Reading
Vincent
van Gogh
Introduction

The aim of this book is to provide a distillation of the central motifs and patterns of imagery in Vincent van Gogh’s extraordinary, voluminous correspondence. Readers setting out to read all the way through the vast collection of his letters soon encounter the formidable challenge of its sheer mass and complexity. Also, although the impact of Van Gogh’s writing can be felt immediately in his most interesting letters, it is difficult to discern the imaginative and conceptual designs that transform his correspondence as a whole into something that is widely recognized as a literary achievement of a very high order.

In two earlier books, I provided a critical analysis of the collected correspondence considered specifically as literature and negotiated the complexities of the texts in some detail, while also offering a broad assessment of Van Gogh’s achievements as a writer. The present book builds on that work, seeking to present in an accessible form what I take to be the core elements of Van Gogh’s writerly vision. As it happens, the letters are often especially arresting and insightful in brief passages that stand out from the more ephemeral discourse of which these passages are a part, and the correspondence thus lends itself well to the kind of anthologizing offered in the following pages. Consequently, the present book can be read both as a synthesis of Van Gogh’s leading ideas and as a series of observations exemplifying the riches of his imagination as a writer—riches that a fuller engagement with the collected letters will certainly continue to disclose.
But first, let me say a little about the part played by the letters in the shaping of Van Gogh’s reputation.

**Privacy and the Public Record**

After his death, Van Gogh’s fame developed with the same astonishing rapidity as had his career as a painter, which lasted only a brief ten years. Towards the end of his life (he died at age thirty-seven), his paintings were beginning to win recognition among a few avant-garde critics and artists. But he had made only one significant sale and was reconciled to disappointment, which, combined with his serious mental illness, helps to explain his suicide. During the last decade of Vincent’s life, his brother Theo had supported him financially and, in return, had received a steady supply of Vincent’s paintings as part of an agreement between the two brothers. Theo had also become increasingly convinced of the high value of Vincent’s painting, and, as an art dealer, he was well positioned to promote the developing interest in his brother’s work. But Theo died six months after Vincent, and the task of promoting Vincent’s painting was subsequently taken up by Theo’s wife, Jo van Gogh-Bonger, who dedicated herself to this goal for the rest of her life—with spectacular success, as we now know. Within a few generations, the emergence of Van Gogh as perhaps the most widely recognized painter on the planet was as startling as his astonishing productivity during his brief career.

But Jo inherited not only Theo’s collection of paintings and drawings; she also found herself in possession of a massive collection of letters that Vincent had sent to Theo, beginning in 1872, when Vincent was nineteen, and continuing virtually until his death—an unfinished letter was found in his pocket after he shot himself. Jo realized the value of this remarkable correspondence
as a testament to Vincent’s ambitions and trials as an artist, and, in 1914, she published a three-volume edition of the letters to Theo. Yet she was not the first to publicize Vincent’s talents as a writer. Comments drawn from the letters had been used in a catalogue of a Van Gogh exhibition in Amsterdam in 1892, and in the following year, further passages were published in a Flemish magazine, *Van Nu en Straks*. Vincent’s young painter friend, Émile Bernard, published excerpts from letters that Vincent had sent to him, and, between 1893 and 1897, Bernard placed a substantial selection of Vincent’s writing in the influential French magazine *Mercure de France*. In 1905, Van Gogh’s letters to his painter friend Anthon van Rappard were published in the Netherlands, and, in 1911, a collected edition of the letters to Bernard appeared in France. Jo’s edition was soon translated into several languages, and Van Gogh’s fast-growing celebrity as a painter was thus accompanied by a parallel interest in the letters, which did much, in turn, to promote the paintings.

In the early 1950s, a four-volume collected edition was published, which included the letters from Theo to Vincent, as well as the letters to Bernard, Van Rappard, Vincent’s sister Willemien, and Paul Gauguin. Jo was the original editor, and after her death in 1925, her son Vincent Willem completed her work. This edition in turn became the primary source for many further editions, as well as for the great amount of research into Van Gogh’s life and career that accompanied his fast-growing reputation.

In 2009, the magnificent six-volume edition, *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters*, was published, in Dutch, French, and English. The edition is also available in an expanded version at www.vangoghletters.org. For the first time, the letters are now thoroughly annotated and supplied with a scholarly apparatus. A facsimile of each letter is provided, as is a transcription of the original text, and virtually every work of art mentioned in the correspondence is
illustrated. New letters have been discovered, the order and dates have been revised, and every effort has been made to preserve the idiosyncrasies and faults of the originals. For readers who might find the six volumes somewhat daunting, the same editors published a single-volume selected edition in 2014.

