In a letter written from Arles in 1888 to his sister Wil, Vincent says that he would “like to see if I can’t make my own portrait in writing. First I start by saying that to my mind the same person supplies material for very diverse portraits” (626/4:132). Here, Vincent suggests that no single representation expresses the complete truth about an individual person. Yet through the “diverse portraits” that might be produced, whether in paint or writing, we can feel the presence of this “same person,” whom we can come increasingly to recognize and value. Elsewhere, Vincent explores the related idea that the main thing about a work of art is that it enables us to get to know not just the people it depicts but also the person who produced it. For instance, writing from Arles, he asks Theo to consider whether “what is alive in art, and eternally alive, is first the painter and then the painting?” (670/4:249). Earlier, in Nuenen, he cites Zola with approval: “In the painting (the work of art) I look for, I love the man — the artist,” going on to explain: “I think that’s perfectly true — I ask you, what sort of a man, what sort of a visionary/observer or thinker, what sort of human character is there behind some of these canvases praised for their technique” (515/3:264). Writing from Etten in 1881, he puts the point succinctly: “I generally scrutinize, with artists in particular,
the man who produces the work just as much as the work itself” (190/1:328).

These examples show that Van Gogh valued art in part because it reveals the humanity of the artist, putting us in touch with a creative vision that is, above all, personal, and that is valuable for that reason. In making this point, he draws no distinction between painting and writing. As I pointed out in the introduction to this book, he reminds Bernard that “it’s as interesting and as difficult to say a thing well as to paint a thing” (599/4:61), and, in an earlier letter, he assures Theo that “books and reality and art are the same kind of thing for me” (312/2:268). In the same vein, he tells Theo that “the love of books is as holy as that of Rembrandt” and that “one has to learn to read, as one has to learn to see and learn to live” (155/1:247).

Both in writing and painting, then, for Van Gogh, the personality of the artist is disclosed and discovered, although not completely. In The Hague, he defines the artist’s task as “always seeking without ever fully finding” (224/2:66), and in Nuenen, he argues that just as we do not know the whole truth about another person, so neither do we know ourselves: “Speaking of self-knowledge — who has it? Here again ‘the knowledge — no one has it’” (516/3:266). But although our knowledge of one another, and of ourselves, is imperfect, so that different portraits give us insight into different facets of a person, Van Gogh did not think that personality is merely an assemblage of fragments. Rather, he had a more integral (Romantic) sense of the person as a living, organic presence — a presence of infinite complexity, perhaps, but not merely a kaleidoscope of facets, discontinuous and unstable, such as is likely to strike a chord with modern (or postmodern) readers. As we have seen in other aspects of his correspondence, two opposed tendencies again remain in tension here: on the one hand, Van Gogh held to the idea of the person as a substantive, organic unity; on the other hand, he knew that personal identity is unstable and is often riven by contradiction.

All of this brings us to a theme that occurs persistently throughout the letters and that mirrors the polarity I have just described. That is, Van Gogh wanted his work to be seen as a whole, so that through the diversity of the individual items we might come increasingly to
know the person who created them. As early as 1883 in The Hague, he explains, “I don’t view my studies in isolation, but always have in mind the work as a whole” (371/2:401), and he suggests that life itself, like painting, needs to be organized with a view to “the whole composition” (374/2:402). Along the same lines, he advises Theo that “a single drawing by me won’t be entirely satisfactory in itself, even in the future. A number of studies, no matter how diverse, will still complement each other” (378/2:410). In Arles, he laments that his pictures are “fated for dispersal,” but he is consoled by the fact that Theo knows “the whole of what I want” (743/4:402), which elsewhere is described as “an ensemble that will hold together” (680/4:268). Discussing his paintings with Theo, he insists: “I seriously ask you to show them together” (810/5:118), explaining in the next letter that he is “only trying to form a few things into a sort of ensemble that I would prefer to see stay together” (811/5:122). And so he sees his work as an oeuvre that is best seen “as a whole” (528/3:279), just as Dickens, Balzac, Hugo, and Zola need also to be read “as a whole” (345/3:337). Likewise, he says, the work of Rembrandt and the other great painters needs to be seen “in its full extent” (651/4:201) so that, among other things, we can come to “love the man — the artist” (515/3:264).

The dialogical interplay between a diversity of parts and an ideal wholeness that we see in Van Gogh’s descriptions of his painting carries over also to his letters. By their nature, letters are fragmentary, but the more we read Van Gogh’s letters, the more we feel his presence as a man with specific preoccupations, a man shaping his experience by way of particular groups of metaphors, favourite ideas, perplexing contradictions, enabling insights, and characteristic rhetorical strategies. We watch this person grow and evolve, suffer and endure, and, even from within the disintegration of his mental and physical health, we feel a presence that remains engaging and affecting, even if nonwhole and labouring under the burden of unresolved problems and tensions that are a burden to him as well as a source of energy.

