In this book, I attempt to offer some assessment of the literary distinction of Vincent van Gogh’s collected letters. In doing so, I am not primarily interested in what the letters tell us about Van Gogh’s biography, or how they enable us to approach his paintings, or what they say about the times in which he lived. Rather, I focus on a point that commentators often notice in passing: namely, that this remarkable correspondence exercises upon us the same kind of challenging and revelatory power as does a great work of literature.

The meaning of the word literature is, of course, in itself problematic and has given rise to some considerable debate among theorists. In a straightforward sense, the word is usually taken to indicate the fictional domain of poetry, plays, and novels, though it is not unusual for other kinds of writing, such as essays, biography, letters, memoirs, and the like, to be described as having literary qualities. This does not mean that letters or memoirs are fictional in the way that novels are, but rather that we are engaged by an imaginative use of language that reveals aspects of experience dulled by customary usage and by habitual ways of thinking and understanding. As Heidegger says, in a work of art, “truth occurs as unconcealedness,” as the “unfamiliar source” of familiar things is disclosed, evoking wonder and a sense of discovery. In experiencing a work of art, we therefore find ourselves “for and with one another” in a shared communication of the mystery.
of being, by which we are constituted and sustained and which is revealed to us in new, life-enhancing ways.²

In some such sense, I suggest that Vincent van Gogh’s letters likewise illuminate and transfigure how we think and feel about matters of common experience. Throughout his correspondence, Van Gogh engages repeatedly with topics of broad human interest and concern — religion, love, death, sickness, creativity — but he does so with such imaginative resourcefulness that the correspondence as a whole expresses a personal vision of unusual originality and revelatory power.³ As Van Gogh says, things are “put in a new light by the artist,” and as a result, “all things are made new” (152/1:242).⁴ Just so, his own correspondence is itself a remarkable artistic achievement, though there is to date no sustained critical discussion of how and why this is so.

As Wouter van der Veen says, the prefaces to all the main editions of Van Gogh’s letters “unfailingly point out the artistic character of these epistles,” even though in the informative analysis of Van Gogh’s use of French that Van der Veen then provides, he makes clear that his own goal “is not to produce a literary commentary” but rather to assess Van Gogh’s linguistic competence.⁵ In his more recent book, Van Gogh: A Literary Mind (2009), Van der Veen again notes that the letters are “part of the world’s literary heritage,” but his main concern is now with “Van Gogh the reader” and “his intellectual development.”⁶ In pursuing this line of enquiry, Van der Veen makes some observations of a literary-critical kind, but his main focus is on the governing idea that Van Gogh, for the most part, read books that confirmed his own passionately held convictions: “the texts he mentions are above all the mirror, and not necessarily the source for this extremely individual mind” (57).

The present book can be seen as complementary to Van der Veen’s important study. That is, I am not mainly interested here in the books that Van Gogh read, although I acknowledge the part they play in his letters and his deployment of them for rhetorical effect in specific instances. Rather, I am concerned with the literary dynamics and imaginative coherence of Van Gogh’s own writing.

The book that most resembles Van der Veen’s is Judy Sund’s True to Temperament (1992). Sund focuses on how French Naturalist novels
shaped Van Gogh’s “sociopolitical and aesthetic convictions, as well as his conception of modernity.” Her carefully researched and illuminating study attends especially to what she calls “conceptual linkages” between Van Gogh’s paintings and the French Naturalists whose works he admired (3). Although Van Gogh does not directly depict scenes from the novels, Sund shows how his reading is “an integral component of his creative personality” as a painter (7). Again, however, she does not dwell on how this “creative personality” is expressed in the letters.

Another major study with a bearing on the present project is Carol Zemel’s *Van Gogh’s Progress* (1997). Zemel’s main idea is that Van Gogh’s “unremitting idealism . . . infused his practice” and that his paintings can be seen as launching a series of utopian cultural programs aimed at specific audiences. These projects remain shot through with contradictions and tensions highlighting unresolved class and gender differences, exacerbated by the burgeoning capitalist art-market with which Van Gogh was closely involved.

Zemel’s focus on Van Gogh’s utopianism addresses an aspect of his thinking that I highlight in part 1: Van Gogh’s idealism and the negative contrasts that challenge it. But Zemel’s argument, in large part, depends, as she says, on downplaying the expressive aspects of Van Gogh’s work and focusing instead on historically produced class differences and the ensuing contradictions that his utopian thinking reveals (244). By contrast, my own concern is to emphasize the personal and expressive dimensions that Zemel deliberately sets aside and to focus on the literary achievement of the letters, which she does not.

