CONCLUSION

Envoi

In the development of literary studies since, roughly, the mid-twentieth century, a predominant focus on the close reading of works of literature, which for this purpose were considered as unitary and complete in themselves, yielded to a predominant interest in situating a wide variety of texts (“literary” and otherwise) within a complex of further, culturally coded and historically specific discourses. Yet the “new criticism” of the mid-twentieth century was not conducted without theoretical reflection, and the new literary theory of the late twentieth century routinely sought confirmation in perceptive readings of texts on the older model. The domains of criticism and theory were therefore not mutually exclusive; indeed, neither of them flourishes well in isolation from the other. Criticism without theoretical reflection divorces the text from the actualities of culture and history; theory without critical practice readily becomes a hall of mirrors, endlessly reproducing speculations untested by the rough entanglements of actual works of literature.

Consequently, although the present theory-based study remains distinct from my earlier mainly critical one, it is not wholly separate, and my aim is that the two books should work together as a means of bringing Van Gogh’s collected correspondence into the domain of modern literary studies, both critical and theoretical — as is long overdue.
With these points in mind, in my introductory discussion of the literary status of Van Gogh’s correspondence, I do not supply a hard and fast definition of “literature.” Rather, I offer a set of suggestions about “literature-talk” that are appropriate for the materials under consideration, drawing especially on Mikhail Bakhtin, whose ideas about self-fashioning have considerable explanatory power when brought to bear on Van Gogh’s letters. But I also emphasize the points made by Merleau-Ponty and Eagleton about how texts embody “intentions” over and above the author’s conscious design. Such a view entails that the self-fashioning recorded in Van Gogh’s letters is not confined to the factual record of his interesting but fraught life. Rather, the letters are dialogical in nature, raising from within themselves, as part of their own “intentional” structure, questions and issues to which they also respond. This internal “conversation” in turn reproduces the structure of Bakhtin’s “I/other” — the fundamental élan vital of self-fashioning as he describes it. Throughout, I have suggested that the letters thematize this process by foregrounding it within their own discourse, and this fact, or strategy, is a significant marker of the literary dimension of Van Gogh’s correspondence.

At the conclusion of their important study, Mikhail Bakhtin, Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist point out that “no word is final” and that here they “pay homage” to Bakhtin’s thinking about “the impossibility of endings.”1 The reasons for this open-endedness are implicit in the epistemology of self-fashioning and the “heteroglossia” that it entails, as I have explained in the introduction. As Clark and Holquist say, dialogism assumes “the necessary presence of gaps in all our fondest schemes and most elaborate systems.”2

Just so, the present study has offered a certain interpretation, supported by particular readings that, although far from exhausting the hermeneutic potential of the texts under consideration, provide what I hope is a helpful account of the power and enduring significance of Van Gogh’s writing. But as a way now of shaping my argument towards a conclusion — despite the “impossibility of endings” — a brief consideration of Wolfgang Iser’s influential contribution to reader-response theory can help to clarify the relationship between
the necessary open-endedness of critical discussion, on the one hand, and coherent interpretation, on the other.

In *The Act of Reading*, Iser, like Bakhtin, insists that interpretation is unfinalizable and that the text is “an open event.” He goes on to explain that “total organization” would be the death of literature because there would be “nothing left for the reader to do” (86). By contrast, literature works “to stimulate the imagination” (87), so that meaning emerges from the reader’s imagination-infused engagement with the possibilities of interpretation offered by a text. In turn, these possibilities are organized in two main ways. First, a text has a “repertoire,” comprising common knowledge that, it is assumed, readers share and recognize and that draws from “material selected from social systems and literary traditions” (86). Second, the “strategies” of a text are the means by which it organizes or works upon the repertoire in a way that discloses aspects of experience and understanding occluded by conventional knowledge and belief. Readers are thereby enabled to take a “fresh look” at ideas that they “may hitherto have accepted without question” (74), and they can come to see things “in a new light” (69) while also acquiring a more discerning view of how provisional self-knowledge is. Iser refers to this process as a “dialogue” (80), and because different readers interact with the text in different ways and various interpretations invite comparison with one another, this dialogue is never finalized. Open-endedness, however, does not entail mere relativism, because the strategies of a text impose constraints that serve as common reference points. That is, although the strategies do not impose specific interpretations, they offer certain possibilities, which a reader then fills out.

Even this brief summary shows how strong are the similarities between Iser’s thinking and the main ideas set out in the introduction. That is, like Bakhtin, Iser insists on the centrality of dialogue to interpretation and on the idea that interpretation is unfinalizable. Iser’s theories about “strategies” also directly influenced Eagleton’s use of the same term. Eagleton even quotes Iser’s claim that literature is “a reaction to the thought systems which it has chosen and incorporated in its own repertoire,” as a way of showing how “strikingly close” Iser

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comes to Jameson’s concept of the “self-fashioning artifact,” whereby literary texts raise problems and issues to which they also respond. And when Iser points to how “the ultimate function of the strategies is to defamiliarize the familiar” (87), he echoes the Heideggerian idea that art discloses fresh aspects of ordinary things. He also cites Merleau-Ponty in describing this defamiliarizing as a “coherent deformation” (81)—a means, as Merleau-Ponty says, of expressing a “way of seeing” that is an “emblem” of a particular manner of interpreting the world and that a reader takes up and fills out.

