“My Own Portrait in Writing”
INTRODUCTION

The Dialogical Structure of Self-Fashioning

Van Gogh Old and New: Reading the Letters as Literature

Van Gogh’s letters have played a crucial role in the shaping of his reputation as a painter. This is so because the letters provide a wealth of information about not only his painterly practice but also his intensely lived, brief life. Consequently, it has been all too inviting to make connections between the dramatically tragic aspects of his biography and the incandescent paintings, which can readily be seen as his most heartfelt and revealing self-expression. One result is that Van Gogh’s fame became rapidly associated with the legend of the painter as a romantically tragic figure — an isolated genius whose blazing individuality was prematurely extinguished, and he himself driven to madness by the hard realities of a philistine world.

The romantic legend remains very much alive today, but recent scholarship has also been concerned to recover a more thoughtful, learned, and strategically minded Van Gogh, who was closely connected to the art world of his time and who deliberated carefully about how he might best shape his career in relation to it. Again, the letters provide a wealth of information about these further dimensions of Van Gogh’s character and professional endeavours, however much the
more brightly illuminated portrait of the artist as isolated hero and victim has prevailed in the general view.

Yet, already in 1959, after reading a recent English translation of the letters, W. H. Auden pointed out that although “at first sight” the Van Gogh whom we encounter there “seems to fit the myth exactly,” in fact, “the more one reads . . . the less like the myth he becomes,” until, finally, “it is impossible to think of him as the romantic artiste maudit, or even as tragic hero.”¹ Published fifty years later, the magnificent Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters (2009) does much to confirm Auden’s observation.² This is the first fully annotated edition of the entire correspondence, and it is lavishly supplied with illustrations of virtually every work of art that Van Gogh mentions. It also provides detailed notes on the impressive range of his literary interests, and as we read the letters along with the scholarly apparatus provided by the 2009 editors, the view that gradually comes into focus is of a highly literate, dedicated practitioner working self-consciously within a broad and complex professional world.

A similar sense of Van Gogh as a knowledgeable and careful investigator of the ways and means of his craft emerges from a further major project recently published by the Van Gogh Museum, dealing with Van Gogh’s material practice. As Sjraar van Heugten explains, Van Gogh “worked systematically and to a carefully thought-out plan, generally leaving little to chance,” though he was also “innovative and intelligent” and adapted what he learned from other artists to suit his own temperament and abilities.³ Likewise, in the keynote symposium address titled “Van Gogh’s Studio Practice in Context” (Amsterdam, 24 June 2013), Sir John Leighton summarized how in “recent decades,” the “standard image” of Van Gogh as an “untamed, passionate, intuitive artist” has gradually “shifted,” as a “deeper understanding” of his life and work emerged. One result is that there is now a better appreciation of the “calculation, logic, rationale” of Van Gogh’s way of working, so that his “underlying deliberate self-awareness and even control” appear as more “striking” than was previously the case. Still, Leighton correctly points out that Van Gogh’s “intuition, passion, spontaneity” remain important and are not simply cancelled by the more recent emphasis on

4 Introduction
“method, logic,” and “structure,” although this new focus has opened up important new perspectives on Van Gogh’s life and work.4

A variety of impressive studies has contributed to the shift Leighton describes, but I will not dwell on this interesting body of scholarship for the simple reason that the accounts rendered to date of Van Gogh’s remarkable genius are marked by a significant omission, which, in a previous study as well as in this one, I am especially concerned to address. This omission has to do with how extraordinary the letters are in their own right, as literature.

Certainly, there is no shortage of acknowledgements, made in passing, of the high literary quality of Van Gogh’s writing. For instance, the editors of the 2009 edition describe his correspondence as “a literary monument” that “attains the universality of all great literature” (1:9, 15). Leo Jansen places the letters “in the front rank of world literature,” and Dick van Halsema points out that in 2010 the Museum of Dutch Literature ranked Van Gogh among “our hundred greatest dead writers.”5 Similar gestures are offered in a variety of critical and scholarly contexts but have remained unsupported by any extended study of the literary dimensions of Van Gogh’s achievement.