In *Van Gogh and His Letters* (2007), Leo Jansen begins by noting, like so many other commentators, how Van Gogh’s collected correspondence is often acknowledged as belonging “in the front rank of world literature.” But Jansen does not explore the implications of this statement, mainly because his study aims to provide a broad introduction to the letters and to how they “represent the written complement” to Van Gogh’s “artistic career” (17). Jansen describes the contents of the correspondence; the materials used in producing it; the handwriting, revisions, and sketches within the letters; and so on. Given the aim of his project, he does not assess in detail how and why the letters might,
in fact, deserve a position of pre-eminence among the world’s great literary productions.

In their recent biography, *Van Gogh: The Life* (2011), Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith contend carefully with the difficulties of interpreting the letters as evidence for events that actually happened. Because Van Gogh engages in so much special pleading, evasion, manipulation, and the like, his correspondence often cannot be taken at face value and needs to be assessed with reference to other kinds of evidence. Naifeh and Smith attend carefully to this kind of assessment, in the course of which they also occasionally notice the quality of Van Gogh’s writing.

For instance, while in the province of Drenthe, Van Gogh “filled his letters with elaborate word paintings” (351), and he supplied a “relentless varnish of words” (438) in describing *The Potato Eaters* to Theo. Naifeh and Smith acknowledge his “profligate descriptive powers” (422), as well as the “flights of rhetoric” with which he promotes his “Berceuse-and-sunflower decorations” (718). Understandably, these observations, among others of the same kind, are made in order to confirm certain biographical points. Thus, the “elaborate word paintings” in Drenthe show how Van Gogh closed his eyes to the dreadful conditions under which people lived there. The “varnish of words” is Vincent’s “desperate” (438) advance attempt to shape Theo’s opinion about *The Potato Eaters* and is evidence of Vincent’s insecurities. The “profligate descriptive powers” are mentioned to confirm how hard-hearted Vincent was, not having “expended a single word” at his father’s funeral, despite his unusual ability with language (422). The “flights of rhetoric” are significant because they mask the seriously ill Van Gogh’s futility as he set about “redeeming not just the failed combination with Gauguin but all his Midi suffering and sacrifice” (718). In short, the effectiveness of Van Gogh’s writing is discussed here not for its own sake but as a way of confirming the relentlessly depressing portrait of the man (either an “Ingrate From Hell or an achingly sensitive artist,” as one reviewer says) that this biography provides.

Although I am convinced by Naifeh and Smith that Van Gogh would have been impossible to have about the house for long, I take solace
from the fact that the mind and sensibility that produced the letters are (among other things) engaging and humane. Indeed, the beauty and power that we find in the silent voices of Van Gogh’s paintings are complemented by his remarkable correspondence, which would continue to have readers even if, by some chance, the paintings were lost to us. In this regard, Dick van Halsema recently drew attention to an acknowledgement in 2010 by the Museum of Dutch Literature that Vincent van Gogh belongs among “our hundred greatest dead writers.” Van Halsema goes on to consider Van Gogh’s historical relationship to the Movement of 1880, but in so doing, he correctly points out that the “literary value” of Van Gogh’s letters lies especially “in the movements of the whole” and in an encompassing “coherence” (28). Van Halsema’s article is a welcome statement of the main underlying conviction of the present study. As he says, Van Gogh was not just a writer of occasional descriptive passages; rather, the collected letters have an imaginative integrity and power that do indeed merit the recognition they were officially accorded in 2010.

Finally, I should mention, however briefly, the magnificent 2009 edition of Van Gogh’s complete correspondence, which is available both in print and online. This massive project, fifteen years in the making, is definitive and provides the most accurate, complete English translation, which I use throughout the present study. As does virtually every other printed version of Van Gogh’s letters, the six-volume 2009 edition calls attention to the author’s literary distinction. Thus, Van Gogh has left us (however “unwittingly”) “a literary monument” (1:19), and “there is broad recognition of the intrinsic qualities of his writing: the personal tone, evocative style and lively language” (1:15). Because of his “gift for words,” Van Gogh “rises above the purely individual and, as a result, attains the universality of all great literature” (1:15). Again, given the nature of their undertaking, the editors do not dwell on how Van Gogh’s “gift for words” affords his correspondence the literary qualities they describe, which is the task I have undertaken here. They do, however, provide a definitive account of the documents (6:19–25), which I will now summarize.
Assessing the Documents

The total number of letters known to exist is 903. Of these, Van Gogh wrote 820 and received 83. In addition, the 2009 edition contains 25 “related manuscripts” (RM) consisting of pages that cannot be placed within the correspondence, as well as some drafts and a few letters that were not sent. After that edition was published, one more letter was discovered and was printed in volume 4 of the Van Gogh Studies series (2012).

