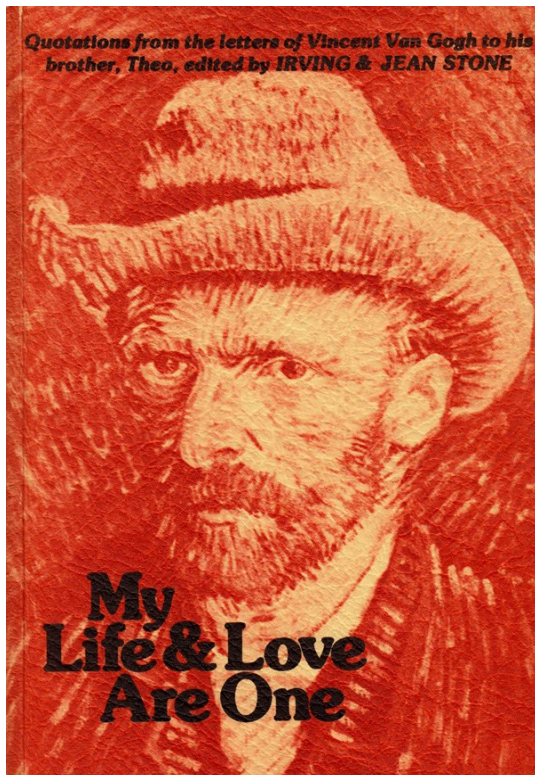




Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) Dutch Painter

had an eccentric personality and unstable moods, suffered from recurrent psychotic episodes during the last 2 years of his extraordinary life, and committed suicide at the age of 37. Despite limited evidence, well over 150 physicians have ventured a perplexing variety of diagnoses of his illness. Henri Gastaut, in a study of the artist's life and medical history published in 1956, identified van Gogh's major illness during the last 2 years of his life as temporal lobe epilepsy precipitated by the use of absinthe in the presence of an early limbic lesion. In essence, Gastaut confirmed the diagnosis originally

made by the French physicians who had treated van Gogh. However, van Gogh had earlier suffered two distinct episodes of reactive depression, and there are clearly bipolar aspects to his history. Both episodes of depression were followed by sustained periods of increasingly high energy and enthusiasm, first as an evangelist and then as an artist. The highlights of van Gogh's life and letters are reviewed and discussed in an effort toward better understanding of the complexity of his illness.



Van Gogh's most direct and honest account of his psychoemotional turmoil comes from the letters to his brother Theo, originally published in 1937 as the hefty tome *Dear Theo: The Autobiography of Vincent van Gogh* and later excerpted in *My Life & Love Are One* (public library) — the same wonderful 1976 gem that gave us his thoughts on love, tracing “the magic and melancholy of Vincent van Gogh.” The title comes from a specific letter written during one of the painter's periods of respite from mental illness, in which he professes to his brother: “*Life has become very dear to me, and I am very glad that I love. My life and my love are one.*”