In an attempt to address this gap in the assessment of Van Gogh’s work as a whole, in The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: A Critical Study (2014) I undertook an analysis of the collected correspondence, concentrating on key patterns of images and ideas that I held to be central to Van Gogh’s creativity as a writer. But in so doing, I passed over an important question, which I acknowledged as needing further attention. This question asks, simply: By what criteria do we judge Van Gogh’s letters to be, specifically, literary?

For the purposes of the critical enquiry conducted in the earlier book, I settled for a provisional answer to this question based on Heidegger’s description of art as a form of disclosure enabling us to see familiar things in new ways, thereby expanding our perceptual and cognitive range of reference and understanding. As Van Gogh says, things are “put in a new light by the artist” (152/1:242), and I was concerned to show how Van Gogh’s writerly imagination and imaginative thinking could disclose the world to us in fresh, sometimes
challenging, but, in the end, life-affirming ways, informed throughout by a characteristic vision that evolved over time. I considered (and still consider) such a study to be foundational for the assessment of Van Gogh’s creative imagination as a writer.

But under pressure from a rapidly developing interest in literary theory, especially during the 1980s and 1990s, assumptions about the internal unity and coherence of literary texts have been vigorously questioned. A wide range of new lines of enquiry deriving, for instance, from semiotics, poststructuralism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, and ethnic and gender studies, among others, has highlighted the embeddedness of literature in a wide variety of larger, often internally fragmented, cultural contexts. Attention consequently became focused on the gaps, elisions, and contradictions by which texts are riven, as well as on the tacit ideological and psychological agendas by which they are shaped, and on how unpredictably their semantic and cultural codes interact with the semantic and cultural codes of their readers. Under such scrutiny, the idea of literature itself was problematized, as its porous boundaries and flexible conventions made it especially vulnerable to assimilation into broader discussions of discourse in general. Within such a set of concerns, how, then, might we undertake to read Van Gogh’s letters?

What Is Literature Anyway?
Cultural Codes and Timeless Truths

Margaret Thatcher once famously declared that society doesn’t exist. In the same sense, we might say that criminal negligence doesn’t exist — except that you really can go to jail for it, sometimes with good reason. In fact, as non-Thatcherites everywhere understand, societies can be organized, and social programs can make a difference to people’s lives even if “society,” like “criminal negligence,” eludes exact definition. I want to begin by suggesting that the same holds true of “literature,” which is not an empty category, even though it also eludes precise definition.
In *The Event of Literature*, Terry Eagleton addresses this point at some length, arguing that it is incorrect to say that if a concept has no definable essence, it is therefore vacuous. To clarify the point, Eagleton looks to Wittgenstein’s idea of “family resemblances” (20), the complex networks of overlapping similarities that bind our activities together in much the same way as a family is bound together by numerous overlapping affinities. Although the “essence” of a large extended family cannot be clearly described, it can nonetheless, for practical purposes, make sense to talk about such a family as an actual entity.

As Eagleton goes on to point out, however, one problem with family-resemblance theory is that, with a little ingenuity, we can find similarities among all kinds of randomly selected objects. Whatever attributes are held to be pertinent in any actual case must therefore be judged to have a specific significance, and this brings us back to the problem of, again, providing necessary and sufficient conditions along essentialist lines (23). That is, at some point, judgement has to intervene — to tie the knot, as it were, at the end of a thread that is otherwise endlessly drawn in the wake of an ever-inquisitive needle on the hunt for an ever-elusive definition. And so, although Eagleton agrees that there is no “essence” to literature, he looks for anchorage in certain “empirical categories, not theoretical ones” (25), based on what people generally have in mind when they talk about this topic:

They mean by “literary” a work which is fictional, or which yields significant insight into human experience as opposed to reporting empirical truths, or which uses language in a peculiarly heightened, figurative or self-conscious way, or which is not practical in the sense that shopping lists are, or which is highly valued as a piece of writing. (25)