Most of the letters (658) are addressed to Vincent’s brother Theo (dating from 29 September 1872 to Vincent’s death on 29 July 1890). Only 39 letters from Theo to Vincent survive, mainly because Vincent did not preserve his correspondence. There are also 21 letters to Vincent’s youngest sister, Willemien (Wil), as well as three more, written after Vincent became ill, that he addressed to his mother and Willemien together.

Van Gogh also wrote to artists with whom he had ideas in common: he wrote 58 letters to Anthon van Rappard and received one from him; 22 to Émile Bernard; and 4 to Paul Gauguin, receiving 16 from him. A small number of letters are addressed to other artists, such as John Peter Russell, Paul Signac, and Eugène Boch, as well as to further assorted recipients such as Albert Aurier, M. and Mme Ginoux, and J. J. Isaäcson, among others.

As we might expect, the tone and register of Van Gogh’s writing are often gauged to fit the recipient. Thus, he is solicitous and often kind to Wil, racy and unbuttoned with Bernard, and academic and theoretical with Van Rappard; with Theo, he expresses a spectrum of emotions of Dostoevskian range and variety. Over time, his opinions change and develop, and often his writing is shot through with ambivalence and conflict.

This extraordinary correspondence allows us unmatched access to the narrative of Van Gogh’s life and remains the primary source for his biographers, despite the problems of interpretation I have mentioned. Indeed, the documentary value of the letters is so considerable, for both biographers and art historians, that assessing the vast amount of
information that the letters provide accounts for most of the scholarly attention they have received. As I have said, I am not mainly concerned with the correspondence as biography or as a way of approaching the paintings, nor do I discuss the 242 sketches that occur within the letters themselves. Still, I would like to recap briefly the main events of Van Gogh’s life, if only because the narrative dimension of the correspondence can help us to contextualize individual letters on which I offer various kinds of assessments as the argument proceeds.

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; his younger brother Theo was born on 1 May 1857. Little is known about Vincent’s early schooling, but at age sixteen, he found employment with The Hague branch of the international art dealers Goupil and Cie.

In 1873, Van Gogh was transferred to Goupil’s London branch, partly as a result of friction with his employers in The Hague, which, in turn, might have given rise to tension with his parents. While working in London, he may have become infatuated with his landlady’s daughter, Eugenie Loyer, but whether or not he suffered heartbreak for love, he found that his relationship with the Loyer household was unsustainable, and he had to leave. During this time, his interests turned increasingly to religion. In 1874, Goupil brought him back to Paris. The following year, he was transferred again to London before returning to Paris, where, in 1876, he was dismissed by his employer.

In 1876, Van Gogh went back once more to England, where he worked as an assistant teacher, first in Ramsgate and then in Isleworth. By this time, he had become intensely religious and had decided to become a preacher like his father. With this goal in mind, he returned to Holland in December 1876; the next year, he worked briefly in a bookshop in Dordrecht before moving to Amsterdam to prepare for the entrance examination to the University of Amsterdam, where he hoped to study theology.

In 1878, Van Gogh abandoned his pre-university studies and entered a missionary school in Brussels. The following year, he went
as an evangelist to the coalfields of the Belgian Borinage. There, he discovered that the miners needed more than his evangelical enthusiasm to improve their lives, which were ruined by poverty and sickness. The moral crisis resulting from this realization was accompanied by a dawning sense that his vocation lay not in religion but in art, and in 1880, he decided to work towards becoming an illustrator, with a view especially to depicting the life and condition of the working poor.