As we have seen, Van Gogh came to think of Christ as the greatest of artists, and an analogy can be made between the means by which we come to know Christ in the twenty-seven documents of the New

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Testament and how we come to know Van Gogh in the letters. In both cases, a collection of documents gives us insights into different aspects of a particular personality, but the documents themselves are not wholly consistent and do not form a single narrative account. Just as we come to know Jesus from various points of view, each of which discloses some aspect of the historical person, so also a sense of who Van Gogh was emerges convincingly yet incompletely from within the dense weave of his correspondence. One main difference is that the New Testament was written by others about Jesus, whereas Van Gogh was the author of his own letters; we might see this difference as corresponding roughly to the distinction between a portrait and a self-portrait. Also, in the case of the New Testament, the complexity and variety of the documents has occasioned an immense hermeneutic debate, enduring over centuries. This is to be expected, given that the Bible has so long been considered the Word of God. The stakes are high, and in this regard, the comparison with Van Gogh’s letters is incommensurate. Still, it is surprising that the remarkable body of Van Gogh’s correspondence has not given rise to more detailed critical commentary, not least because the letters are so frequently praised for their literary distinction. In the present study, I have attempted to do something to repair this omission, and in these concluding remarks, I ask what kind of self-portrait we can expect the letters to offer.

My main conclusion is that Van Gogh’s correspondence does reveal the man himself to us, though incompletely and not without contradictions and inconsistencies. Indeed, the flickering interplay between intimations of wholeness and the all-too-evident gaps is itself a marker of the kind of authenticity that the letters offer, because this is very much how we come to know (and fail to know) one another in actual experience. But this claim in itself does not sufficiently explain how powerful, moving, and gratifying is the experience of reading the entire collection of Van Gogh’s letters. Consequently, I have focused on key metaphors, patterns of ideas, and dialogical complexities, as well as on the fact that Van Gogh engages us repeatedly with matters of such broad human significance that we can readily identify our own concerns in the issues with which he deals.
In part 1, I develop this point about matters of broad human interest by charting some key relationships between religion, morality, and art throughout the correspondence and by describing an evolution in Van Gogh’s thinking about these topics. In so doing, I focus on the conflict between Van Gogh’s idealism and the negative contrast experiences produced by the circumstances of his life. I also suggest that relationships among religion, morality, and art constitute a continuing dialogical exchange throughout the letters. Under the pressure of circumstances, Van Gogh’s dominant ideology shifts from religion to morality and then to the aesthetic, yet none of these completely displaces the others, and the evolving story of how he thought about — and experienced — this evolving exchange provides an implicit, if discontinuous, narrative for the letters as a whole. In turn, the discontinuities within this narrative are thematized within the correspondence by Van Gogh’s proposal that imperfection is a criterion of the aesthetic, pre-empting perfect closure. Paradoxically, for Van Gogh, the most authentically beautiful things are flawed, their very imperfection being part of what makes them beautiful. Eventually, he came to realize that art itself, however necessary for his well-being, was not finally sustaining, and the aspiration to “something altogether new” that has “no name” (686/4:282) would go on keeping the heart’s desire in conflict with the negative contrasts to which human flesh is perennially heir. “One shouldn’t be discouraged because utopia isn’t coming about” (663/4:237), he tells Theo, and, again, “imperfect and full of faults as we are, we’re never justified in stifling the ideal, and what extends into the infinite as if it were no concern of ours” (341/2:330). In the story of Van Gogh’s complex, interwoven commitments to religion, morality, and art, the contrast between utopia and the actual world, between the ideal and the imperfect, remains at the centre as the condition of his own, arduous, personal struggle and of his extraordinary creativity, evident in his letters as in his painting.

In the three chapters of part 2, I deal with some key groupings of metaphors that provide access to the deep structure, as it were, of Van Gogh’s imagination. I focus on birds’ nests, cab horses, and the mistral, not because they offer exclusive means for understanding Van
Gogh’s creativity as a writer but because they provide points of entry into the dense weave of his mind, enabling us to discern patterns and motifs that knit his writing together. These motifs are hallmarks of his creative imagination, imparting to his correspondence a gathering power and coherence. In their own way, they also reflect the evolution of his thought described in part 1, even though his favourite metaphors do not simply change and develop consistently in lockstep with his thinking about religion, morality, and art. Rather, there is a complex counterpoint between the (already complex) dialogical “narrative” described in part 1, and the tropes and figures analyzed, more or less achronologically, in part 2.

