Anna's first child, born early in their marriage was named Vincent. He was stillborn. One year later to the day, in 1853, Vincent Willem Van Gogh was born. He was followed by five siblings, two brothers and three sisters over a fourteen-year period. He was the only child for two years, then came his sister Anna, then two years later, brother Theodorus, always known as Theo. The family gradually filled the parsonage at Zundert which was said to be an orderly place run on the principle of "duty first" and adherence to the strictures of Calvinist obedience and Dutch vigilance.⁴ Neighbors recalled the family's routine of a daily group walk throughout the village, the children neatly groomed and dressed. The Protestant minister's family in the heavily Catholic region was a subject of observation and comment, not a small burden for the sensitive and anxious parents. And yes, from the beginning, Vincent was seen as troublesome. He was a fussy infant, oppositional toddler, and quarrelsome child. He isolated himself from his siblings and did not make friends.

Vincent puzzled his parents by spending hours walking the forests and moors around Zundert. He was fond of his brother Theo who accompanied him at times, but he was just as prone to wander off alone for an afternoon, oblivious to the concerns of his mother for his whereabouts. He was a keen observer of nature and began to collect wildflowers, birds' nests, beetles, and all manner of interesting life that he found in his long sojourns from home. As he wandered further and came home later in the evening, sometimes dirty and with torn clothing and vague stories of his whereabouts, his parents became increasingly alarmed. It did not help that he was a recalcitrant student and poor learner of academic subjects, despite his obvious intellectual curiosity and intelligence. When interested, he read voraciously and spent

hours poring over subjects that appealed to him. Because he was chronically unruly his parents tried homeschooling him with poor results.

As adolescence approached the parents began to despair for their son's eventual vocational and social future. Although the cost of private school was outside of their budget, and despite Vincent's opposition to such a plan, the parents enrolled him in a boarding school where he took up residence at age eleven. By all accounts, his experience at this all-male school located 13 miles north of home was a lonely, miserable one and did nothing to correct his unruly behavior.⁵ In fact, throughout his life he would refer to his drop off at the doors of the Provily School in tones of abandonment and bewilderment.

Vincent was at the school two years and never stopped begging to come home. At age 13, he was transferred to another school, perhaps a more affordable setting, even further from home. He did not socialize but threw himself into his studies and proved himself an adept learner. He had a nearly photographic memory and a facility for languages which had him fluent in four languages, eventually. He continued to read voraciously, and he began his lifelong habit of penning long letters to family. As for art, although his mother had encouraged his drawing abilities, he did not make any impression in the art class at boarding school, nor is there any recorded evidence that the class made any impression on him.⁶

Near his fifteenth birthday Vincent walked out of the school and took himself home, refusing to go back.

When he returned to the parsonage it was to a household caught up in the birth of the youngest and last child born to Dorus and Anna, a baby brother Cornelius "Cor". The extended family was celebrating the achievement of Vincent's Uncle Cent, who had been knighted by King Willem III, for his outstanding success in art dealership and for furthering the arts in the Netherlands. After growing a small paint shop into a multi-location art house catering to the burgeoning interest in prints, Uncle Cent had demonstrated keen business acumen and an unfailing eye for what would sell. Eventually he entered into a partnership with the hugely successful French art dealer Goupil, which made Cent extraordinarily wealthy and, in a position, to pursue a life of leisure at age forty-seven. The contrast with brother Dorus's austere life and dour path could not have been starker.⁷

Which must have had an impact on the "Vincent problem" that faced Dorus and Anna. Of course, they longed for Vincent to establish an advantageous position with his rich uncle. And yet, in his young life, Vincent had not shown any inclination to form an advantageous position with anyone. By mid-adolescence the only

relationship that had shown any viability was with his brother Theo and that had become distant and cool as Theo entered adolescence and formed other friendships. Theo showed social promise, was genial and fun-loving, and got along at school and with his family.

Vincent idled at home for over a year but finally agreed to go to work for Cent at Goupil at The Hague, capital city of the Netherlands and the hub of commerce. His job, clerking at the sales counter for the busy art house, put him in position to study and handle scores of pieces of art while also starting him on the path to the fulfillment of his parents' dreams: pleasing Uncle Cent and coming into line as his heir.

The next five years were a debacle. While a quick study at the technical aspects of knowing inventory and appraising form and color, Vincent was an off-putting salesman with his abrupt, often abrasive remarks and manner. He was consistently demoted to work that was further from the public which led to moves to locations outside of the Netherlands where he floundered socially and emotionally. His letters home are full of loneliness and sadness as well as regret at not succeeding in the art business or in the relationship with Cent who was becoming increasingly frosty with his disappointing nephew. The year 1874 was surely a stressful one for Anna and Dorus as they coped with the suicide of Anna's brother and the unwelcome news that Vincent had been fired from Goupil altogether.

Vincent's exit from any possibility of favor from his uncle ushered a long period of wandering for the young man. His relationship with his parents openly deteriorated for the first time. He began a pattern of coming home but not staying, intense conflict prompting his exits or banishments. Dorus was then in another parish only four miles from the last at Zundert. He was eager to succeed and having a layabout son with no plan or prospect would not do in terms of appearances. Anna, ever vigilant for conformity must have been bewildered by her son and his ways and increasingly distant over time from him. The relationship between Dorus and Vincent was the loud and angry side of the triangle, with Dorus pushing for compliance with a conventional path with Vincent feeling criticized and abandoned.

Meanwhile, brother Theo's star was rising at Goupil where he had secured employment at an entry level. He had an eye for salable art and an easy personality that customers enjoyed and sought out. The parents were overjoyed and not sparing in their praise of Theo. Vincent's correspondence with Theo, frequent and warm over the previous years, cooled considerably.⁸ One can only imagine the added sense of rejection for Vincent.

