

Dear Theo,

I still have to thank you for your letter of January 1, and the enclosure.

With regard to being brotherly it would appear to me that this is dependent on taking the same view of things or not – which I pointed out to you – seeing that it seemed to me that perhaps our opinions were going to deviate considerably – if they haven't already. If I observed a deviation already (not simply imagined it), I repeat, I mention it because with you I do not want to pretend to be different from what I am, and because of the very fact that I do not want to quarrel. In the long run I should prefer to do without your support, however much your help means to me, to keeping it on condition that I act contrary to what I think is right. The more so because in later years, if we live to see them, it is possible that you will not continue really believing in what you now suppose to be unshakable. But this is not the point under discussion.

As to what you say about my perhaps becoming quite isolated, I do not say that this will not happen, I expect little else, and shall be content if life remains possible and bearable for me.

But I declare to you that I should not consider this a deserved fate, for I believe that after all I have never done, and shall never do, anything to make me lose the right to feel one with my fellow creatures.

Others would be greatly to blame for it too. Well, I try to look at myself as if I were somebody else, that is to say, objectively, so that I try to see my own shortcomings as well as perhaps their compensations. And I know several stories of men who had to live relatively very isolated lives just because neither of the two parties found them exactly as they wanted them to be.

There are two kinds of fellows who stand between the parties, firstly those who have no personal character, but secondly those who most decidedly have character but, as I said, who are not exactly what either one of the parties which have the say wants them to be.

Isolation is bad enough, it is a kind of prison. To what extent I shall become so cannot be guessed now with any degree of certainty. Nor do you say so, in fact.

I for my part often prefer to be with people who do not even know the world, for instance the peasants, the weavers, etc., rather than being with those of the more civilized world. It's lucky for me.

So since I have been here, for instance, I have been absorbed in the weavers.

Do you know many drawings of weavers? I know only a very few. I began by making three watercolours of them.

Those people are very hard to draw because one cannot take enough distance in those small rooms to draw the loom. I think that is the reason why so many drawings turn out failures. But I have found a room here where there are two looms, and where it can be done.

In Drenthe, Rappard painted a study of it which I like very much. It is very gloomy – they are but poor creatures, those weavers. I have also made a drawing, just an impression, of a lumber auction [F 1113, JH 438].

I wish you could understand that if at times I wish you had other thoughts about some questions than you have at present, I do so only because I believe you would profit by it, and not because I should want to make a proselyte for my own opinions. I do not believe my opinions to be better than those of other people. But more and more I begin to believe that there is something compared to which all opinions, mine included, become as nothing.

Certain truths and facts, which our opinions can change little or not at all, and which I hope not to mistake for my or other people's opinions, as this would be an error on my part.

Opinions can as little change certain standard truths as weathercocks can change the direction of the wind. The weathercocks do not make the wind east or north, nor can opinions make the truth true.

I do not know whether you will understand me, but I wanted to make clear to you that I – thinking as I do – could hardly get cross with anyone merely on account of an opinion. Not counting my own opinions for much. But my not being able to resign myself to the fact that I see many persons lead a life, rather rashly I think, too far removed from what is true for all is quite another thing. So if I get cross, it might be because of something that has nothing whatever to do with my having a high opinion of myself.

There are things as old as humanity itself, and which will not disappear in a hurry.

I know of an old legend, I don't know of what people, which I love; of course it did not happen literally, but it is a symbol of many things.

In that story, it is said that the human race descends from two brothers.

These two were allowed to choose what they wanted above all things. The one chose gold, and the other chose the book.