In the chapter on birds’ nests, I deal with the fact that the tangled structure and rough fabric of a nest coexists with its comforting shapeliness, which aligns with how Van Gogh thought about art itself. And so birds’ nests offer a useful point of entry to two large concerns that run throughout the letters and that Van Gogh brings together in an original way. The first is the age-old question about the relationship between art and nature; the second is the equally enduring problem of the relationship between home and exile. For Van Gogh, a nest, like home, is a safe haven, a place of comfort and serenity where imagination can be nourished and where a person finds confidence to face the storms of life and to soar creatively. In turn, creative flight is associated with hope, resurrection, and the transfiguration of nature by art. But, as ever, the ideal produces a negative contrast, in this case represented by cages, rules, idleness, and enervation — all of which prevent creativity. These negative conditions constitute the anti-home, which is also anti-art, a place of exile rather than freedom.

Van Gogh first encountered the mistral in the south of France, but weather had been a concern in his earlier correspondence, especially as a means of exploring the analogy between changing climatic conditions and the fluctuations of human feeling. Throughout his letters, Van Gogh returns frequently to the contrast between storm and calm in ways that overlap with some aspects of the bird’s nest motif, but he also uses the contrast to emphasize a further set of contrasts and insights. Thus, although the mistral (like storms in general) can be
destructive, it has its own fierce beauty. Likewise, the calm after the storm offers a special creative opportunity, even though we must try to avoid inertia and stagnation. Again, the opposites do not entirely exclude one another, and Van Gogh’s deployment of the mistral as metaphor allows him to explore the complexities and uncertainties of the creative life in vivid and engaging ways.

As the analysis of particular passages also shows, the mistral motif connects to and reinforces Van Gogh’s sensitivity to the transience of beauty, the uncertainty of inspiration, and the patient endurance needed to acquire the skill to paint well. As ever, he is keen to emphasize the links between creativity and imperfection, and in describing the traces left by the mistral on a finished painting, he indicates how authenticity can be communicated and beauty enhanced by the thematizing of imperfection within the work itself.

The cab-horse motif allows us access to Van Gogh’s continuing struggle to find a balance between hope and depression without hope becoming escapist and depression descending into despair. Among other things, cab horses represent abjection, which Van Gogh felt should neither be evaded nor become so dispiriting as to stifle creativity and the will to live. He draws an analogy between cab horses and the plight of artists, many of whom also live arduous lives. In painting, though, abjection can have a positive value in the sense that the marginalized, rejected, and maltreated, when rendered effectively in a painting, can give rise to compassion. The cab-horse motif then opens upon several further, related concerns, including the relationship between hope and despair, compassion and suffering, ugliness and beauty. Throughout, Van Gogh’s struggle to strike a balance between these opposites tips sometimes in the direction of escapism (the Pangloss motif) and sometimes towards despair (one of the worst consequences of his illness).

In part 3, the emphasis shifts from imagination as a means of thinking to certain favoured sets of ideas that inform the letters. These ideas are often infused and reinforced by imagination, but the three chapters that constitute part 3 give priority to some of the main conceptual preoccupations running through the correspondence as a whole. These are the idea of learning by heart, the challenge
of finding a balance between autonomy and dependency, and the aspiration to a spirituality beyond the confines of traditional religious observance.

In the chapter on learning by heart, I suggest that throughout the letters, Van Gogh seeks to reconcile the need for an artist to be spontaneous with the need to acquire technique patiently over a period of time. He concludes that the highest creativity depends on a prior interiorizing of technical skill, which is learned through patient apprenticeship. Van Gogh explains the synthesis of these contrary impulses by stressing the fact that memory is required in the acquisition of skill, even though the creative process is often characterized by self-forgetfulness and by being taken up by the task at hand. Still, even when caught up in the moment, the skilled practitioner is guided by techniques that have become so habitual as to be unconscious and that, consequently, are not attended to in the creative moment itself.

Van Gogh distinguishes between two senses of memory, one of which he links to skill and the other to what he calls “abstraction.” In the second sense, memory is a mere conjuring up of images in the mind’s eye, and for Van Gogh, there is a significant difference between memory informed by a proper apprenticeship and memory that merely calls up fanciful mental pictures. Still, although he remains wary of abstraction, Van Gogh knew also that painting does not reproduce the appearances of things exactly and that all painting therefore involves some degree of abstraction. With this in mind, he looked to “exaggeration” and “simplification” as an antidote to what he considered the negative effects of “abstraction.”

These matters are not explained in the letters systematically but by way of various sorties, engagements, and re-engagements with the key issues in different contexts, among which is Van Gogh’s interest in Japanese art. He admired Japanese artists for combining patient technique with speed of execution and for their use of exaggeration and simplification. He thus found his own thinking about what it means to learn “by heart” exemplified in the style and practice of his admired Japanese. Likewise, in his letters, we find him again working and reworking his leading ideas from different perspectives, so that the
apparent spontaneity of his writing is, as with the painters he admired, often underpinned by careful, repeated practice.

