Although the present book stands on its own, it can also be read as a companion to *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: A Critical Study* (Athabasca University Press, 2014). Together, these two books offer a response to the surprising fact that, despite many scholarly and critical acknowledgements of the extraordinary literary distinction of Van Gogh’s collected correspondence, there has been no extended study of his letters as literature.

As a way of addressing this gap in the assessment of Van Gogh’s work as a whole, my earlier book focused on the imaginative and conceptual coherence of the collected correspondence, but I made no attempt at any detailed consideration of Van Gogh’s writing from a theoretical perspective. Yet if Van Gogh’s literary achievement is to be adequately assessed, his correspondence needs to be read from both practical-critical and literary-theoretical points of view. Consequently, the present book approaches the letters by way of a set of ideas about dialogue and self-fashioning derived especially from Mikhail Bakhtin, and, in each chapter, I bring these ideas to bear while also engaging the reader in some hitherto undiscussed aspect of Van Gogh’s writing.

Throughout, I deal only with the letters, together with their attendant sketches, and the tacit assumption (well, now not so tacit) is that Van Gogh’s writing would be highly regarded even if the paintings and drawings had not survived. Yet, to date, commentary on the correspondence has reflected mainly the interests of art historians and biographers, whose principal focus is on Van Gogh the painter. But if the letters are to come into their own as literature, some separation of the domains of scholarly discourse is in order, if only to enable the foregrounding of both critical and theoretical modes of enquiry and analysis.
All quotations from the correspondence are from Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters (2009). As the editors, Leo Jansen and Hans Luijten, say, this English translation is “the first truly integral and updated compilation of Van Gogh’s correspondence available to an international readership” (Editio: Internationales Jahrbuch für Editionswissenschaft 15 [2001]: 53). Consequently, it makes good sense to work from the English version, and in the preface to my earlier book, I weighed some pros and cons of doing so. But then, as now, the central point is that I am writing mainly for English-speaking readers who will be reading the letters in English. Still, it is important not to let critical interpretation override what the original languages say, and I have checked the Dutch and French, as appropriate, to defend against interpretive transgressions.

I gratefully acknowledge help received from the Van Gogh Museum and from the staff of the Museum Library. Many thanks to Hans Luijten for expert help, advice, and encouragement all the way, and also to Teio Meedendorp, Sue Mitchell, Peter Stoepker, and Henry Summerfield. Permission to print excerpts and sketches from the letters has been gratefully received from the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. Citations are from the six volumes of Vincent Van Gogh, The Letters, edited by Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker (London: Thames and Hudson. 2009).