While Theo plied the art trade under the bright light of family approval Vincent considered what to do with his life. His parents wanted him to stay close to art in some way. Vincent had been collecting prints and was often drawing pencil sketches which he sent to family in letters, but he was not inclined to pursue art in any serious way. It is quite possible that his parents' approval of art might have turned his mind elsewhere for vocation.

Vincent's parents urged him to come home while he sorted out his fortunes, but instead he embarked on a series of teaching jobs in boarding schools in England, an interesting choice given his own miserable experiences with formal education. During this time there is a first mention of Theo being ill. Anna went to him at the Hague to assist in his convalescence from an unnamed serious sickness. Vincent wanted to visit his brother, but Anna forbade him which predictably left Vincent feeling rejected. Deeply lonely in England, unsuccessful in teaching, he took to long punishing treks throughout the countryside which left him depleted and hungry. He managed to send many letters to his parents describing his poor living conditions which escalated their insistence that he return home. Finally, he did so. Dorus convinced twenty-four-year-old Vincent to take a job clerking at a local bookstore.

As one might expect, moody, withdrawn Vincent did not get along well with his coworkers or the customers, but at least the situation with his parents was somewhat calmer. Theo, finally recovered from his illness, had begun an affair which had led to a pregnancy. Terribly disappointed in the golden child, the parents seemed to relate more sympathetically to Vincent, who opened up to his mother and father. The intense focus on how Vincent could find a life for himself led him in the direction of the family anchor, religion. While relations with the parents were in a temporary peace and the parents were anxiously preoccupied with Theo's unsuitable love affair, Vincent announced his desire for the ministry to his father. It is easy to imagine his expectation of fatherly approval, the hope perhaps enhanced by Theo's relatively outside position with the parents.

His parents were not pleased.⁹ Neither could picture Vincent as having the temperament or self-control suitable to a parson's life. While Vincent had always been a regular church attender, sometimes seeking several services in one Sunday and periodically filling his week with Bible reading and study, he had never before leaned toward a career in the church. His parents were flatly opposed. At the same time, as Theo recovered from his illness, he announced his intention to quit working for Goupil in favor of pursuing his own life as an artist. Vincent was in full support of his brother leaving Goupil and viewed it as a gesture of solidarity between the two of them, both outcast from the family dynasty. The more the parents leaned on Theo to

maintain his solid position in the family business, the harder Vincent proselytized his brother towards life as an artist.¹⁰

The family was in turmoil. Before long, Theo changed his mind, did not quit Goupil, continued his affair in secret, and fell back into the parental circle of approval. Anna and Dorus, in the face of Vincent's implacable insistence on the ministry, agreed to support this plan with the caveat that he "do it right" through completing university studies and pursuing ordination. Vincent reluctantly agreed, assuring his parents that their hard-earned money towards his education would be stewarded responsibly.

The next three years, as Vincent passed through his mid-twenties, were a study in failure. Vincent studied to be admitted to university under a tutor in the home of his Uncle Jan in Amsterdam, financially supported by his parents and others in the extended family. He began his studies with great enthusiasm, no doubt determined to atone for his previous failures. He was initially prodigious toward his work, putting in long hours of study. However, he did not do well academically which is at odds with his strengths: remarkable memory, verbal and language fluency, and voracious reading habits. He read and spoke four languages yet at university he struggled mightily with the required Greek and Latin. Within just a few months he was depressed, neglecting classes and tutoring lessons, and was on his way out of mentorship. His letters indicate some suicidal thinking, the first such sentiments recorded.¹¹

Vincent was not dissuaded from his hopes to be a preacher, however. He remained in Amsterdam and found work in the lowest rung of the church hierarchy, as a catechist, reading rote verses during services and teaching children. When his father learned of this, he was furious and demanded that Vincent quit his job. Dorus expressed that a catechist position was an embarrassment to the family and a distraction from Vincent finding suitable work with a living wage. The parents enlisted Theo in the project to get Vincent to abandon work as a catechist, not the first nor the last time that Theo stepped in as peace broker for the family. The verbal railing between parents and Vincent went on for weeks and ended as these verbal maelstroms often did, with Vincent capitulating, unexpectedly appearing at the family doorstep. This time he spent weeks at home, taking walks, drawing and reading while waiting for his father to find the kind of situation that he considered suitable for a young man with pastorate goals. Theo returned to work at Goupil and was now at the Paris stores, scene of Vincent's final failure and exit from Goupil. The atmosphere between the brothers was distant during this time; the parents were referencing Theo as their pride and joy as his stock with Uncle Cent increased.

Vincent travelled to Brussels to take up study in an evangelical school that his father had found. The school proved to be a fly-by-night enterprise with little to offer. Even

so, Vincent lasted in the program for three months before being expelled for lack of achievement. Classmates later recalled him as an irritable, volatile person who they learned to avoid.¹² At his boardinghouse he slept on the floor, refused food, and went out in cold weather dressed inadequately. Spending time alone he read the Bible for hours and began to follow an obsession with the lives of coal miners in the southern part of the country. His letters to his Theo relate his fascination with the lives eked out in a dangerous and bleak environment. Rather abruptly, he left for Borinage Belgium, saying that he hoped to prove himself a courageous soul, worthy of respect and acceptance.

“If I could spend three years or so... working in peace and always learning and observing, then I wouldn’t return from there without having something to say that is indeed worth hearing;”¹³

The coal country of Borinage was a complete contrast to the brimming heath of Zundert, Vincent’s family home, and also vastly different from the rich beauty of the cities where Vincent had lived and studied. In his year at Borinage Vincent had truly found a punishing locale, arid and treeless, soot infused and dotted with slag heaps. The people were an unhealthy lot, bent over and scarred, faced every day with possible death or maiming in the worst working conditions imaginable. Vincent was in a hurry to become their preacher and secured a position as a lay minister and catechist at a small church in the district.