The first, who had chosen gold, became prosperous; but the second one fared poorly. The legend – without explaining exactly why – tells how the man with the book got banished to a cold and miserable country, and got isolated. But in his misery he started reading that book, and he learned things from it. So he managed to make his life more bearable, and invented several things to get out of his difficulties, so that at last he acquired a certain power, but always by working and struggling. Then afterward, just when he had become stronger with the book's help, the first one grew weaker; and so he lived long enough to learn that gold is not the axis round which everything turns. It is only a legend, but for me there is a depth in it which I find true. "The book" does not mean all books or literature, it is at the same time conscience, reason, and it is art. Gold does not stand for money alone, but it is at the same time a symbol of several other things. But do not suppose that I want to force anything in this respect, these things must establish themselves. But saying a few words about things is different from forcing them – at certain moments keeping silent about something is nearly identical with dissimulation. I just did not want to do that. As for the rest, whether isolated or not, I will try to manage so that I can work on; and as to my opinions – I sometimes think of what Taine says, "Il me semble que pour ce qui est du travailleur personnellement, il peut garder ça pour soi" [It seems to me that as far as the worker is personally concerned, he can keep that to himself], so it was probably a mistake on my part not to keep things strictly to myself. And bear in mind that I do not want you to consider the help you give me as a thing you are obliged to do, for you were not obliged to do it in the past, nor are you now, it has been a voluntary thing on your part for which I, for my part, feel, and I repeat, shall certainly always feel, a real obligation to you. Wishing you success in your business,
Yours sincerely, Vincent

[On enclosed loose leaf]

Once I read a remarkable saying somewhere about the possibility of becoming decidedly different in later life. In a biography of Corot I found the following observation on the influence he had on Français. I read: "à trente ans Français ignorait ce que c'est qu'on ton neutre" [at thirty F. did not know what a neutral tone was].

I only want to say that until late in life one may have, surely as an artist no less than as a "human being" – until late in life one may have a certain stiff, rigid, let's say iron-like way of doing things, and of looking at things, and of working, too – but for all that one may gain, later on in life, gentler, more intelligent, more reasonable, more humane views.

I only want to point out that it is quite possible that as a human being and as a workman you will acquire more of nature, more tranquillity, that you will get to be more "your own self." I want to point out that now and then I do think you unnatural, for instance last summer in The Hague. At present this means nothing – and I don't in any way look upon this as your fixed and unchangeable character or state of mind, but as a curious phenomenon. Which I observe with interest and attention for the very reason that I myself have known moments of this state of mind just at a time when I was on the brink of a mental revolution. Ah, well...

There is something else that I want to tell you about my talk with Father. I pointed out to Father that in my present condition and state of mind I sometimes think of going back to the woman I lived with – yes, that I might even decide to marry her. You should know, however – but Father need not know this – that up to the present I have not changed my mind about my decision that it would be impossible, and that living together again is out of the question.

I mentioned it to Father in order to bring up again the question of the "paternal right" to prevent such a thing, a question put forward by Father himself. On this subject I said that Father's becoming my opponent in legal proceedings would in my opinion be anything but sensible.

That moreover, in such a lawsuit it would be necessary to use trickery and false witnesses in order to give a semblance of justice to the obstruction of my intended marriage.

That I for my part, if people should try to put obstacles in my way under such circumstances, should defend myself quite calmly and collectedly, insisting on my rights, and that I should never give in.

Because I am convinced that it would be the kind of case in which the judge himself would urgently recommend an amicable settlement.

Thus I spoke to Father about the matter of marrying, taking the woman with whom I lived as an example of what might happen. But mind you, in this matter I see no reason to go back on my resolution not to go and live with her again. A resolution that is known to her too.

Before I could change my mind with regard to this matter, a great many things would have to happen, things that are quite out of the question at present. So now you know what I want you to know, but I have discussed the matter with Father with the object of making it clear that, if I should want to, Father would never be able to prevent it; that whatever may be said about a "paternal right," I cannot find anything within the meaning of the law that would apply to me and could be used as an obstruction to me.

Father has hinted at it so often, very vaguely but very palpably for all that, that I on my part decided to tell him flatly how absurd and coarse I should consider such a proceeding.

It is a fact that now and then I think marriage would be a highly desirable thing for me, but as to this I nevertheless have no definite plans, certainly not as regards the woman I lived with.