

[After Theo's visit]

Dear Theo,

Coming home just now, the very first thing I want to do is to beg a favour of you – a favour which I do not doubt is necessary, because it will show you that my intentions are the same as yours – it is: do not hurry me in the various things we could not settle at once, for I need some time to decide.

As to my relative coolness towards Father, I will explain that to you now that you mention it.

About a year ago, father came to the Hague for the first time since I had left home seeking peace which I didn't find there, either. I was already living with the woman then, and said, "Father, as I cannot blame those who disapprove of my conduct, given the prevailing conditions, I purposely avoided those whom I think would be ashamed of me. And you understand, I do not want to worry you, and as long as my affairs are not straightened out and I have not found my way, don't you think it would be better for me not to come home?"

If Father had answered something like, "No, that's carrying things to far," I would certainly have felt more warmly towards him; but Father's answer was something between Yes and No: "Well, you must do as you think best."

So, presuming they will be more or less ashamed of me, which fits in with what you said, I was not very keen on correspondence – neither was Father, and neither his letters nor mine have been a very intimate.

This "entre nous," only to explain things, not to draw any further conclusions.

There are two things to be done when somebody stretches only a finger: one is to seize the whole hand, to obtrude oneself; the other is to drop the hand that is not held out warmly and cordially, or to disappear of one's own free will where one is only tolerated.

Have I been mistaken, "qu'en sais-je?"

There is a bond between you and me which continuous work can only strengthen in the course of time – this is art, and I hope we shall continue to understand each other after all.

I am afraid I have said something to you about my work which I ought to have said differently, and I have a vague feeling of having hurt you by something, because there seemed to be something amiss when you left. I hope it will redress itself.

About my work, what is becoming more and more clear to me since I first noticed it is the dryness of execution.

This would alarm me if I did not think it a natural consequence (which I have also discovered in the early work of a great many very sympathetic persons) – a natural consequence of the great strain of overcoming the initial difficulties. And looking back on the last years, I see them full of troubles; but when these troubles have been overcome, I hope another period of work will follow.

That fault is so persistent, and correcting it is so urgent, that we must try to take such measures as will bring us a period of peace. That must be the first thing, otherwise it will remain as it is. As my work is, so am I. You must bear with me a little. I do not know whether you think it would be better to go and see people like Herkomer, Green or Small now, or to wait till the work as well as myself have quieted down a little. I should prefer the latter; perhaps things will clear up within me soon, but for the moment I had better not get myself involved in the complicated London business.

As to the few things you said to me when you left, I hope you will not forget that, for instance, your remarks about my clothes, etc., are rather exaggerated. Is it indeed as you say? Well, I am ready to plead guilty, but it seems to me it is an old point of discord which has turned up again, rather than one founded on recent observation, except when I'm working out-of-doors in the fields or in the studio.

If you really want to help me in this, you must not hurry me.

Last year I was, so to speak, quite without any social contact.

And it's true that I haven't paid the slightest attention to my clothes.

If that's the only thing, it's not so difficult to correct, is it? Especially now that I have that new suit of yours.

I just wish with all my heart that they would bear with my shortcomings, instead of gossiping about them.

If it puts me in a bad mood, it's because I've heard so much about it already. At one time I dressed well, at another, less so; it is like the story of the farmer, his son and the ass, the moral of which you know, that it is difficult to please everybody.

Coming from you, it surprised more than it angered me, because you know how much worry it has caused me already, and that it has become a bit of gossip that will never die out, what ever I do. Well, at all

events, I now have that new suit of yours, and the old one, which is still quite good. So for the present that's the end of it, and no more about it.

And now I will tell you once more what I think about selling my work. My opinion is that the best thing would be to work on till art lovers feel drawn towards it of their own accord, instead of having to praise or explain it. At all events, when they refuse it or do not like it, one must bear it calmly and with as much dignity as possible.

I'm so afraid that the steps I might take to introduce myself would do more harm than good, and I wish I could avoid it.

It is practically always so painful for me to speak to other people.

I am not afraid of it, but I know I make an unfavorable impression. The chance of changing this is sometimes destroyed by the fact that one's work would suffer if one lived differently. And by sticking to one's work, things will come out right in the end. For instance, take Mesdag, a real mastodon or hippopotamus, but he sells his pictures. I am not that far yet, but the man I mention also began late and worked his way along an honest, manly path, wherever he may be in other respects. I don't leave things undone from laziness, but rather to be able to work more, putting aside everything that does not belong directly to the work.