Within a few weeks, he was in trouble. He had gone into the position with the delusional expectation that coal miners in a desolate environment would be a cheerful, optimistic people. In their lives of dreariness, they were not eager to accept the interloping minister whose inability to connect to their needs and concerns was quickly evident. Before long, the parishioners were avoiding Vincent and he reacted as he usually did, by withdrawing. In perhaps a misguided effort to relate to the people, Vincent left his comfortable lodgings and took up sleeping on the floor of a cold thatch hut, restricting his eating and before long, looking ill. His church superiors were summoned, his worried father visited, and Vincent was warned to return to normal lodgings and abide by his parish duties. He was on thin ice and his family, never supportive of the Borinage plan, was panicked.

Vincent promised to conform to his duties but almost immediately increased his self-sacrificial leanings, returning to the cold hut, going barefoot in the winter, and tearing up his clothes to make bandages for those who suffered mine injuries. His formal ministry ended in disgrace and for over a year he wandered, sometimes stopping at home for brief periods before leaving under a cloud of conflict with his parents. He travelled back to the coal country and then ventured further towards France and

England. He frightened people with this gaunt, underclothed appearance, his mumblings and odd behavior triggering rejection wherever he went. There is an absence of written record about how he survived but he later described the year of homeless wandering as a time where he almost died more than once. On one brief visit home his father began the process for having Vincent committed, but when Vincent caught wind of this, he left home abruptly and travelled to the coal country, furious with what he viewed as his father's betrayal. ¹⁴

Vincent was gone and living amongst the miners for months, and not much was heard from him. Finally, he reached out to his brother Theo through letter and poured out his wish to find some purpose, some direction to his existence. "There is something inside me, what can it be?" ¹⁵

Soon after this letter he began to mention drawing as a feature of his life and an outlet for his wish to be somehow useful.

Theo encouraged Vincent, as he always had, in his pursuit of art. Finally, Vincent seemed to be following his own interest, having wrestled with the question of "How can I be of use?" ¹⁶ Sketching on his own in the coal country his letters to Theo became filled with his desire for a calling in the arts, and although Theo clearly did not see his brother as having the training or talent to pursue art as a full vocation, he encouraged him to use his creativity as an outlet for his anxious, energetic mind.

Two developments in the family took place during this period that had far reaching implications. First, Theo began to take the central role in responding to "the Vincent problem", replacing Dorus who declared himself defeated and exhausted in trying to rehabilitate his wayward, disturbed son. Theo became the switchboard for all things Vincent, enlarging his role far beyond that of brother/comrade/ competitor. Second, Theo began to provide Vincent with financial support towards his life endeavors. Money passed on to Vincent ranged from informal small gifts to eventually a regular stipend paid as a wage. Cash gradually became a tormenting focus of their relationship and threatened the bond between the brothers even as Vincent stabilized just enough with regular cash coming in to start what would become becomes a most uneven and perilous journey towards masterpiece output.

In 1881, in the first year of his serious pursuit of art, Vincent lived at home with his parents. He was a brooding presence, argumentative with his parents and with the many visitors to the parsonage. The parents swung between conciliatory, placating gestures and outright shouting matches, some lasting hours. Vincent managed to stir up trouble in the wider family through his heavy pursuit of a cousin he identified as the love of his life, this despite her complete refusal of any of his attentions. Her parents and Vincent's parents struggled to convince Vincent to cease and desist his

letters and unannounced doorstep visits, to little avail. Theo stepped in but not before an explosion between Vincent and his father led to Vincent's banishment from the home.

Over the next two years Vincent, filled with a hardened resentment towards his parents, pursued drawing in The Hague. At first, he was mentored by a benevolent artist cousin while financially backed by Theo. Vincent declared himself a career artist for the first time and launched his path with bold pronouncements, extravagant expenditures on a studio, and entitled demands for more money from Theo. In short order he alienated his cousin who eventually cut off contact, riled Theo with his financial demands, and ignited contention in the extended family with ill-advised demands for favors from the family artistic heavyweight, Uncle Tersteeg, Dorus' wealthy and successful brother-in-law. Favors were not forthcoming. Vincent was furious, and Dorus and Anna were quite likely humiliated.

Vincent toiled away as a draftsman and his work during the period garnered no encouragement in any quarter. He struggled especially to draw human figures and was hampered in this by his difficulty finding models. Unless he could find models who would pose for free, he was obliged to pay fees which he was hard pressed to afford. As in his family, he quickly alienated potential models and in fact tended to attract negative attention when drawing in public through his intense posturing and unusually dramatic wielding of pencil and brush. He sometimes attracted a scoffing crowd leaving him with no choice but to avoid the streets, forcing him indoors for project subjects.

With only Theo as a friend, and a fraught alliance it was, Vincent sought comfort in the back alleys and brothels of The Hague. A purveyor of prostitution since adolescence, Vincent formed a relationship with Sien Hoornik, a pregnant prostitute who lived with her toddler and her mother. Vincent moved the family into his studio home ushering in a chapter in his life wherein he vacillated between secrecy and defiance towards his family, sometimes seeming terrified that his family would discover his affair and other times reporting on his lifestyle to Theo in indignant and defensive tones. He was artistically productive, however, with Sien as a ready model along with some of her friends and family. The home became a kind of soup kitchen for the neighborhood with Vincent the generous proprietor. Although of course, the real underwriter was Theo who was, understandably, having financial woes under the constant pressure from his brother for funds. It was during this period that Vincent veered into an entitled, demanding posture with his brother who responded with annoyance, late payments, but compliance in the end.¹⁷