On the family-resemblance model, these criteria are interconnected by way of overlapping affinities and thereby provide a set of guidelines that “help cast light on the nature of literature-talk” (32). It is not hard to see how such criteria can map sufficiently well, for instance, onto a body of writing such as Van Gogh’s. His letters frequently provide significant,
fresh insights. They use language in a heightened and figurative manner. They are often imaginative. And his writing is frequently distinguished or arrestingly idiosyncratic. The acclaim that the collected correspondence has received from readers who recognize its literary distinction presumably reflects a set of responses that can be loosely accounted for by the above criteria, considered as a set of guidelines.

But in his ensuing discussion of the distinctive strategies of literary discourse, Eagleton quickly moves on to address some further, more theoretical issues. In so doing, he acknowledges the explanatory power of “Heidegger’s concept of truth as disclosure or revelation” (65), and, as I have mentioned, Heidegger’s account of how art can “make things new” was helpful in my earlier study of Van Gogh’s writing. But in the present context, it is also worth noting that Heidegger’s idea of truth as a disclosure and contemplation of Being remains largely untouched by such pressing concerns as historical contradiction, ideological struggle, and semantic ambiguity. And yet we need to recognize as well that the temptation to replace Heidegger’s view of the aesthetic by a thoroughgoing historicism that focuses exclusively on such matters runs the opposite risk of causing the idea of literature to be absorbed into a description of the cultural conditions enabling the production of texts in general. For instance, in his influential book Renaissance Self-Fashioning, Stephen Greenblatt makes a strong case for texts being inextricably involved in “larger networks of meaning in which both the author and his works participate,” so that neither literature nor the reader exists in a sealed-off universe of discourse.7 For Greenblatt, self-fashioning (the idea that we have some autonomy in shaping the kind of person we want to be) is curtailed by the social and historical circumstances that shape us, beyond our full understanding. It is impossible, Greenblatt says, to reconstruct fully either the cultures of past ages or our own culturally coded interactions with them (5). Consequently, the process of self-fashioning, like the process of reading, is “resolutely dialectical” (1), and the “impurities,” “indeterminacy and incompleteness” built into it are ineradicable, even as the “I” being fashioned takes on “characteristic modes of expression, recurrent narrative patterns,” and the like (5–6).
But an analysis, such as Greenblatt’s, that insists on contradiction, incompleteness, and the interplay of cultural codes is likely to find that any text at all is interesting and relevant as grist for the analytical mill. The question of whether or not “literature” is a useful category is not especially pressing here, because a resolutely pursued historicism effectively absorbs the aesthetic into a discussion of cultural production, thereby leaving us with a problem that is the exact opposite of Heidegger’s ahistoricism.

As accomplished thinkers, Heidegger and Greenblatt take steps to address the counter-case to their own predominant emphases. But I am mainly interested here in the predominant emphases themselves and in the gap with which they confront us between a resolute “hermeneutic of Being,” on the one hand, and a resolute historicism, on the other. In attempting to bridge this gap, I have found Mikhail Bakhtin to be especially helpful because he presents strong arguments in support of the idea that although texts are indeed shaped by an endless interplay of cultural codes, nonetheless a high value can also be placed on the idea of literature. That is, for Bakhtin, the alternative to a single, clear meaning is not a merely chaotic relativism but a tension-fraught, dialogical exchange on the threshold, an exchange that he finds embodied in and exemplified by great literature. To clarify this point, in the following remarks I draw on some of Bakhtin’s best-known ideas, though I do not deal with the several controversies occasioned especially by discussions of authorship and attribution. Throughout, I draw also on Michael Holquist, who has done much to explain and develop the epistemological foundations of Bakhtin’s thought.