While the publication history of Van Gogh’s correspondence is more complex than I have indicated in this brief outline, my main point is that the letters played an important part in the shaping of Van Gogh’s reputation; there is a broad consensus among scholars that this is the case. Still, the reputation in question is mainly that of the painter, and the letters have been used for scholarly purposes mainly by art historians and biographers. Indeed, Van Gogh himself wanted his main contribution to be in the domain of painting and drawing, and he would not have imagined a printed collection of his complete correspondence, especially on the scale of the 2009 edition, which took a team of editors and translators fifteen years to prepare. He would surely have been dismayed to learn that the personal details of his family life (for instance, his angry repudiations of his parents and the embarrassing disasters of his love affairs, as well as the details of his mental illness) would be made public. Nor would he have thought that the tangled, eclectic mass of the almost one thousand documents that remain (perhaps half of the total number actually written) would be read as a riveting narrative of his life and principal concerns.

Although it makes good sense that the letters have been read largely as ancillary to the paintings, a counter-current has nonetheless gathered momentum among commentators on the correspondence, and it is certainly the driving force behind the present book. As the editors of the 2009 edition say, Van Gogh has left “a literary monument” (1:19) that “attains the universality of all great literature” (1:15), and in the selected edition, the same editors
go on to point out that for many readers his correspondence, “which was never intended for publication, is a highlight of world literature” (38). This opinion is echoed in the acknowledgement in 2010 by the Museum of Dutch Literature that Van Gogh belongs among “our hundred greatest dead writers”; other commentators make similar observations. Still, no serious study of Van Gogh’s specifically literary achievement had been published before I attempted to repair something of the omission, first in *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh: A Critical Study* (2014), which was written from a practical-critical perspective, and then in “My Own Portrait in Writing”: *Self-Fashioning in the Letters of Vincent van Gogh* (2015), which was written from a standpoint informed by literary theory.

One main aim of these two studies is to enable readers to re-encounter the texts with some degree of enhanced understanding in light of Van Gogh’s literary strategies, made accessible by way of critical analysis. Yet, as I have said, Van Gogh’s collected correspondence remains a formidable challenge. Consequently, in the following pages, my aim is to draw on my main critical conclusions about Van Gogh’s writing in order to compile an anthology of brief excerpts arranged and presented to make the main lines of his thinking accessible, as well as to show the arresting vividness of his writing in a variety of particular cases. With this goal in mind, let me now describe the contents of Van Gogh’s collected correspondence in more detail.

**Biography and Beyond**

Van Gogh’s surviving correspondence begins in 1872, when he was nineteen years old, and ends in 1890, when he was thirty-seven. The editors of the 2009 edition estimate that perhaps half of his actual correspondence has been lost. Today, the total number
of letters known to exist is 903. Of these, Van Gogh wrote 820 and received 83. Most (658) are addressed to Theo, but Vincent also wrote 58 letters to his artist friend Anthon van Rappard, 21 to his sister Willemien, 22 to Émile Bernard, and 4 to Paul Gauguin, as well as a small number to various other recipients. Approximately two-thirds are written in Dutch and one-third in French. There are also a few letters in English, and 242 sketches are dispersed throughout.

As we might expect, individual letters are often gauged to fit the recipient, and Van Gogh frequently adapts his tone of voice to appeal to different readers. His style is often idiosyncratic, with scant attention to such matters as capitalization and punctuation. Although the early letters are carefully written, he increasingly made revisions on the page and added an array of markings, such as underlining, bold capitals, and afterthoughts squeezed into the margins. Together with the letter-sketches, these markings affect the appearance of the letters, which in turn impact the reader.

These several considerations confirm the complexity of interpreting Van Gogh’s collected letters as well as the care a reader must take in deducing matters of biographical fact from the many refractions, indirections, calculated concealments, and manipulations running throughout. Nevertheless, a strong biographical narrative does lie at the heart of the collection: for instance, Jo van Gogh-Bonger’s lengthy introduction to the 1914 edition focuses on what the letters tell us about Vincent’s life. Not surprisingly, the letters have remained the primary source for biographers, as well as for art historians who are interested in what they can tell us about Van Gogh the painter.

Readers who are concerned mainly about Van Gogh’s achievements as a writer will also value the biographical aspect of his correspondence, not least because it provides the letters with a compelling narrative. Perhaps the term “quasi-narrative” is more
helpful here, because the storyline is neither self-consciously constructed nor entirely clear. Rather, it emerges from a kaleidoscope of partial views that the letters provide. The discontinuities (as with the New Testament documents that record the life of Jesus, for example) are often captivating precisely because of their lack of closure, which both reminds us of and enacts, as it were, the provisional nature of personal identity itself. Also, in addition to their quasi-narrative dimension, the letters record a remarkable—again discontinuous—evolution in Van Gogh’s thinking, expressed especially by way of an unresolved but engaging dialogue among religion, morality, and art. Each of these topics contends for ascendancy at different phases of Van Gogh’s career, yet with none of them totally displacing the others. The biographical quasi-narrative, together with Van Gogh’s evolving dialogue of ideas, remain integral to the personal story that the letters record. And although this story is well known in its broad outlines, it will be helpful, for our purposes, to summarize it briefly.

