

Dear Theo,

Thanks for your letter, thanks for the enclosure.

Now look here. What you say is all very well and good, but as for scandal, I am now somewhat better prepared to meet it than I used to be to nip it in the bud. No fear of Father or Mother leaving, for example. Although they have only just received a new call. (Father and Mother could, if anything, consolidate their position here, if they managed things properly.)

Now, there are people who say to me “Why did you have anything to do with her,” [Margot] – that’s one fact. And there are people who say to her, “Why did you have anything to do with him,” – that’s another fact.

Apart from that, both she and I have grief enough and trouble enough, but as for regrets – neither of us have any. Look here – I believe without question, or have the certain knowledge, that she loves me. I believe without question, or have the certain knowledge, that I love her. It has been sincerely meant. But has it also been foolish, etc?

Perhaps, if you like – but aren’t the wise ones, those who never do anything foolish, even more foolish in my eyes than I am in theirs? That’s my reply to your argument and to other people’s arguments. I say all this simply by way of explanation, not out of ill-will or spite.

You say that you like Octave Mouret, you say that you are like him. I’ve read the second volume too, since last year, and like him much better in that than I did in the first. The other day I heard it said that ‘Au Bonheur des dames’ would not add greatly to Zola’s reputation. I consider it contains some of his greatest and best things. I have just looked it up and am copying out a few of Octave Mouret’s words for you.

Don’t you think you’ve been moving in Bourdoncles’ direction during the last 1½ years or so? You would have done better to stick to ‘Mouret’, that was and still is my opinion. Save for the enormous difference in circumstances, indeed, the diametrically opposed circumstances, I actually lean more in the direction of Mouret than you might think – when it comes to belief in women and the realization that one needs them, must love them. Mouret says, “Chez nous on aime la clientèle.” [At our place we love the clientele.] Do give this some thought – and remember my regret when you said that you had “cooled off.”

I now repeat more emphatically than ever everything I said by way of bitter warning against the influence of what I called Cuizot-esqueness. Why? Because it leads to mediocrity. And I do not want to see you among the mediocrities, because I have loved you too much, indeed still do, to bear watching you petrify. I know things are difficult, I know that I know too little about you, I know that I may be mistaken. But anyway, do read your Mouret again.

I mentioned the difference and yet the parallels between Mouret and what I should like. Now look. Mouret worships the modern Parisian woman – fine. But Millet and Breton [worship] the peasant woman with the same passion. The two passions are one and the same.

Read Zola’s description of women in a room in the twilight – most of the women aged between 30 and 50 – such a sombre, mysterious place. I find it splendid, indeed sublime.

But to me, Millet’s Angélus is just as sublime, with that same twilight, that same infinite emotion – or that single figure of Breton’s in the Luxembourg, or his “Source.”

You will say that I am not a success – vaincre or être vaincu, [to conquer [or] to be conquered], it doesn’t matter to me, one has feeling and movement in any event, and they are more akin than they may seem to be or than can be put into words.

As for this particular woman, it remains a mystery how it will turn out, but neither she nor I will do anything stupid. I am afraid that the old religion will once again benumb her and freeze her with that damnable icy coldness that broke her once before, many years ago, to the point of death.

Oh, I am no friend of present-day Christianity, though its Founder was sublime – I have seen through present-day Christianity only too well. That icy coldness hypnotized even me, in my youth – but I have taken my revenge since then. How? By worshipping the love which they, the theologians, call sin, by respecting a whore, etc., and not too many would-be respectable, pious ladies. To some, woman is heresy and diabolical. To me she is just the opposite.
Regards,

Ever yours, Vincent

Here you are, from Octave Mouret:

Mouret dit: “Si tu te crois fort, parce que tu refuses d’être bête et de souffrir! Eh bien – alors tu n’es qu’une dupe, pas davantage.”

“Tu t’amuses?”

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Mouret ne parut pas comprendre tout de suite, mais lorsqu'il se fut rappelé leurs conversations anciennes sur la bêtise vide et l'inutile torture de la vie, il répondit: "Sans doute – jamais je n'ai tant vécu... Ah! mon vieux – ne te moques pas! Ce sont les heures les plus courtes où l'on meurt de souffrance."