Bakhtin, Dialogue, and the Self Interrupted

In his study of Dostoevsky’s poetics, Bakhtin argues that to be human is to be in communication, and thus “to be for another, and through the other, for one’s self.” That is, as Holquist explains, for Bakhtin every “self” needs an “other” even to begin to chart a course in the world. This is so because the self emerges only through relationships
within specific historical situations. This is what Bakhtin means when he says that “through the other” one comes to a sense of “one’s self.”

But, as Holquist points out, the relationship between “I” and “other” is asymmetrical because the self is perpetually “open” and “unfinished,” a work in progress, vulnerable to uncertainties and insecurities and yet called to shape itself meaningfully (26). By contrast, the space and time of the other are accorded a degree of stability and identity. That is, by encountering what I see as a stable value represented by the other, I am able to accord my own “open” and “unfinished” self-fashioning a sufficient degree of structure to shape a meaningful engagement with the world and with my historical situation within it.

Yet when the other is a person (rather than, say, an idea), the values that I see as relatively stable are in fact experienced subjectively by that other, who is also a project-in-the-making, likewise called to a self-fashioning that is perpetually in process. My encounters with the world thus confront me with a wide range of values in contention with one another, values that are often beset by insecurities even though called to objectivity and among which I must choose my allegiances.

Bakhtin’s word for the endlessly complex and unobjectifiable multiplicity of dialogues that constitute the human quest for stability and meaning is “heteroglossia.” In every individual case of self-fashioning, this multiplicity of dialogues affords the opportunities and constraints in terms of which a person can be “through the other, for one’s self.”

Personal identity is thus shaped by a process that is multi-directional rather than linear, entailing an array of dialogical relationships within some of which, for instance, I might well shift my persona, aims, and allegiances. But if my persona (the face that I present to the world, for practical purposes) becomes merely a kaleidoscope of expedient manoeuvres, my identity will volatilize accordingly, and instead of “making something of myself” (as the saying goes), I will “come to nothing.” By contrast, a person’s self-fashioning, amidst the all-but-infinite range of potential dialogues on offer, entails specific engagements, patterns of response, ways of imagining and thinking, which in turn can take on the shape of a narrative — “the story of my life.” Still, this narrative is never complete, nor is it without discontinuities.
and contradictions, because the self is a provisional synthesis rather than a self-identical essence. The Buddha and David Hume were right about this — and so is Bakhtin.

In his book on Dostoevsky, Bakhtin develops these ideas about self-fashioning specifically in relation to literature, his main claim being that Dostoevsky’s characters are given the status of “authentic” subjects independent of the author’s own subjectivity. That is, Dostoevsky renders the “unfinalizability” of the people whom he depicts, and, in so doing, his art “liberates and de-reifies the human being” (61, 63). Dostoevsky’s novels thus provide special insight into the process whereby the self is shaped dialogically, and, in his writing, “referential meaning” is “indissolubly fused with the position of a personality” (93). The result is that the drama of self-fashioning is itself thematized through the multiple or “polyphonic” dialogical structures within the novel. Bakhtin points also to Dostoevsky’s fondness for doubles and “paired characters” and for a dramatized sense of “simultaneity” and “co-existence” whereby people are inserted into relationships through which, in turn, they discover their own personal trajectories (28). The “double-voiced discourse” that characterizes this kind of dialogue is everywhere a driving force in Dostoevsky’s novels, along with “hidden polemic, polemically colored confession, hidden dialogue,” and “almost no word without an intense sideward glance at someone else’s word” (203). Already, we might recognize here the very idiom of Van Gogh’s letters, but before considering this analogy further, I want to return to Eagleton’s discussion of literature and, in that light, to reconsider Bakhtin’s ideas about how, as a novelist, Dostoevsky thematizes the process itself of dialogical self-fashioning. As a way of getting back to Eagleton, a little assistance from Maurice Merleau-Ponty will prove helpful.