Theo, who had agreed to a monthly stipend for Vincent, an amount regularly exceeded by Vincent's penchant for overspending, became increasingly involved in advising Vincent on artistic matters of medium and subject. Through his position at Goupil, Theo had a wealth of knowledge about salability, and it is easy to imagine how important Vincent's output was becoming to the foundation of their relationship. Theo was not alone in advising Vincent about medium and subject, the family a veritable who's who of the art world of the time. Vincent had burnt several bridges with artists in the family who had offered help or advice only to find Vincent thin-skinned, disinterested, or violently contentious in response to feedback and guidance. Vincent seemed to approach his art career as a kind of battleground on which he must be armed against defeat.¹⁸

Impressionism with its harmonic play of light and color had been reigning for several years. Paintings were fetching huge sums, in an art heyday with numbers of affluent collectors on the rise. Theo began to offer specific ideas to Vincent about what he ought to paint, encouraging more upbeat subject matter and vibrant color. Vincent tended to listen but then go in the opposite direction. A case in point is the painstaking production of a dark, claustrophobic scene of a coal mining family bent over their evening meal, *The Potato Eaters*. Theo despaired of anyone wanting to own this painting and the brothers argued fiercely about the time Vincent put into it. It did not sell, and Theo remained bewildered by his brother's attachment to the subject matter. Vincent of course, was following his fascination and dedication to the poor and downtrodden (*The Potato Eaters* is on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam and is considered priceless. It has been stolen and recovered twice).

As Theo advised Vincent on art, he also began to pressure Vincent to end the affair with Sien. Interestingly, Theo had begun his own affair and was supporting a mistress. During this period, Theo was supporting six people on a salary likely suitable for two or three.

An uncle caught wind of Vincent's living situation and visited him, insisting that he break off with Sien. Vincent was livid and outraged. However, despite his attachment to Sien, he went along, consistent with his pattern of secrecy, discovery, outrage, and then acquiescence. He left Sien with some money which, of course, was Theo's.

Also true to pattern, Vincent abruptly changed location, moving to the remote heath in the north of the Netherlands, a land of dark moors, called Drenthe. He intended to stay one year and practice drawing figures, with Theo's financial support. Drenthe was a featureless, barren terrain which Vincent, with his characteristic lack of objectivity, pronounced a kind of paradise for his aims and goals. Once again, he imagined he

could find models among the peasants in villages. Quickly his rude, abrupt manner dried up his access to models and he found it difficult to work.

During this time, Vincent's sole human contact was his brother with whom he corresponded obsessively, sometimes two or three letters in one day. He became convinced that the best life plan for him and for Theo was that Theo quit his job at Goupil and join Vincent in Drenthe where the two could draw together, in a communion of talents. He urged Theo to bring his mistress Marie with him, as well. No matter that Theo's salary at Goupil supported them both and that Theo helped out the wider family as well. He pressured Theo to the point of angering Theo who did not send money for his supplies, leaving Vincent in a desperate panic of having no way to work. There is evidence that Vincent may have had a psychotic period at this time, through his letters to Theo detailing a deep despair about his life and his potentialities.¹⁹

When Vincent emerged from this desperate period after several days, he was in the grip of his final and most compelling mission: painting.

At Christmastime 1883, Vincent headed home, after only three months in Drenthe. He was broke, friendless, at odds with Theo, and, despite his newfound determination to master painting, dispirited. To his parent's dismay he took up lodging at the parsonage, at this time in Nuen, a poverty-stricken town to the east of Zundert where Dorus had agreed to come out of semiretirement to mend fences with a tiny congregation disgruntled by the church's draconian eviction policies. Vincent returned to his family spoiling for conflict, nursing old injuries and demanding apologies from his father. Certainly, the homecoming would have imploded quickly if not for a new family development.

Anna, Vincent's mother, suffered a fall while out shopping and broke a hip. The family rallied round her with Vincent playing a prominent role in caregiving. For months he threw himself into hands-on care and took pains to read to her and distract her from her pain and immobility. His parents were grateful, and Vincent's demeanor changed drastically. He ventured into painting with the approval of his parents and Theo who all offered encouragement. It is a rare interlude for the storm-tossed group.

And he produces the first "indisputable masterpiece" of his short career.²⁰ In March 1884, as his mother was convalescing and unable to venture outside to her beloved early spring, Vincent produced a small pencil on paper called *The Kingfisher*. He also embarked on a series of pencil sketches of pollard trees, all these pieces showing a remarkable eye for the detail and splendor of nature. As Vincent's biographers Naifeh

and Smith remark, “In the brief clearing of his mother’s favor, Vincent could just look.”²¹

During this period of family calm and artistic productivity for Vincent, remarkable acrimony marked the relationship between Vincent and Theo. They squabbled over money, Theo’s view of Vincent’s work, and Vincent’s belief that Theo and Dorus were in an alliance against him. Vincent questioned whether he should continue to allow Theo to represent his work. On the brink of severing their working relationship Theo acquiesced to Vincent’s opinions and Vincent offered his own conciliations.

Over the next year Anna recovered her health and Vincent gradually resumed his role as the family troublemaker and outcast. He lived in a small place near the parsonage and pursued a love affair with a neighbor which resulted in the suicide attempt of the young woman. This scandal touched the parsonage, of course. Dorus’s health, never strong, began to fail. The pressure on Theo to “manage” Vincent increased and, in an effort to influence Vincent towards moving to France, he offered Vincent the chance to have his work shown at the prestigious annual Paris Salon. Vincent reacted to this offer with a missionary zeal but he and his brother quarreled bitterly about the type of work to be shown.

In late March 1885, Dorus died. The family consensus was that Vincent had killed his father through his chronic obstreperousness and irresponsibility. Anna Van Gogh, the eldest of the sisters, evicted Vincent from the family home and, despite voluminous letter writing to mother and siblings, Vincent never returned. He decided on Antwerp as his destination, his mood bitter. He was very ill, likely with syphilis and was treated with mercury, the perilous antidote of the times.