In 1881, Van Gogh moved back to his parents’ home in Etten, and there, he once again came into contact with Kee Vos, his recently widowed cousin, whom he had met, along with her husband and son, in Amsterdam. Van Gogh fell intensely in love with Kee, who rejected him out of hand, leaving him devastated. As a result of the ensuing family discord, he moved to The Hague in December 1881, where he studied painting with his cousin-in-law Anton Mauve. He also began a relationship with the unmarried and pregnant Clasina (Sien) Hoor, who, in order to ease her dire financial circumstances, had been earning money as a prostitute. Although Van Gogh’s family was scandalized, he insisted on setting up house with Sien and declared that he would marry her (though he never did).

In 1883, the relationship with Sien ended, and Van Gogh went to Drenthe, seeking solitude in that remote province in order to concentrate on painting. But he soon found himself unbearably lonely, and after three months, he went back to his parents, who had now moved to Nuenen. There, he painted the local weavers and peasants and, in 1885, produced his famous painting *The Potato Eaters*. In Nuenen, yet another scandal occurred, resulting from Van Gogh’s relationship with Margot Begemann, one of his father’s parishioners. The relationship ended after Margot attempted suicide.

In 1885, Van Gogh’s father died, and on 24 November, Vincent left for Antwerp, where he enrolled in the Academy of Fine Arts and began to develop an interest in Japanese art. But he did not take easily to academic instruction, and early in 1886, he left Antwerp for Paris, turning up unexpectedly and moving in with Theo, who was an art dealer there. Vincent found Paris stimulating and learned much from the Impressionists and post-Impressionists to whom he was directly exposed, partly
through studying for three months at the studio of Fernand Cormon. In Paris, he and Theo became enthusiastic collectors of Japanese prints.

But the big city took a toll on Van Gogh, and in 1888, he headed south, to Arles, where he set up house (in the “Yellow House”) and sought inspiration from the local people and landscape, which he thought resembled Japan. With the goal of establishing an artists’ community, he invited Paul Gauguin to stay at the Yellow House, which Van Gogh decorated for the occasion with, among other things, his sunflower paintings. But his utopian dream soon disintegrated; within two months, the relationship with Gauguin was in ruins, coming to a dramatic end when Van Gogh cut a piece off his own ear. He was admitted to hospital in Arles. In early January 1889, he returned to the Yellow House, but a petition by the local citizens claimed that he was mentally unstable and a risk to public security. As a result, he was apprehended by the police and readmitted to hospital.

On 17 April 1889, Theo married Jo Bonger, and in May, Vincent moved voluntarily to Saint-Paul-de-Mausole Asylum in St. Rémy, not far from Arles. There, despite suffering a series of attacks, mainly of an epileptic nature, he continued to paint. On 31 January 1890, Theo and Jo had a son and named him for his uncle, Vincent Willem; in May, Vincent left St. Rémy and 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, a physician who was also an art collector and an amateur painter. A few months later, on 27 July 1890, Vincent suffered a gunshot wound to the stomach, which he said was self-inflicted.\(^18\) He died on 29 July with Theo by his side.

The letters bring us through this difficult story, showing us a myriad of facets by means of which the narrative emerges, imperfectly but with captivating power. Despite its gaps and fissures, this narrative remains an important aspect of how Van Gogh’s writing engages us, partly because our sense of personal participation is intensified as we follow the emergence and resolution of his particular trials and challenges, which often reflect and give shape to our own hopes, fears, and aspirations.

Like the fine points of Van Gogh’s biography, the manuscripts of his letters raise issues that lie beyond the scope of the present study.
Chief among these is how the material form of the letters affects their meaning. For the most part, Van Gogh used a sheet of paper folded in four, so that a single sheet provided four pages. Some 1,200 sheets survive, containing 3,800 pages of letters. He probably wrote a great deal more than this, but it is difficult to determine exactly how much of his correspondence — for instance, letters to and from his parents — has been lost. The editors of the 2009 edition suggest that the complete correspondence “may have run to more than 2,000 letters” (6:41) — more than twice the number that survive.19

The early letters are neatly written, with few corrections, but in the years after roughly 1875, Van Gogh increasingly took liberties, apparently caring less about how neat the letters appeared and more about how forcefully he was expressing himself.20 Although his handwriting remains generally clear and even, he frequently crossed out words and phrases, and he used bold underlinings, heavy capitals, and afterthoughts squeezed into the margins or between the lines. Notoriously, he disregarded conventional punctuation, accents, capitalization, and spelling.