Yet if Iser offers such a convenient reprise of some of the main ideas described in the introduction, the question arises as to why I did not make him a central point of reference there, instead of Bakhtin. The answer is that Iser is mainly concerned about the interplay of textual codes and structures, and his hypothetical reader remains more a theoretical construct than an actual grappler with complex problems and ideas. As Eagleton says, with Iser, “it is as though the true referent of the literary work is not so much the social reality as the conventions that regulate it” (95). Iser has little interest in the rough terrain covered by Bakhtin’s brand of self-fashioning, which is not just about reading but also about the conflicted situation of the radically insecure “I” and the ambivalently attractive and threatening “other.” The felt sense of recalcitrant biographical facts and of contending ideologies is the very stuff also of Van Gogh’s letters, but not of Iser’s analysis of the reading process.

Still, a further question now presses from the opposite direction. If Bakhtin offers a more helpful way to approach Van Gogh, why, in conclusion, do I turn to Iser? The answer is that he is especially helpful in clarifying how, in retrospect, we might think about the specifically aesthetic dimension of literature conceived as dialogue. In my earlier book The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: A Critical Study, I dealt with key patterns of metaphors and concepts. These standard topics of conventional literary criticism can help to show how Van Gogh’s writerly imagination offers new ways of seeing as he uses language in a heightened or figurative way, contending with matters of significant human value in a style that is often arresting and distinctive. But in the present study,
I describe the aesthetic dimension of Van Gogh’s writing by means that lie outside the range of the critical practice exemplified by my earlier book. And in the present context, Iser can help, in conclusion, to describe the aesthetic dimension of literature conceived as a set of self-referential strategies in fruitful but unfinalizable dialogue, such as I have been claiming — by way of Bakhtin — is a main aspect of Van Gogh’s achievement as a writer. Although Iser is mainly interested in fiction, his analysis of the aesthetic has a strong explanatory power when brought to bear on what I have described as the literary structure of Van Gogh’s letters.

In brief, Iser is not so much interested in what a text means as in what it does, and he locates the aesthetic in the “effect” a text has on a reader (54). Yet because different readers respond to texts in different ways, an aesthetic effect cannot be prescribed or seen as, somehow, inhering in the text alone. It is, instead, best thought of as a potential of the text — a possible effect, actualized by the reader’s experience of the particular kind of “coherent deformation” that a reading produces. Consequently, “aesthetic value is something that cannot be grasped”; rather, it is manifest “in the alteration of what is familiar,” as a result of a particular reading. Literary value thus emerges in an indeterminate way as an effect of a dialogue between reader and text, actualizing the further interplay within the text, between strategies and repertoire.

The analyses I have offered of Van Gogh’s letters fit well with this broad understanding of the aesthetic. As Clark and Holquist say, there is no final word, and just so, my readings of Van Gogh are a means of describing certain effects, in Iser’s sense. Still, in turn, these readings cannot be separated from their dialogical interinvolvement with the ideas set out in the introduction. This is so because, as I mentioned above, theoretical considerations need to produce sound critical readings, just as criticism needs to be theoretically informed if the explanatory power of each of these aspects of literary study is to be effectively realized.

Much indeed is left undone, and critical discussion of Van Gogh’s correspondence is, today, in its early stages. Further questions and issues, both critical and theoretical, spring readily to mind, but for the
meantime, I must settle for the readings I have presented in the previous pages. Thus, chapters 1 to 4 confirm the explanatory framework offered by the introduction, and in each of these central chapters, I engage the reader critically in some hitherto undiscovered aspect of Van Gogh’s writing.

Chapter 1 deals with a pervasive tension throughout the letters between narrative and pictorial elements of the writing. The restless mobility of the (temporal) narrative in relation to the (spatial) stability of conventional “word painting” reproduces the relationship between “I” and “other” — the basic dialogical exchange, as Bakhtin says, by which self-fashioning is conducted.

Chapter 2 explores Van Gogh’s frequent use of binary constructions such as paradoxes, contradictions, strong juxtapositions, and the like. Among other things, these constructions express an energy of the will bent on realizing an ideal while remaining aware of the destabilizing, negative-contrast experiences that the ideal itself enables us to see. Often, Van Gogh’s most pressing contradictions are not resolved; rather, they remain as part of a continuing re-evaluation, inseparable from the always unfinished quest for stability and self-realization.

There are to date no sustained critical assessments of Van Gogh’s 242 letter-sketches in relation to his letters. With this in mind, I provide in chapter 3 a general account of the sketches, but the main focus of the chapter is on the dialogical interaction between the sketches and the texts of the letters in which they occur. Although the sketches sometimes confirm what the letters say, they also focus on matters that the letters suppress or elide, thereby enabling us to interpret the letters themselves in new ways. Considered as an integral part of Van Gogh’s correspondence, the letter-sketches play a significant, if minor, role in the drama of self-fashioning that lies at the heart of his literary achievement.

Chapter 4 deals with the rich, apparent confusion of Van Gogh’s discussions of imagination, fantasy, illusion, belief, self-surrender, and the value of common experience. A clarification of these topics is afforded by considering them as a set of polarities by means of which Van Gogh’s unusually vulnerable ego aspires to stability, but without
ceasing to be creative. In this context, his concern about the ambival-
ence of imagination, as a source of creative power and yet also as a
dangerous delusion, is a figure for the aspirations and anxieties of
self-fashioning itself.

Throughout the book, I have argued that the literary dimension
of Van Gogh’s letters resides not so much in the fact that they provide
information about the narrative of his personal life as in how they
thematize within their own discourse the structure of the self-fash-
ioning process itself as a multi-faceted dialogue between I and other.
In so doing, the letters enable readers to recognize how necessary yet
open-ended, constrained yet liberating, confined yet unpredictable, are
the means by which people seek to shape a place for themselves in the
world. And because such a process is inherently dialogical, open-ended,
and plural, it is especially amenable to literary representation. The
genius of Van Gogh’s letters is that they implicitly grasp the signifi-
cance of this fact, so compellingly embodied as a strategy, or intention,
of the texts themselves.