If I were only a little more advanced, so that my work were more saleable, I should decidedly say, I leave the business part to you, I won't have anything to do with the selling. I will live quite outside that circle. But now, alas, I cannot say that yet, and that is not your fault, but in the interests of both of us and for the sake of peace I beg you to have patience.

I am awfully sorry that I am a burden to you – perhaps things will clear up – but if you stagger under it, tell me so plainly. I would rather give up everything than put too heavy a burden on your shoulders. Then I shall definitely go to London at once to work at “n'importe quoi,” even carrying parcels, and I will leave art till better times, at least the painting and having as studio. When I look back on the past, I always run up against the same never quite cleared up fatal facts which occurred in the months from August, 1881 till February, 1882.

That is why I can't help mentioning the same names. Which seemed to astonish you.

Dear brother, don't think of me as anything other than an ordinary painter who is confronted by ordinary difficulties, and do not think the worries at all unusual.

I mean, don't think of the future as a darkness or as a dazzling light; it will be better to believe in the grey.

I try to do the same, and think it wrong of myself to deviate from it. Goodbye.

Yours sincerely, Vincent

About the woman – I don't doubt but you will understand that on my part I do not want to be brusque.

I must refer again to what you said on leaving, “I begin to think more and more like Father.”

Well, that may be so. You speak the truth, and for my part – though I don't exactly think and act in that way – I respect that character, and perhaps know its weak points, but also the good ones. And I think that if Father knew something about art, it would undoubtedly be easier for me to talk with him and to agree with him. Suppose you become like Father, plus your knowledge of art – all right – I think we shall continue to understand each other.

I have quarreled with Father very often, but the bond between us has never quite been broken.

Well, let nature simply follow its own course in this – you will become what you must, I too will not remain exactly the same as I am now; let's not suspect each other of absurd things and we shall get on together. And let's not forget that we have known each other from childhood, and that thousands of other things can bring us more and more together.

I am a little worried about what seemed to worry you, and I doubt if I know exactly what was the matter, or rather I believe it is caused less by one definite thing than by the fact that there are some points in which our characters differ, and that you understand one thing better, I another.

I think it would be well for us to try to stick together.

One thing – if I become too much of a burden to you, let the friendship remain, even though you help me less in money matters. I shall grumble now and then – but it will be without any mental reservation and more to give vent to my feelings than expecting or demanding that you do everything, which you know I wouldn't do, boy!

I feel guilty about having said things that I should like to take back after all, or wish to have left unsaid – or even if you should admit that there was a grain of truth in them, they ought to be considered as very

exaggerated. For know it well that the main fault, the one compared to which all the others fade into nothing, which will remain so whatever the future may be, is a feeling of gratitude towards you. Further, if I am less happy in the future, I would in no case – I repeat, in no case – you understand – even if you had quite withdrawn your help – I would never consider it your fault.

It would be superfluous to say this if, under the influence of my nerves, which were too upset, I had not expressed myself to the effect that in the past you might have done more. Forget that, please, consider it unsaid. I think if certain things will come right, time will bring them so, if I am calm. But in my nervousness, I put the blame now on one thing, then another. It's the same with other things that I will not repeat now, though I always remember afterward even what I said in my excitement, and to a certain extent there is always a grain of truth in it; but not all principles are absolute, and in nervous excitement they often seem more important than they are. As for me, though it seemed something was the matter when you left, I'll drop it.

Indeed, I am thinking of what you said and of what I wrote you about my clothes; I am not reluctant, and think you are perfectly right when you say that if I ever went to see Herkomer, or others, they would notice my appearance – but I know that myself without your saying so. Further, what you said about Father – now there has been occasion to write more often to him than usual, and you will read the letter yourself. And so it is with everything. In short, when I give an opinion about persons, circumstances, a society in which I do not move, you may understand that I do not always speak justly, but let my imagination roam without regard to reality, and that I see things in a very fantastic way, just as things may appear strange when seen against the light.

You who are nearer to them do not understand how it is possible for them to appear this way, seen it at a distance and from behind. And even if I should see things quite incorrectly, anybody who thought about it would perhaps understand that given such and such circumstances, I could hardly speak differently. Things went wrong during a short period, and that short period cannot but continuously occupy my thoughts and I think it natural for that moment to cause a reaction even in the future, because, although people avoid each other on purpose, inevitably they must in time face each other again.