Vincent’s artistic quest in Antwerp was to paint models and become more refined with the human figure. He was intent on the brothels as a resource for models, much to Theo’s dismay. Vincent’s health was precarious, he hinted at not eating much and Theo became insistent that Vincent abandon his pursuit of prostitutes and leave Antwerp. He threatened his brother with cutting off financial support.

Vincent had stated that he planned to stay in Antwerp for a brief spell, maybe a couple of months. As Theo pushed him to leave, Vincent indicated a plan to stay in Antwerp for a long time. To punctuate his intentions, he enrolled in the Royal Academy of Art, a direction he had always dismissed as pointlessly pedestrian, and he also joined two artist clubs. He was poorly received by teachers and students alike, provoking rejection with his frenzied, odd mannerisms and aloof, arrogant attitude. His pencil drawings were widely disparaged, criticism piercing his thin skin like a knife to the heart. In the winter of 1886, at about one full year after his father’s death, he

confessed to Theo that he was in a physical and emotional collapse. “It is an absolute breakdown. It overtook me so unexpectedly.”²²

What to do with Vincent? Theo, residing in Paris and working his way up the ranks at Goupil, suggested that Vincent go home, to Nuenen, to rest and spend his days painting. Vincent, for his part, decided it is time that he come to Paris and that the brothers live together, each pursuing their end of the art world in an embrace of brotherly ambition. Theo stridently urged Vincent not to come to Paris, likely fearing the worst from shared housing with his unpredictable brother. Of course, in March 1887 Vincent travelled by train to Gare du Nord, eagerly telling his brother to meet him at the Louvre, apologizing for the surprise arrival but full of hopes for what they can achieve together.

The Paris union of the brothers, off to a rocky start, had its advantages and disadvantages. Theo, with his affable personality, was an insider in the artists community and well-situated to observe and encourage salable art from the exciting emerging trends. He urged his brother to paint from nature, and Vincent began to paint outside, borrowing from the Impressionists treatment of light and color. His eye, for years tuned to the subtleties of nature and his hand, perhaps finally becoming more cooperative with line and form, allowed the emergence of works that, while not selling, were more cordially received. In turn, Vincent, with his sense of art reaching some real maturity, helped Theo in sales for Goupil. Their enmeshment in each other’s work carried the burden of jealousy, however. Vincent was stung when Theo made the bold purchase for Goupil of some works of Claude Monet, a rising star.

Another new development signalled a threat to Vincent’s alliance with his brother. Theo was pursuing an engagement. Johannah “Jo” Bonger, sister of a friend that Theo had met in Amsterdam, had captured his romantic heart, a heart which had perhaps grown weary of a succession of ill-chosen and expensive mistresses. Jo Bonger was a serious young woman, well-educated and of a good family. She was standoffish and rebuffed brash Theo’s pursuit, but he stayed intent on her.

In February 1888, both brothers were physically ill, likely with syphilis and quite possibly suffering from the effects of mercury treatment. Theo was in the worst shape and Vincent worried about his brother, perhaps felt responsible because of his history of encouraging Theo to indulge in prostitutes. But their relationship was steadier than it had been in years despite the resentment-generating financial tangle between them. There was some semblance of stability to their living arrangement, some satisfying mutual support, and Vincent was heady with small measures of deference from fellow artists who flocked to Theo’s side. He was producing paintings which, while still not selling, would one day grace the most prestigious museums in the world. After years

of effort and struggle, both with his craft and with his reactivity to those in his environment, Vincent gained a toehold of position in the charged artistic scene.

And so, without notice, Vincent left Paris. His reasons for sudden relocation to Arles, several train hours south, were never really clear, but perhaps can be best understood through this passage of a letter written shortly before his death, two years later:

“After Father was no more and I came to Theo in Paris, then he became so attached to me that I understood how much he had loved Father...It is a good thing that I did not stay in Paris, for we, he and I, would have become too close.”²³

The last two years of Vincent’s life are widely known for his spiral into alcohol abuse, self-mutilation, outright madness, and finally, a violent end. It was also in these final two years that Vincent produced most of his most acclaimed work. Leaving his brother’s side, he launched into a painting frenzy on his arrival in Arles, simultaneously seeking to operationalize his dream of a kind of artist’s colony. Never mind that he had just walked away from such an arrangement in Paris, he began anew, stretching his brother’s generosity when he rented a house in Arles famously known ever after as “the Yellow House”.

At the Yellow House Vincent likely sought to recreate a family and a set of relationships more satisfying than what he had with his given family. It was not his first attempt at a substitute family. His biography is filled with brief, idealized pursuit of mentors, teachers, even landladies, none of whom could tolerate his stormy personality for long. At the Yellow House he tried again and was thrilled when Paul Gauguin, a French post-Impressionist artist that Vincent had met in Paris during his time with Theo, agreed to come and live with him for a time.

Vincent, in his usual way, attached himself to Gauguin even before Gauguin arrived, and projected an idyllic bond with the painter. Gauguin, struggling financially, vacillated for months before finally appearing at the Yellow House with little notice.

Correspondence indicates that Theo likely made Gauguin’s journey happen when he offered to subsidize Gauguin’s travel and living expenses at the Yellow House.²⁴ Uncle Cent had died in 1888 leaving a will that specifically denied Vincent any inheritance, but which made Theo a special bequest that changed his financial picture and, unknown to the rejecting patriarch, paved the way for the realization of Vincent’s artistic legacy.

Almost from the start the residents of the Yellow House clashed. A likely trigger was a business collaboration between Gauguin and Theo, with Vincent on the outside.