For instance, when his seizures recurred in the St. Rémy hospital, Van Gogh wrote a brief, pained letter in black crayon (797/6:70). There are several crossings out, words are bent at the end of a line to fit them in, both the right and left margins contain inserts written vertically, and at the heart of the letter, the words “it is ABOMINABLE” (“c’est ABOMINABLE”) are offset and emphasized in a way that commands our attention visually. There is a wide space between the lines above and below, and the word “ABOMINABLE” is in bold capital letters with a heavy, double underlining in black crayon and with only two other words in the line. It is impossible to read the original without feeling Van Gogh’s anguish, which is communicated by the appearance of the letter.

The correspondence contains many such effects, imparting to it a highly personal quality, not just in what the letters say but also in how they look. In this, Van Gogh’s writing can remind us of similar effects in the paintings, the differences in audience and intent notwithstanding. Although meant for public viewing, the paintings (like the letters) are often disturbingly confessional and personally revealing; although
written for private purposes, the letters (like the paintings) are often of broad human interest. In both cases, Van Gogh’s lack of finish, the roughness and imperfection that lie at the far side of technical skill (and are not to be mistaken for lack of technical skill), communicate something essential to his vision, his always unfinished search to know and communicate “what most makes me a human being” (400/3:51). There is, therefore, a complex symbiosis between Van Gogh’s correspondence and his visual art, and when we consider the 242 sketches that are distributed throughout the letters, the complexity of this symbiosis increases greatly. But, again, an investigation of the manuscripts along such lines would require a separate monograph, a different kind of study from the one in which I am engaged. Here, I confine myself to the transcribed texts and to their English translation.

The question of translation raises a final preliminary consideration. Van Gogh wrote some 585 letters in Dutch and 310 in French (as well as 6 in English). He wrote a small number in French from the Borinage but began writing to Theo exclusively in that language in 1888. In both languages, he is unconventional and idiosyncratic, and his French often reflects Dutch usage. The resultant style is “disconcerting, fascinating,” as Van der Veen says, pointing also to the combination of careful correction and freewheeling expressiveness that make Van Gogh’s writing distinctive. Jansen also notes the contrast between the “idiosyncratic and unconventional” in certain letters, and “the great care Van Gogh lavished on them.”

The declared aim of the 2009 English translation is to preserve “absolute fidelity to the original” (6:9), even to the point of preserving the ambiguities or awkwardness of Van Gogh’s “idiosyncratic voice” (1:16). Nonetheless, certain kinds of “idiosyncrasy in spelling, syntax and wording could not possibly be reflected” (6:9), and one main consequence of this limitation for the critical assessment I wish to provide is that matters of tone, mood, register, metaphoric resonance, and various kinds of nonexplicit suggestiveness need to be checked against the original languages before being affirmed on the basis of the translation alone. Although I am attentive to this set of issues, my argument throughout remains based on the English version.
Further Dimensions of Reading and Writing

All of this can return us now to the question raised at the beginning of this chapter about the relationship between Van Gogh’s letters and his reading. As he tells us frequently, books were highly important to him, and he insists that there is an analogy between good writing and good painting. “Books and reality and art are the same kind of thing for me” (312/2:268), he says, and “one has to learn to read, as one has to learn to see and learn to live” (155/1:247). He acknowledges his “more or less irresistible passion for books” and claims that “the love of books is as holy as that of Rembrandt” (155/1:246, 247). What we have read, he explains, “has in some way become part of us,” so that, for instance, reading Zola affects how one might paint a peasant (662/4:238). He encourages his painter friend Émile Bernard to go on writing sonnets because words are important: “don’t you think, it’s as interesting and as difficult to say a thing well as to paint a thing” (599/4:61). Dickens is like a painter (325/2:300), drawing is like writing (265/2:155), and “there’s something of Rembrandt in Shakespeare and something of Correggio or Sarto in Michelet, and something of Delacroix in V. Hugo” (155/1:247). Indeed, Shakespeare’s style is compared to an artist’s brush “trembling with fever and emotion” (155/1:247). Van Gogh sees himself as “armed only with my brush and my pen” (736/4:390): the pen, here, is an instrument both for writing and drawing — Van Gogh did not make a clear distinction between these activities. As in his painting, so also in his letters, he developed a distinctive voice with his special combination of thoughtfulness and spontaneity, whether in evoking the spirit of a place or landscape or in using surprising metaphor, critical insight, searching aphorism, evocative reflection, and a wide range of mood and tone alive with the presence of the man himself. In his writing, he moved beyond the straightforward record of facts and the material circumstances of his life.