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological understanding of art follows upon his compelling account, in The Phenomenology of Perception, of how the human body is a source of signification in which sensuous perception is already laced through with a reflective dimension born out of the relationship between body and world. For Merleau-Ponty, seeing is always a way of seeing and is a means of organizing the world rather than an objective reflection on or replication of it.
When Merleau-Ponty applies these ideas to language, he sounds very much like Bakhtin. For instance, in *Signs*, we learn that speech is “always only a fold in the immense fabric of language,” with which we are taken up in a perpetual dialogical relationship that does not “leave a place for pure meaning.” Within this dialogue, “at the moment of expression the other to whom I address myself and I who express myself are incontestably linked together.” Elsewhere, Merleau-Ponty goes on to explain that in such an “exchange,” “there are never quite two of us and yet one is never alone.”

All of this is very much in harmony with Bakhtin’s thinking on the same issues, but when Merleau-Ponty turns to literature, he has further points to make, especially about the relationship between dialogue and intent. Thus, in “Studies in the Literary Use of Language,” he describes literature as something that “lives through an imposture” insofar as the sum total of the countless “accidents” that influence the production of a text are taken to reflect “the author’s intention.” It is a cliché of literary criticism that the “intentional fallacy” should be avoided: in other words, that readers should realize that the effects of the artifact outreach what the author thought he or she was doing at the time. In *Signs*, Merleau-Ponty extends this principle to painting, arguing that a painter “is no more capable of seeing his paintings than the writer is capable of reading his work.” Rather, “it is in others that expression takes on its relief and really becomes signification” — which is to say, the significance of the work is opened up by way of a dialogical relationship with the reader or viewer, thereby extending the significance of the work beyond the artist’s specific intent, or “personal vibration” and “inner monologue” (52).

This is not to say that readers or viewers grasp the whole significance either. As we have seen, language does not give us “transparent significations” (41) and meaning is “never completed” (42). As Greenblatt observes throughout *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, the individual reader’s codes and the cultural codes of the text interpenetrate in endlessly complex ways. Consequently, in matters of value, what we take to be truth comes to us dialogically and by way of a continuing exploration. As Merleau-Ponty says, sounding much like Heidegger, art

12 *Introduction*

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presents us with “a way of seeing” and of “inhabiting the world,” offering “a certain relationship to being” (53–54). But Merleau-Ponty goes on to stress that the internal organization of the work of art achieves a certain “equilibrium,” as a result of which the text is, as it were, in dialogue with itself, holding its own internal contradictions in suspension (43). In turn, this internal dialogue expresses a distinctive way of inhabiting the world, with which we are also invited to engage. Here, a Heideggerian understanding of the truth of art as disclosure joins with a dialogical view of the artifact as culturally situated and contested, reducible neither to the author’s intent nor to a reader’s interpretation.

Embodied Intentions: The Textual Dynamics of Self-Fashioning

These comments on intentionality and on the text being in dialogue with itself can return us now to Eagleton, who, on the topic of intention, offers an argument quite similar to Merleau-Ponty’s, except that Eagleton also introduces what he describes as “a fruitful distinction” between asking what an author has in mind and what the “intention” of the text itself is (148). As we see in the work of Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty, a text cannot be reduced to the intentional utterance of a single person, the author, but a text nonetheless can have a high degree of coherence — through imagery, diction, constellations of ideas, and so on. Eagleton suggests that these can also be usefully described as “intentions,” of which, again, “authors know little or nothing” (148). I am reminded here of a friend who was once involved with security at a racetrack. When undesirables were banned from the premises, security guards would try to remember not their faces but their gaits as the best way of recognizing them if they turned up again. Unconsciously, the body has a pattern of movement that is recognizable to others but not to the person whose body it is. Likewise, the body of a text can be the bearer of a significance of which the author is unaware. Eagleton describes this as the text being “faithful to the law of its own being” (60) — the embodiment of meanings, as in Merleau-Ponty’s “way of seeing,” that are unselfconsciously expressed or intended.
It follows that the text is in dialogue not just with the reader but also with itself insofar as it attains a distinctive “equilibrium” in tune with “the law of its own being.” For Eagleton, this internal dialogue is a fundamental “strategy” of the literary artifact, and here he is drawn to Fredric Jameson, who sees literature as raising from within itself the ideological issues and contexts to which it then also offers a response (177). As Eagleton says, “paradoxically, the literary work of art projects out of its own innards the very historical and ideological subtext to which it is a strategic reply” (170). In conducting a dialogue with itself, the text therefore puts on offer a way of “inhabiting the world” that engages with the reader, again dialogically: “there are never quite two of us and yet one is never alone.”