Nevertheless, the two painters worked side by side for a few weeks, with Vincent's output during this period succumbing to Gauguin's style, bold colors and simple forms. Inevitably, and after several loud and rather public rows, their living arrangement came to an abrupt end with Vincent's infamous drunken slicing of his left ear and his subsequent psychiatric hospitalization near Arles. Notably, at this time, Theo was preoccupied with Jo Bonger and had proposed to her.

Vincent was discharged from hospital fairly quickly but was soon re-hospitalized when the neighborhood of the Yellow House joined together in a petition for his commitment. They cited his public drunkenness and threatening behavior which landed Vincent back at the same institution. By this point, Vincent had developed a fondness for absinthe, a toxic alcoholic drink popular in the late 1800's and now known to cause hallucinations and volatility. Vincent recovered very slowly during his second hospitalization which was sobering to him. He wrote Theo that he was "beginning to consider madness as a disease like any other and accept the thing as such."²⁵ His family did not visit although the attending doctors corresponded with Theo about Vincent's progress.

Theo was caught up with his plans to marry Jo. In fact, the entire family was happy for Theo and mother Anna made clear how thrilled she was for the new life Theo would have with Jo. Vincent's sense of abandonment and failure was no doubt magnified.²⁶ In hospital he painted when he felt well enough and expressed that art was his only solace. He portrayed the wards of the hospital as well as the surrounding landscape, leaving a chronicle of his time of imprisonment as he would call it.²⁷

And yet, when it came time to return to independent living, Vincent fitfully admitted to his brother and to his doctors that he did not feel he could risk it. After much consultation, and letters back and forth between Vincent and Theo, Vincent settled resignedly on a long stay at another institution. In the end, he had to be firm with Theo about his decision, his brother attempting to turn him away from the undeniable stigma of a "lunatic asylum." And yet, it seems likely that Vincent made his decision for Theo and for his family. "I wish to remain shut up as much for my own peace of mind as for other people's."²⁸

On the eve Theo's wedding Vincent was admitted to the St. Paul asylum at St. Remy-de-Provence, a small, private hospital he had chosen because of its reputation for allowing patient's ample freedom to pursue their interests. Theo was unhappy with the cost and the brothers dickered some over this issue, Theo ultimately acquiescing when Vincent threatened to abandon the hospital plan altogether and "join the Foreign Legion."²⁹ Theo likely wished to get on with his new life with Jo whom Vincent had not yet met.

Vincent stayed one year at the asylum, until May 1890. The length of stay, Vincent's cooperation with treatment, and a keenly observant doctor seemed to foster at last some progress in understanding Vincent's life troubles. He was diagnosed with "latent epilepsy" a form of non-seizure epilepsy, likely present since childhood and exacerbated with time, and most definitely inherited from his ancestors, many of whom had suffered with the condition and other forms of mental affliction.³⁰

Somewhat unburdened from guilt and in a peaceful, undemanding environment, Vincent began to thrive. In the course of the year at St. Remy he produced almost 150 paintings among them some of his most outstanding masterpieces. "Starry Night", arguably his most revered work, was completed in June 1889, depicting the artist's nighttime view from his asylum window of the village below canopied under a mystically glowing sky. He painted in a frenzy, hospital scenes, the natural world around him when he could get outside, self-portraits, portraits of his doctor. Free from many of the pressures and stresses that had thrown him off course his style had finally crystallized into a form that was distinctively his own. He would later be known as the leader of Post-Impressionism but at that time he was simply synthesizing years of observing art, analyzing structure and color, struggling to draw, wrestling with the paintbrush, taming his hands and temperament in a final creative soar.³¹

And still, nothing sold. This, while Theo represented painters who were reaping huge sums for their work in Paris. Vincent toiled in isolation, without much recognition at all for what he was achieving at the easel. Resignedly, he and Theo agreed that "Starry Night" was not very good.³² Vincent routinely sent drawings and sometimes paintings to family members; his mother made little comment in her few letters to her son.

In terms of family, through voluminous correspondence Vincent was privy to all that was occurring in Paris and the Netherlands. Theo was in failing health, likely the relentless progression of syphilis, and this tormented Vincent. Mother Anna was anxious for Theo and Vincent was acutely aware of her distress, felt responsible for it.³³ Jo and Theo announced their pregnancy with Jo expressing some concern for the child's health, given Theo's sickness. Vincent extended his good wishes to the couple but likely felt further on the outside of his brother's life. Theo's letters had become more infrequent and less personal, more perfunctory. Vincent's younger brother Cor left for military service in Africa without a word to Vincent while mother Anna and sister Wil moved to Breda, a town without any family connection.

Vincent lived in fear of another spell of paranoia and darkness. Soon after writing a wrenching letter to Theo in which he offered to stay out of his life and leave Theo freer to devote himself to Jo and the coming baby, he entered an extended black hole

of madness. This spell was longer than any previous and he did not become clear enough to care for himself for two or three months. Even then, he was acutely paranoid and had now become convinced that the asylum was dangerous to him.

Isolated and afraid, he turned to the only medicine he knew he could rely on, his work. Vincent threw himself into a copious output of drawings and paintings. He told Theo, “Because I am ill at present, I am trying to do something to console myself. I find that it teaches me things . . .³⁴ Ever so gradually he tested his fragile mental and physical energy against the demands of creative enterprise. When he was strong enough, he again began to spend hours outdoors, painting many of his most exquisite scenes from the surrounding landscape. His craft began to veer far from the norms of realistic, photography-like drawings and even further from visually airy, soft Impressionism and seemed to be headed towards a futuristic sort of abstraction during the latter part of his stay at the asylum.³⁵ He began to free color from its normative prescriptions, his Olive Tree series an example of wildly twisted shapes boldly colored against a green sky, all movement and energy. However, the voluminous flow was stopped by another round of debilitations in late 1889 that stretched into early spring 1890. During this time the family welcomed Jo and Theo’s baby whom they named Vincent.