Because the letters frequently deal with personal matters, they are often confessional, as a private communication might be: Van Gogh
certainly would not have imagined his correspondence as one day being collected in a printed edition to be read by strangers. And so it is important to make a distinction between the individual recipients of Van Gogh’s letters and ourselves, the public readers of a private correspondence. The fact is that Van Gogh had no opportunity to see his letters in relation to one another as we do, or to consider them as coherent despite their variety, eclecticism, and occasional nature. But in the assemblage of elements that the collected letters provide — coruscating, fragmentary, discontinuous — an imaginative coherence does, nonetheless, emerge, and a reader is by turn captivated, consoled, edified, and affected in a manner not entirely accessible to Van Gogh himself or to his individual correspondents.

In the following pages, I therefore use the term “reader” primarily to indicate ourselves, Van Gogh’s public readers, who are afforded the opportunity to see dimensions of his achievement as a writer that the intended recipients of his letters could not. Admittedly, some of these recipients did, on occasion, comment to one another on the unusual quality of Van Gogh’s writing. But they were in no position to grasp the scale of his achievement, which is a function of both of his carefully considered and reconsidered leading ideas and his distinctive metaphors, images, and motifs to which he returns throughout the correspondence as a whole.

As is often acknowledged, Van Gogh enjoyed considerable facility with descriptive language, and he provides many fresh, vivid descriptions, especially of landscapes and paintings. Judy Sund points out that in doing so, he consciously imitated the convention of writing “word pictures,” following the Romantic interest in the ancient idea of “ut pictura poesis.” But as Van Gogh himself kept insisting, description is less important than the human concerns that are expressed by means of it and that in his own writing, provide a deeper coherence than is supplied by his gift for “word pictures” alone. With this in mind, let us briefly consider a passage, both to exemplify the descriptive aspect of Van Gogh’s writing and to indicate that descriptiveness is most interesting when it is not an end in itself. Here is Vincent writing to Theo from Drenthe in October 1883:
This time I’m writing to you from the very back of beyond in Drenthe, where I arrived after an endless trip through the heath on the barge.

I see no way of describing the countryside to you as it should be done, because words fail me. But imagine the banks of the canal as miles and miles of Michels or T. Rousseaus, say, Van Goyens or P. de Koninck.

Flat planes or strips differing in colour, which grow narrower and narrower as they approach the horizon. Accentuated here 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. (392/3:25)

Van Gogh had gone to Drenthe after his breakup with Sien, and he suffered pangs of conscience about leaving her and the children, as his letters tell us (376, 382, 386). But he sought solitude, and in Drenthe, he wanted to be close to nature as a way of nurturing his art. And so, in writing to Theo, he emphasizes his isolation in “the very back of beyond in Drenthe,” going on to preface his description of the countryside by referring to a series of landscape paintings. Although he claims that “words fail me,” he nonetheless provides a precisely observed description of the scene before him. Yet the scene is composed as a landscape painter would see it: Van Gogh describes perspective (“narrower and narrower as they approach the horizon”), composition (“accentuated here and there”), and colour (“delicate,” laid in “strips”). In short, he is composing a scene in words as a painter would observe.
it, even though he points beyond the words to a further significance indicated by what he sees in the “great character” of the people.

Specifically, he mentions the woman in mourning and the mother with the baby: we might feel here the frisson of a reminder of the woman and child he had left behind (Sien, after all, was Van Gogh’s model for Sorrow), as well as the grief that had followed him to Drenthe. When he goes on to describe the “Ostade types,” comparing their faces to “pigs or crows” (despite the fact that sometimes one might appear “like a lily among the thorns”), we might feel some discomfort. He himself is not one of these “types,” and however much he wanted to be close to the miners, weavers, field workers, and prostitutes (such as Sien), he was not really one of them. The “really charming” qualities he describes here are themselves to some degree composed, an idealized heightening — like the landscape itself — shaped from a point of view marked by class difference, among other things.