My main aim in this study is to read Van Gogh’s letters in the context of the ideas I have here broadly set out. Although, as we have seen, “literature” eludes precise definition, I follow Eagleton in maintaining that it is not an empty concept and that “literature-talk” can be valuable and productive, even if the domain itself is often contested. Throughout, I want to retain Heidegger’s idea that the literary imagination reveals occluded aspects of familiar experiences and objects and that these disclosures can be valuable in extending our understanding of the world and of one another. But I want also to acknowledge that literature is a product of particular historical and cultural circumstances and is the site of contradictions, aporias, distortions, and irresolutions of various kinds. As Greenblatt says, its structure is “resolutely dialectical” (1) and, as he goes on to point out, is richly contaminated by the interaction between its codes, the codes of the culture within which it was produced, and the codes of its readers. Bakhtin’s “heteroglossia” likewise draws attention to this perpetual negotiation of meaning, both in human culture as the site of our individual and communal self-fashioning and in how we engage with literary texts. In this negotiation, we have some degree of autonomy, even though the modes of production within which we find ourselves situated are the bearers of a significance that shapes our intent beyond our full understanding. Eagleton correctly talks about the text itself as having an “intention” that embodies a “way
of seeing” in excess of the author’s conscious awareness, as Merleau-Ponty affirms. Consequently, when I talk about self-fashioning in Van Gogh’s letters, I do not just mean the descriptions that they offer of the events of his life. Rather, as with Bakhtin’s reading of Dostoevsky, I mean that one key criterion relevant to the assessment of Van Gogh’s letters as literature is that the process of self-fashioning is itself thematized by the internal dialogues that the letters conduct with themselves. That is, Van Gogh’s letters raise, from within themselves, questions and issues to which they also respond. This is the central “strategy” by which they acquire the stylistic “equilibrium,” the embodied “way of seeing” that invites our attention and engagement.

As it happens, in Van Gogh’s case, the process of self-fashioning through the interaction of self and other is especially intense because Van Gogh well knew the unusual fragility of his ego, the “I” called to shape itself in the image of an other. Throughout his life, his mental stability was a concern, and, in turn, this special vulnerability helps to explain why he was such a resolute idealist. For Van Gogh, that is, ideals had objective value and were strongly self-identical, offering thereby a counterweight and antidote to his personal instability. But, again, the literary quality of his writing lies not just in this kind of biographical description but also in how his letters reproduce the process of an unusually intense self-fashioning by way of their own internal structures.

**Conclusion: Van Gogh’s “Double-Voiced Discourse”**

As a way now of bringing Van Gogh into the foreground, I would like to return to Bakhtin’s remarks on Dostoevsky’s “fondness for doubles” and for the kinds of “juxtaposition and counterpointing” by which the simultaneous co-existence of self and other is represented in the novels (28). These dialogical structures in turn engage us in the “inescapable open-endedness” of the self-fashioning to which we are committed by virtue of being human and which is accompanied always by contest.
and struggle (47). As any reader of Van Gogh’s collected correspondence quickly recognizes, this is the very stuff also of his writing, and commentators on his letters — and, especially, on his paintings — often notice how fascinated he was by the idea of “simultaneous contrasts” and by binary oppositions in which differences merge or otherwise influence each other. For instance, Wouter van der Veen points out how, everywhere in his writing, Van Gogh searches for “contraries that complement” and is preoccupied with binaries. Naifeh and Smith remark on how nature always had “a double edge” for Van Gogh, at once consoling and alienating. They also note how interested he was in theories about complementary and contrasting colour and how he favoured painting pairs of objects as part of an “obsession with pairings and partnerships.” Lubin remarks on how often Van Gogh paints couples and also pairs that overlap and merge, as, for instance, his paired cypresses, paired cottages, and other twinned structures. Schama points to “optical opposites that were also complementaries” in Van Gogh’s paintings, and how, in Arles, he especially exploited dramatic contrasts, juxtaposing “fruitful and barren worlds, fertility and self-destruction, comradeship and loneliness.” Callow notes how entranced Van Gogh was with Rembrandt’s Jewish Bride, which, again, depicts a couple who are separate yet merged, and also how fond he was of depicting paired objects under strain, such as, for instance, the juxtaposed “death-throes and birth pangs” in Wheatfield with Crows. Jansen reminds us that, throughout the entire shaping of Van Gogh’s reputation, the letters have been “the written complement” of the paintings — the overarching binary opposite, as it were, in the dialogue between painting and writing by means of which his fame was established.