Vincent van Gogh was born on 30 March 1853 in Zundert, the eldest son of the Reverend Theodorus van Gogh (1822–85) and Anna Cornelia van Gogh-Carbentus (1819–1907). Vincent was the first of six surviving children. (A brother, also named Vincent, had been born the previous year but did not survive.) Not much is known about his early schooling, but at age sixteen, Vincent was employed at the Hague branch of the international art dealers, Goupil and Cie.

In 1873, Van Gogh was transferred to Goupil’s London branch. While living in London, he may have become infatuated with his landlady’s daughter, Eugénie Loyer; whether or not he was smitten by Eugénie, he found that his relationship with the Loyer household was unsustainable, and he left. Partly to allay his ensuing insecurities, he turned increasingly to religion. In 1874, Goupil transferred him to Paris, but, by this time, he had become so
immersed in his new religious enthusiasm that he failed to meet the expectations of his employer, and he was dismissed in 1876.

Van Gogh then returned to England, where he worked as an assistant teacher, first in Ramsgate and then in Isleworth. He became convinced that he had a religious vocation and declared his desire to become a preacher like his father. With this goal in mind, he returned to Holland in December 1876, and, after working for a short time in a book-and-stationery store in Dordrecht, he moved to Amsterdam in order to prepare for the entrance examination to the University of Amsterdam, where he hoped to study theology. After a year, however, he abandoned his course of studies, and in 1878, he entered a missionary school in Brussels. But things did not work out in Brussels either, and the following year, Van Gogh went as an evangelist to the coalfields of the Belgian Borinage. There, he discovered that the miners needed more than evangelizing to improve their lives, which were ruined by poverty and sickness.

Van Gogh’s growing concern for the material well-being of the Borinage miners and their families caused him to question the pre-eminence that he had accorded to religion. Partly as a result of an ensuing crisis of conscience, he turned his attention to art as a means of expressing how troubled he was about the plight of the working poor. He began drawing the miners with a view to publicizing the harsh conditions of their lives and, in so doing, to shape a career for himself as an artist.

In 1881, Van Gogh returned to his parents’ home in Etten, and there he met Kee Vos, a recently widowed cousin, whom he had encountered once before, in Amsterdam. Van Gogh fell in love with Kee, who rejected him out of hand. He was devastated, and as a result of the considerable family discord that he had managed to stir up, he moved later that year to The Hague, where he studied painting with his cousin-in-law Anton Mauve. He also
began a relationship with the unmarried and pregnant Clasina (Sien) Hoornik, who, to ease her dire financial circumstances, had been earning money as a prostitute. Once more, Van Gogh’s family was scandalized, but he insisted on setting up house with Sien, declaring that he would marry her, though he never did.

When the relationship with Sien ended in 1883, Van Gogh went to the remote province of Drenthe in order to focus on painting. But after three months, he returned to his parents, who had moved to Nuenen. There, he painted the local weavers and peasants, and, in 1885, produced his first masterpiece, *The Potato Eaters*. While he was in Nuenen, his father died, and soon after, he left for Antwerp, where he enrolled in the Academy of Fine Arts and began to develop an interest in Japanese prints. But he did not take easily to academic instruction, and in early 1886, he left Antwerp for Paris, where he moved in with his brother Theo, an art dealer. Vincent was greatly influenced by the modern French artists, to whom he was exposed through Theo, and also by Fernand Cormon, at whose studio he studied for three months. In Paris, he and Theo also became enthusiastic collectors of Japanese prints.

But life in the big city became arduous for Van Gogh, and in 1888, he headed south, to Arles. With the intention of establishing an artists’ community, he invited Paul Gauguin to stay at the Yellow House, which he decorated for Gauguin’s arrival with, among other things, his now famous sunflower paintings. Within two months, the relationship with Gauguin was in ruins, coming to a dramatic end when Van Gogh cut off a piece of his own ear. He was confined in a hospital in Arles, and subsequently, in 1889, he went voluntarily to the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole Asylum in St. Rémy. There, despite suffering a series of debilitating attacks that seem to have had an epileptic component, he continued to paint.

In 1889, Theo married Jo Bonger, and the following year, he and Jo had a son and named him Vincent Willem, after his uncle.
In May 1890, Vincent moved to the village of Auvers-sur-Oise, close to Paris. He took a room at an inn and became friendly with Dr. Paul Gachet, who was also an art collector and an amateur painter. A few months later, on 27 July 1890, Van Gogh suffered a gunshot wound, which he said was self-inflicted. He died on 29 July, with Theo by his side.

This brief recapitulation of the main narrative of Van Gogh’s life provides a frame of reference for the passages cited in the following chapters. For the most part, I arrange the excerpts chronologically so that they reflect Van Gogh’s changing interests and circumstances. Sometimes, though, in attempting to catch a sense of the correspondence as a whole, I break with a strictly chronological arrangement—for instance, in order to highlight Van Gogh’s variations on a key metaphor or idea. Rather than focusing exclusively on the arc of Van Gogh’s life, I want to highlight the thematic continuities and patterns of the most characteristic images and ideas that infuse the correspondence.