Although the discomfort that haunts this passage is not declared directly, it is felt nonetheless, and it is reminiscent of a similar discomfort in earlier, painful letters to Theo about Sien. There, in the wake of his disappointment over Kee and the emergence of his hostility to organized religion, Van Gogh’s self-abasement was presented, paradoxically, as an indicator of his superior virtue. That is, he insisted on seeing in the unfortunate, haggard Sien what he calls in the present passage a “lily among the thorns,” and he challenged his friends and family to find his integrity and moral vision wanting. Now that he is away from Sien in “the back of beyond in Drenthe,” Van Gogh depicts a symbiosis of nature and painting that he hoped would be the means of his recovery from the failure of his relationship with her. But, as we see, the evocative account is disturbed by an almost inadvertent reminder of what made the retreat to Drenthe necessary: Van Gogh’s letter betrays, in an undercurrent, the pangs of conscience that bothered him still. Although the writer did not set out to do this, he does so nonetheless, expressively and in excess of the straightforward description that is the passage’s first, most obvious appeal.

My point here is that the letters offer rich intertextual complexities, and in the following pages, I am concerned to bring to the surface some
of the underlying structures, both metaphorical and conceptual, that run through Van Gogh’s correspondence and knit it together while opening also upon issues that engage us because of their perennial human significance. Although, indeed, we should keep in mind Van Gogh’s intent as an author as well as the expectations and understandings of his particular correspondents, the letters as a whole are shaped by an evolving vision and set of understandings not fully accessible to his correspondents or even to the author himself. As readers of the collected letters, we therefore enjoy a privileged position, and my aim here is to show something of how this is so and what it entails.

The Argument in Brief

The following study is divided into three main sections. Part 1 takes an overview of Van Gogh’s career, but the emphasis is not on biography. Rather, I suggest that a dialogical interplay among religion, morality, and art provides an implicit, quasi-narrative structure to the correspondence as Van Gogh’s dominant ideology shifts from one of these areas to the other. Yet not one of these ascendant or favoured topics completely displaces the others as Van Gogh contends with the negative contrasts between his persistent idealism and the imperfections of the actual world, until at last he thematizes imperfection itself as a criterion of the aesthetic.

Part 2 consists of three chapters, each of which deals with a key constellation of metaphors that provide special access to the structure of Van Gogh’s literary imagination. These metaphors are, to some extent, modified by the dialogical evolution of Van Gogh’s thinking described in part 1. For the most part, however, they exist asymmetrically in relation to that evolution, providing an imaginative coherence to Van Gogh’s evolving concerns and interests. Thus, chapter 3, “Birds’ Nests,” shows how Van Gogh addresses the relationship between art and nature and, simultaneously, the opposition between exile and home. Chapter 4, “The Mistral,” focuses on relationships between outer and inner weather as a way of exploring the complexities and
uncertainties of creativity. Chapter 5, “Cab Horses,” deals with relationships between hope and depression and with the difficulty of finding a balance between escapism and despair.

Part 3 also consists of three chapters, but the emphasis shifts from imagination to key patterns of ideas or concepts to which Van Gogh returns repeatedly. Again, these patterns occur as constellations rather than as systematic argument, and often, they are extrapolated imaginatively. Chapter 6, “By Heart,” explores the relationships between spontaneity and patience, as well as Van Gogh’s reflections on the importance of interiorizing technical skill as a means of releasing creativity. His thoughts on these matters lead to discussions of memory, abstraction, and Japanese art. Chapter 7, “A Handshake Till Your Fingers Hurt,” considers a range of rhetorical strategies, especially in relation to the discomfort and ambivalence that Van Gogh experienced in asserting his autonomy in a situation where he knew himself to be painfully dependent. The perennial problem of declaring moral autonomy while acknowledging our necessary dependencies leads to a discussion of Van Gogh’s self-consciousness as a writer and to the function of humour in his letters. Chapter 8, “Something New Without a Name,” deals with Van Gogh’s attempt to describe a spirituality that transcends conventional religious observances. Here, I focus on two opposed tendencies in his writing: first, his forthright declaration of binary opposites between which we must choose; second, his understanding that human judgments are relative. The discussion leads, finally, to a description of Van Gogh’s imaginative thinking as “post-Romantic figural.”

The concluding chapter summarizes the argument as a whole, confirming the claim that the rhetorical versatility, expressive power, imaginative coherence, and thoughtfulness of Van Gogh’s writing are highly remarkable. Although the impressive bulk of his correspondence presents a challenge to anyone intent on working through it from start to finish, a reader who persists will surely feel that something special has occurred, something of the grandeur, catharsis, and enhanced understanding that great literature affords. In the following pages, I try to provide some explanation of how and why this is so.