Taken together, these comments point to a distinctive quality in Van Gogh’s thinking and imagining, reflected in his strong attraction to binary structures, complementary oppositions, startling juxtapositions, vigorous contrasts, and dynamically interrelated pairs — the “friction of ideas” (396/3:36), as he himself says. I do not want to speculate about why this is so but rather to accept it as a point of entry into the kinds of readings I wish to provide in the following
pages. Throughout, I focus on several varieties of internal dialogue, or “double-voiced discourse,” that the letters conduct with themselves as they reproduce and thematize the process of self-fashioning. In turn, I locate this process in Van Gogh’s responses to questions and issues that engage and exemplify a sustained, dynamic interrelationship throughout the correspondence between a questing, insecure “I” and a value-laden, often idealized “other.” Considered as literature, Van Gogh’s letters achieve (unevenly, to be sure, but with impressive consistency nonetheless) a tense, dialogically negotiated equilibrium between these opposites, which in turn shows forth and embodies a way of seeing and understanding that (as with his paintings) is at once disturbingly challenging and powerfully illuminating.

My aim here has been to introduce the concepts underpinning the readings of Van Gogh’s letters in the chapters that follow, each of which deals with a specific topic. Thus, Chapter 1, “The Painterly Writer,” considers how the letters reproduce the dialogue between painting and writing that was central to the shaping of Van Gogh’s life and work as a whole. Chapter 2, “Van Gogh’s Rhetorical Binaries,” deals with how Van Gogh deploys strong oppositions, contrasts, and juxtapositions as a means of exploring the contradictions between his ideals and the difficulties of his actual self-fashioning. Chapter 3, “Reading Van Gogh’s Letter-Sketches,” deals with the 242 sketches contained in (or accompanying) the letters. The sketches work symbiotically with the texts, by way of complement and contrast, deepening and expanding our understanding of the process and dynamics of Van Gogh’s development. Chapter 4, “Self-Knowledge — Who Has It?,” deals with a pervasive, unresolved dialogue between Van Gogh’s insistence on maintaining contact with an objective, recognizable material world and his acknowledgement that, in the heat of the creative moment, surrendering the stable structures of ordinary experience, and even of personal identity, is also necessary. In the conclusion, I offer a synthesis of the preceding arguments, while also drawing briefly on reader-response theory to suggest that there is a significant analogy between the dialogical structure of the letters and the reader’s dialogical encounter with them.
As I noted at the start of this introduction, a literary-critical approach to Van Gogh’s collected correspondence needs to be responsive to the imaginative complexity, power, and coherence of his writing. But the letters also need to be read within the context of modern literary-theoretical discourse if we are to attend effectively to Van Gogh’s writerly strategies and thereby open a path to the further discussions that his letters will surely elicit as they enter fully into their own domain, as literature. Consequently, in the following chapters, I make the case that Van Gogh’s correspondence can be fruitfully interpreted by way of the ideas about dialogue and self-fashioning described in this introduction and, especially, by how the process of self-fashioning is thematized within the texts of the letters themselves.