Preface and Acknowledgements

Commentators frequently remark on the exceptional literary quality of Vincent van Gogh’s collected letters, but no one has yet produced an extended critical assessment of this aspect of his writing. In the present study, I offer such an assessment, focusing on key constellations of metaphors and ideas, as well as a variety of rhetorical strategies through which a compellingly imagined, powerfully humanizing vision emerges from the formidable complexity of Van Gogh’s collected correspondence.

In the following pages, I am, for the most part, not interested in the letters as biography or as a way of accessing the paintings, nor do I deal with Van Gogh’s many letter-sketches. I realize that the artist would probably be dismayed at the thought of his private correspondence being made public, never mind being subjected to the attentions of a reader bent on discovering a special literary distinction in the eclectic, tangled, and bristling variety of this daunting, often uneven body of writing. As I point out in the introduction, many problems do indeed attend the kind of critical exercise I have undertaken. Still, I am satisfied that the letters as a whole offer such a captivating and authentically imagined set of reflections on our shared human predicament that it is worthwhile attempting some assessment of how and why this is so.

My first encounter with Van Gogh’s letters occurred on a rainy winter day in Belfast, Northern Ireland, when I was sixteen. I had ducked into the Belfast Central Library to take refuge from the miserable weather, and I selected a book at random to pass the time. The book was a biography of Van Gogh — I have no idea which one — with extensive excerpts from the letters as well as reproductions of the
paintings. Some two hours later, I left the library, still clutching the book, realizing that my personal kaleidoscope, as it were, had shifted: the world was not looking quite the same as before. When I finished the book some days later, I recall telling myself that by and by, I would return to Van Gogh and invest whatever effort I could in attempting to understand more adequately the extraordinary achievements of this unusual man.

As it happens, it took me almost exactly a half-century to return to the letters in earnest, half a world away from Belfast and at the end of an academic career during which I had written a good deal about literature and various allied topics and concerns. As a sort of recapitulation of that career, I considered writing a collection of essays to address matters I had been especially concerned about or held to be formative during the previous decades. I wanted one of these essays to be on Van Gogh, so I read *The Complete Letters* (2000), finding myself again as thoroughly engaged as I had been in the Belfast Central Library. This time, however, I also visited the Van Gogh Museum Library in Amsterdam to consult the secondary literature, and by and by, I fell into conversation with Hans Luijten, from whom I learned, among other things, that the magnificent 2009 edition of the complete correspondence would soon be published. The more I talked with Hans and the more I learned about the current state of scholarship on the letters, the more clearly I came to realize that despite repeated genuflections by commentators acknowledging the quality of Van Gogh’s writing, no one had attempted an extended critical account of the remarkable imaginative power of the correspondence as a whole. The coincidence of interests and opportunities was too persuasive to be resisted, so, after writing my collection of essays (one of them on Van Gogh, as planned), I set about the present project, returning to my early promise in a more thoroughgoing manner than I might ever have anticipated.

Because the following book is addressed primarily to those who will be reading Van Gogh’s correspondence in translation, I quote throughout from *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters* (2009). Like other distinguished renditions into English (Sir Thomas Hoby’s *Courtyer*, Pope’s *Iliad*, FitzGerald’s *Rubaiyat*, MacKenna’s *Enneads*, among others), the
2009 translation is remarkable for its inherent interest and high quality. Certainly, in its own right it is captivating and powerful enough to sustain the kind of critical assessment that I offer in the following pages.

Still, not least because of Van Gogh’s scarcely translatable idiosyncrasies, grammatical irregularities, and textual markings, it would be unwise to insist on a complete independence of the English version from the source texts in Dutch and French. Consequently, in the following pages my main strategies are, first, to ensure that my readings are sufficiently broad not to depend on nuances that the translation does not catch and, second, to check that, in specific instances, the original languages will sustain the kind of interpretation I am making based on the English. For instance, in Chapter 6, I discuss Van Gogh’s opinions about “memory” and “imagination.” In some cases, the Dutch says “uit het hoofd” and the French “composer de tête,” both using the word for “head” (“hoofd,” “tête”), which is sometimes translated as “memory” and sometimes as “imagination.” In my analysis, the main point is that Van Gogh is concerned with what goes on inside one’s mind as distinct from the outside, material world, and, despite the above-mentioned differences, the translation conveys this idea very adequately. But if I were to explain every such difference between the translation and its source, my book would rapidly sink under the weight of it all.

Although there are indeed limits to working from any translated version, I take heart from the words of Leo Jansen and Hans Luijten, the editors of Vincent van Gogh: The Letters, who comment that “thanks to the English translation,” their edition “will be the first truly integral and updated compilation of Van Gogh’s correspondence available to an international readership” (“How to Do It and How Not to Do It: Problems in the Translation of Vincent van Gogh’s Letters,” Edition: Internationales Jahrbuch für Editionswissenschaft 15 [2001]: 53). As this observation suggests, a good case can be made for working from the English, if only because the linguistic skills required to read the original Dutch and French are shared by a relatively small number of people. As the editors say, the English is “the first fully integral” version and is especially accessible internationally.
Finally, with a view to concentrating as fully as possible on the patterns of literary images and concepts that are at the heart of the present study, I have preferred not to furnish illustrations from Van Gogh’s visual art. In a subsequent book, I hope to take a more theoretical view of the process of self-fashioning that the letters record and also, especially, to discuss Van Gogh’s 242 letter-sketches.

I gratefully acknowledge the help I have received from the Van Gogh Museum. As I mention above, Hans Luijten encouraged me at a crucial moment to consider embarking on the present study. From the start, it was clear that Hans had an unusually discerning and informed understanding of the literary value of Van Gogh’s letters, and of how this aspect of the correspondence would be well served by an extended literary-critical assessment. Thanks also to Leo Jansen for commenting on the typescript, and to Nina Krebaum, Laurence Lerner, Sue Mitchell, Fieke Pabst, Peter Stoepker, and Henry Summerfield. Permission to print excerpts from the letters has been gratefully received from the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, and from David Goatley to reproduce his portrait, *My Dear Theo*, on the jacket cover.