Throughout his career, Van Gogh experienced the universal human drama of an individual person’s autonomy in relation to family loyalty and obligation in an unusually acute way. This was so not least because he depended on his brother for money while pursuing a career that his family largely disapproved of. In the chapter dealing with this set of issues, I concentrate on Vincent’s relationship with Theo, who, as “friend and brother,” mediates between Vincent’s loyalties to and affection for his family, on the one hand, and his declaration of autonomy in the pursuit of his vocation as an artist, on the other.

In assessing Vincent’s vexed relationship with Theo, I have concentrated on Vincent’s rhetorical sophistication in the managing of highly ambivalent and sensitive personal matters. The hard-hitting forthrightness and, at times, offensive honesty of his prose can easily conceal the fact that he also deals with human complexities in nuanced and intricate ways. For instance, he is skilled in arguing by implication and by way of half-articulated suggestions that can be, by turns, manipulative or deeply touching. Also, there are indications throughout the letters of his self-consciousness as a writer, suggesting that real discernment often underlies and informs what might appear as uncalculated spontaneity. His management of tone and register also indicates that he had a developed sense of his audience; in this context, I have drawn attention to the role of humour in the correspondence as a whole and to how the development and changing moods of Van Gogh’s humour can help us to understand the pathos of the last period of his life. Throughout the chapter, detailed attention to particular examples shows how versatile a writer Van Gogh was and how capable of addressing complex human issues with a combination of forcefulness and discernment.

The final chapter of part 3 deals with Van Gogh’s break with traditional religious observance and his subsequent aspirations to an adequate understanding of the mystery of the universe and of ourselves within it. Throughout the letters, he deploys a wide range of suggestive but undefined terms to evoke our participation in the everyday miracle
of existence, and here, I have attended again to two opposed aspects of his thinking. First, he draws strong distinctions between those who are open to the creative spirit and those who are not (black ray and white ray; eternal yes and eternal no). Second, he is aware of the complexities of people’s moral and spiritual lives, and he stresses the relativity of judgment in contrast to the direct oppositions upon which he sometimes insists between black and white, yes and no.

I have dealt with these strong oppositions in Van Gogh’s writing by suggesting that his black and white assertiveness and his nuanced appreciation of moral relativity do not exist separately but within a process by which he discovers how conceptual clarity is complicated and enriched in actual experience. A comparison between Van Gogh’s 1876 sermon and his letters indicates the contrast between the creative complexity of his most effective writing and its absence when the immediacy of experience is separated from the clarity of edifying generalization. To describe the special distinction of Van Gogh’s writing at its best, I suggest the phrase “post-Romantic figural” to indicate how his work embodies the transcendent mystery in a manner that is resistant to both allegorizing simplification and expressionist non-representation.

As I noted in part 1, Van Gogh is perceptive about the imperfection of the truly beautiful, and this idea can be extended by analogy to the self-portrait in words that he told his sister Wil he wanted to create. That is, by their nature, letters offer us a series of glimpses and fragmented insights into a person who is represented imperfectly but who nonetheless is revealed as a real presence whom we feel ourselves coming to know. Throughout this study, I have argued that the value we attach to this kind of emergent knowledge is not separate from — indeed, it remains implicit in — the expressive power of the letters themselves and their engagement with concerns of perennial human significance embodied in the circumstances of Van Gogh’s life. After reading his complete correspondence, we might justifiably feel that, among other things, we have indeed encountered something on the order of a great work of literature. And yet the letters are not integrated and developed as, say, a novel is; rather, they present us with a densely
tangled, difficult, discontinuous quasi-narrative of formidable bulk and complexity. The task of bringing to the surface the organizational principles, shapeliness of imagination, and coherence of thinking by means of which this body of correspondence engages and affects us, is not straightforward. Here, I have attempted at least the beginning of such a task, attending especially to the reading of specific examples in order to reveal something of the overall design of Van Gogh’s mind and thought and his remarkable talent as a writer.

The correspondence (as we have it) began on 29 September 1872, when Van Gogh was nineteen years old and was living in The Hague. The last letter was written in Auvers-sur-Oise on 23 July 1890, when he was thirty-seven years old: it was found in his pocket after his death on 29 July. The three crumpled pages (RM25/5:326) have several dark blotches that are often interpreted as bloodstains, as they might well be. But whether we see actual blood here, or its semblance, these inadvertent markings can serve well enough now, in conclusion, to remind us of the tragic disjuncture between life and art, body and symbol — the disjuncture, that is, out of which desire arises as a condition of our irreparable imperfection. “I myself will actually never think my own work finished or ready” (499/3:234), Van Gogh says, and yet, as his letters show, in this imperfect life and unperfected art, we find a courage, integrity, and compassion far more humanly significant and true to life than any of the ideals that Van Gogh says he failed to realize.