Preface and Acknowledgements

Since the landmark edition of Vincent van Gogh’s collected correspondence in 2009, followed by the selected edition by the same editors in 2014, there has been a surge of interest in Van Gogh as a writer. Translations of his letters have been made, or are in preparation, in at least twenty-five languages, and the literary distinction of Van Gogh’s correspondence is now widely acknowledged. Yet reading all the way through the 820 extant letters written by Van Gogh is demanding and time consuming—even the selected edition of 265 letters is a hefty 777 pages. With these points in mind, I provide in the following chapters some suggestions about the thematic coherence of Van Gogh’s written work, as well as a distillation, in his own words, of the main lines of his conceptual thinking and imagination. To date, no other book offers this combination of elements.

The present book is the offspring of two earlier volumes, in which I set out to make the case for Van Gogh as a great writer. When I first undertook this project, the high literary quality of Van Gogh’s collected correspondence had often been recognized, but there was no extended critical assessment of his extraordinary writerly achievements. Consequently, I attempted in the two previous volumes to bring the collected correspondence into the domain of modern literary criticism, first by way of a practical-critical analysis and then in a more theoretically based study. While the present book is the most straightforward and
accessible of the three, it could not have been written without its predecessors, which supply both the basic understandings enabling my selection of excerpts and a rationale for organizing the anthology and for the interpretations provided by the brief, interconnected essays. Most importantly, my focus on Van Gogh’s literary talents directly influenced the selection of texts that make up the anthology sections of the book. These texts were chosen not only to illustrate the main themes and motifs that provide imaginative and conceptual coherence to the correspondence as a whole but also to exemplify the impressive and captivating quality of Van Gogh’s imagination as a writer.

A note on how the book is organized: each chapter begins with a discussion of the broad significance of the topics that it contains. These topics are then dealt with individually, in a series of subsections. Each of these opens with a short introduction that recapitulates the salient points from the opening discussion, expanding on them in a manner pertinent to the topic at hand and making reference (by number) to the excerpts that have been chosen as illustrations. The excerpts themselves then follow, with the letter from which each excerpt was drawn identified by the letter number in brackets. The book is thus designed to bring an increasing intensity of focus to bear on the central themes and motifs of Van Gogh’s writing, while at the same time pointing readers to relevant letters. Readers can also consult the anthology selectively, if so desired, without losing touch with the overall design—whether mine or, much more importantly, Van Gogh’s.

All quotations from the correspondence are from the six-volume Vincent van Gogh: The Letters, edited by Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009). I refer to the letters by letter number, followed by a slash and then the volume and page number: (155/1:247), for example. In transcribing the letters, the editors of the 2009 edition made every effort to
preserve distinctive features of Van Gogh’s handwritten originals, including the use of suspension points (in varying numbers) and of underlining. Van Gogh sometimes underlined a word more than once, and the editors chose to capture the additional emphasis by using small capitals for words underlined twice and full capitals for words underlined three times or more (while using italic for words underlined only once, as is common practice). In quoting from the translations, I have taken care to reproduce them exactly as they appear in that edition.

Excerpts from the letters are used here with the permission of the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, and I gratefully acknowledge help and support received from the staff of the Van Gogh Museum Library. I am, again, very much indebted to Hans Luijten, who read the typescript with great care and, as ever, made numerous insightful comments and useful suggestions. Many thanks to Sue Mitchell, Pater Stoepker, and Henry Summerfield, who have supported and encouraged my work on Van Gogh’s letters from the beginning.