In May 1890, while in another fragile recovery from months of severe infirmity, Vincent determined to leave the asylum. After much deliberation with his doctors and with Theo, he took up residence in Auvers-sur-Oise a town just a short train ride from Theo and Jo’s home in Paris. Auvers was chosen in part because Theo had heard of a doctor there who was possibly willing to care for Vincent, Paul Gachet. Dr. Gachet had a record of treating artists and while residing in Auvers Vincent planned to see him regularly. With discharge from St. Remy Vincent was called “cured” but no one could have believed this to be the case, least of all Vincent.

With Theo’s ongoing financial backing, Vincent had all that he needed in Auvers to live in material comfort. His mind was somewhat stabilized, but he was, as always, wracked with loneliness. While he filled canvases with oil portraits of new acquaintances and lush local gardens, he began a campaign to convince Theo and Jo to join him in the picturesque medieval town by the river Oise. As he embarked on a series of wheat field compositions which would come to number in the dozens, he was gradually repeating the pattern of alienating his neighbors and provoking rejection. During this wildly prolific period, truly his last gasp, he produced around seventy paintings, even as he was tormented by news that his namesake, the infant Vincent, was ill.

Uncharacteristically, Theo wrote to Vincent to report on his own family problems. Wanting more income, Theo was in the midst of a scheme to leave Goupil and enter an art venture with Jo's brother Andries. As this plan was about to launch, the baby became ill, and Jo's health followed suit. Theo was deeply distressed and had decided that Jo and the baby should return home to the country air of Holland for a spell. Vincent leapt into action, paying an unexpected visit to Theo's Paris home. True to form, he managed to escalate the tension within the family by criticizing Jo's mothering who in turn lamented her husband's need to financially support Vincent. It was a day of violent arguing and then Vincent's hasty return to Auvers.

This scene would be the last family gathering of Vincent's life. Three weeks later, on July 27, 1890, he would be wounded by gunshot in the wheat field not far from his lodgings, where he had been spending the day in plein air painting. In the three weeks between the family melee and Vincent's wounding, Theo settled his family in Holland and returned to Paris where he continued his work for Goupil. He abandoned his venture with Andries. Vincent sent many letters imploring his brother to join him at Auvers where they could try again at solidarity and be a family together. Theo was withdrawn for a time and when he did write he was dismissive of the family rancor of earlier in the month, treating it as a small thing which it clearly was not.³⁶ Vincent was in a flurry of painting, producing about two dozen of his most beloved landscape and garden pieces during this time, at the height of his ability even as his life was dimming.

There is mystery to the death of Vincent Van Gogh. His gunshot wound to the abdomen caused him to die slowly over a two-day period, Theo on hand for much of the vigil. Vincent stated that he wounded himself and his history of self-harm and depressed volatility made a conclusion of suicide inevitable. However, there is much to suggest that the gunshot may have come from another, with Vincent reluctant to point an accusing finger.³⁷

Vincent had become a target for bullies in Auvers, not a new problem for him. He was often in the company of rowdy adolescents who would disturb his work and create havoc for him. He was surprisingly tolerant of this group, and it has been suggested that there may have been a prank gone awry involving a gun in the hands of a teenager discharging in an unintended way. Vincent did not own a gun, he had never handled a gun, and he had never attempted suicide at any time prior, despite his depths of self-loathing. Few self-inflicted gunshots are directed at the abdomen. Further, the scene where the shooting occurred was absent Vincent's paint supplies and easel as well as a gun. These items were never recovered.

By accident or by suicide, it is certainly likely that Vincent wanted to die. He was at a particularly low point in his relationship with Theo, he had no friends, and his

position in his family was that of pariah. His father had been dead almost five years, and his mother and siblings maintained a careful distance from him. He had produced over 2,000 pieces of art, including 900 paintings and countless drawings. He had sold one painting, this for a mere 400 francs.

He was thirty-seven years old.

Vincent's death was followed by a series of losses and reversals of fortune in the Van Gogh family. Theo finally quit his job at Goupil in October 1890 and was subsequently hospitalized in the same month for elevated symptoms of his long-time malady. He died in an asylum in January 1891, having become totally incapacitated mentally and then physically. Brother Cor died in Africa of suicide in 1891. Sister Wil was committed to an asylum in 1892 where she made several suicide attempts and required almost total care. Mother Anna died in 1907, having survived crushing disappointments and much heartache.

And, still, as the family spun out and sputtered, Vincent's star began to rise. Jo Bonger Van Gogh was in possession of the correspondence between Theo and Vincent as well as at least 200 of Vincent's paintings. She astutely recognized the worth of the language and themes in the brothers' letters and pursued a publication in 1914 called "Letters to Theo" which proved popular and helped spread interest in the person of Vincent Van Gogh. She donated many of Vincent's paintings to exhibitions and his work at last began to receive acclaim. Jo was instrumental in gathering the volume of the work, much of it scattered throughout Europe, in attics and cellars, in the hands of creditors and relatives. She wrote a history of the Van Gogh family.

And finally, several years before her death in 1925, she had Theo's body moved from the public cemetery in Utrecht Netherlands where he had been interred quietly 34 years earlier. She had him re-buried next to his brother in the hillside cemetery by the wheat fields in Auvers.

The Van Gogh Family: A Family for All Time

In a letter to Theo, Vincent wrote “Oh, if I could have worked without this accursed disease—what I might have done.”³⁸ How easily this sentiment resonates in the mind of any person of serious reflection who wrestles with the facts of health, position, emotional sensitivity, and relationship trial. Vincent’s letters to his brother and others are evocative of the human condition with its inherent challenge in being a self. Perhaps that is why Vincent’s biographers Naifeh and White Smith have called his collected writings “one of the great documents.”³⁹

Van Gogh scholar Jan Hulsker wrote of van Gogh's letters, "Vincent was able to express himself splendidly, and it is this remarkable writing talent that has secured the letters their lasting place in world literature".⁴⁰

The Van Goghs were surely a mix of advantages and limitations for the son who uneasily carried the namesake forward.

Vincent was born to hard working, conscientious individuals who had themselves squeaked into marriage and reproduction with the assistance of their own siblings and parents. The background of calamity and violent death through the previous generations provided a natural context for Anna and Dorus to inherit anxiety and then to over focus on children, the evidence for this in the poor adult outcomes of several of the siblings. The reproduction of the offspring of Anna and Dorus is striking: six children produced three acknowledged offspring (and likely two more, one born to Theo and a mistress as well as a baby born and relinquished by Lies, Vincent’s younger sister.) The Van Gogh family is a rich illustration of Bowen’s concept of multigenerational transmission process:

“...the pattern that develops over multiple generations as children emerge from the parental family with higher, equal, or lower basic levels of differentiation.”⁴¹

Of course, the generations of societal strife and calamity preceding the arrival of Dorus and Anna into their families must be factored into this family’s adaptation over time.

Vincent’s painful struggle to develop a life around the raw material of intense sensitivity to environment is surely illuminative of life at the lower levels of differentiation where life is governed by “a feeling controlled world in which feelings and subjectivity are dominant over the objective reasoning processes most of the time.”⁴² One wonders if Vincent’s voluminous letter writing was his solution to the problem of relating too closely to others: most of his letters are thoughtful, sensitive

missives, full of attention to the situation of the receiver and revealing of his own life and its rhythms. If the self writing the letters could have “showed up” more often, Vincent’s life might have had quite a different course. Would we have more-- or fewer-- masterpieces to enjoy?

Certainly, Vincent’s life is a study in the way triangles shape expectations and therefore reactivity in relationships. The triangles in place before Vincent’s birth are familiar ones: Dorus was obligated into a parson’s life when the older siblings opted out, leaving Vincent a possible solver of his frustrated father’s hopes and dreams. To add to the pressure, Vincent grew up wrapped in parental anticipation of financial and social status inheritance from Uncle Cent. This dependence of one brother on the other played out in the next generation as Theo vacillated between capitulation to Vincent’s demands for money and emotional support and an angry withdrawal from him. Vincent himself wobbled between an entitled posture and one of sorrow and guilt at the way his life problems were draining his brother. Since neither could find a firm position with some degree of autonomy, their relationship suffered. Of course, Anna’s and the rest of the family’s willingness to let Theo be the “Vincent whisperer” played its part in the intensity between the brothers. One wonders how Theo’s life might have played out with just one more family member intentionally in contact and connected to Vincent.

Vincent’s relationship with his mother is the subtler side of the parental triangle. It is obvious that Dorus was the more active parent in addressing behavior issues, and one pictures Anna passively counting on her husband to settle problems. There is little doubt that Anna took a withdrawn posture to her son early on, no doubt vexed at his persistently contrary nature.

His long solitary rambles in the meadows and woods, where he honed his eye for detail in nature, might have been part of his side of the distance between those two. Vincent was clearly sensitive to his mother’s approval, and he never seemed to stop searching for indications of her feelings towards him. And yet, his efforts to make contact with her could not be sustained for long, inevitably ending in his provoking an argument or a rebuke which he would later decry as a rejection.

This pattern was repeated throughout his life, with family, with teachers, with employers, and with fellow artists. It was as if he could tolerate just a little human contact although he would have said he wanted and needed much more than he was getting. He sought love and approval passionately while he pushed people away with both hands.

Fortunately, those hands turned to painting. Vincent had enough self to recognize that his salvation was in developing his craft. He declared “As my work is, so am I.”⁴³ As Vincent’s ten years of concerted output progressed, his paintings seemed to become increasingly relatable. The way his brush simply captured emotion and transferred feeling to canvas became more and more compelling. Today, to stand in front of a Van Gogh is to be vigorously invited into the energy of the scene. Was it the relationship with painting that Vincent most successfully managed? Up against his exquisite sensitivity to people did Vincent find a personally limiting but wildly triumphant solution in art? If so, subsequent generations in the world community are the fortunate inheritors of the emotional processes of the Van Gogh family and Vincent, their agonized, sublime genius.

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¹ Naifeh, Steven and White Smith, Gregory. *Van Gogh: The Life* (New York: Random House, 2011).

² Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 16.

³ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 16.

⁴ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 31.

⁵ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 46.

⁶ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 47.

⁷ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 67.

⁸ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 93.

⁹ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 151.

¹⁰ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 173.

¹¹ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 168.

¹² Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 188.

¹³ www.thevangoghletters.org, letter 148: from Vincent to Theo, November 1878.

¹⁴ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 208.

¹⁵ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 210.

¹⁶ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 210.

¹⁷ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 254.

¹⁸ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 254.

¹⁹ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 357. “To escape the demons let loose... Vincent fled into his imagination— as he always did.”

²⁰ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 383.

²¹ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 385.

²² Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 488.

²³ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 563.

²⁴ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 614.

²⁵ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 739.

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- ²⁶ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 736.
- ²⁷ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 736.
- ²⁸ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 741.
- ²⁹ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 742.
- ³⁰ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 750.
- ³¹ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 751.
- ³² Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 784.
- ³³ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 769.
- ³⁴ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 781.
- ³⁵ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 789.
- ³⁶ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 846.
- ³⁷ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, Appendix: A Note on Vincent's Fatal Wounding.
- ³⁸ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 820.
- ³⁹ *Van Gogh: The Life*, interview with Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith at the John Adams Institute, July 10, 2017.
- ⁴⁰ www.thevangoghletters.org: Van Gogh the Letter Writer.
- ⁴¹ Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (New York: Jason Aronson Inc, 1987), p. 477.
- ⁴² Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, p. 473.
- ⁴³ Naifeh and White Smith, *Van Gogh*, p. 6.