Je la veux, je l'aurai... et, s'il [*sic*] elle m'échappe tu verras les choses que je ferai pour m'en guérir – Tu n'entends pas cette langue, mon vieux; autrement tu saurais que l'action contient en elle sa récompense – agir, créer. Se battre contre les faits, les vaincre ou être vaincu par eux, toute la joie et toute la santé humaines sont là!"

Simple façon de s'étourdir, - murmura l'autre. "Eh bien, j'aime mieux m'étourdir – crever pour crever – je préfère crever de passion, que de crever d'ennui."

[Mourier says: "If you think yourself strong because you refuse to be stupid and to suffer, well, then you are just a fool, that's all."

"Are you enjoying yourself?"

Mouret did not seem to understand immediately, but when he remembered their earlier conversation about the empty stupidity and the pointless torture of life, he replied, "Of course – I have never lived so intensely... Ah! old fellow, don't scoff! The hours when one dies of suffering are shortest."

"I want her, I will have her... and – if she escapes me then you'll see what I do to be cured of it all. You don't understand this language, old fellow; otherwise you would know that action is its own reward – to act, to create. To fight against the facts, to conquer them or be conquered by them, therein lies all human health and happiness!"

"That's just acting in order to forget" – muttered the other, "Well, I prefer such action – if perish we must – I would sooner perish of passion than die of boredom." (Emile Zola, Au bonheur des dames)]

It is not only I who say this quand même, but she, too, and instinctively so, quand même. That's why I saw something grand in her from the very beginning. Only it's a confounded pity that she allowed herself to be overwhelmed by disappointments in her youth, overwhelmed in the sense that her old-fashioned religious family felt they had to suppress the active, indeed, highly gifted element in her and so rendered her passive for evermore. If only they hadn't broken her in her youth! Or if they had left it at that instead of once again driving her to distraction, and this time with 5 or 6 or even more women fighting against her alone. Just read Daudet's L'Evangeliste about those women's intrigues – those here were different, yet of the same sort.

Oh, Theo, why should I change – I used to be very passive and very gentle and quiet – I'm that no longer, but then I'm no longer a child either now – sometimes I feel my own man.

Take Mauve, why is he quick-tempered and difficult to get on with at times? I haven't come as far as he has, but I, too shall go further than I am now.

I tell you, if one wants to be active, one must not be afraid of going wrong, one must not be afraid of making mistakes now and then. Many people think that they will become good just by doing no harm – but that's a lie, and you yourself used to call it that. That way lies stagnation, mediocrity.

Just slap anything on when you see a blank canvas staring you in the face like some imbecile. You don't know how paralyzing that is, that stare of a blank canvas is, which says to the painter, You can't do a thing. The canvas has an idiotic stare and mesmerises some painters so much that they turn into idiots themselves. Many painters are afraid in front of the blank canvas, but the blank canvas is afraid of the real, passionate painter who dares and who has broken the spell of 'you can't' once and for all.

Life itself, too, is forever turning an infinitely vacant, dispiriting blank side towards man on which nothing appears, any more than it does on a blank canvas. But no matter how vacant and vain, how dead life may appear to be, the man of faith, of energy, of warmth, who knows something, will not be put off so easily. He wades in and does something and stays with it, in short, he violates, "defiles" – they say. Let them talk, those cold theologians.

Theo, I feel so much confounded pity for this woman, just because her age and just possibly a liver and gallbladder complaint hang so threateningly over her head. And this is aggravated by emotions. For all that, we shall find out what can or what, fatally, cannot be done. However I shall not do anything without a very good doctor, so I shall do her no harm.

Just because I anticipate that, if our roads should lead us to one and the same place, we might have rather strong differences of opinion – for that very reason I don't want you to be able to hold my dependence on you against me. I am still in two minds about what I should try to do, but in all probability I shall not be staying on here – and the question will then be, where to?

I don't think you'll be pleased about my coming to Paris – but what am I meant to do about that, since you refuse point blank to look after my interests – all right, but for my part I can't possibly leave things as they are. Had you

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written less peremptorily that it was beneath you, I should never have given it a thought, but now – well, now, I must go my own way.

In short, I have no wish to barter the chance (be it no more than a chance) of making my own way for the certainty of a patronage that is, apres tout, somewhat confining. Since I can see that I am forfeiting my chance of selling by continuing to take money from you, we shall just have to go our separate ways.

Don't you think it eminently reasonable that, hearing you say that you won't be able to do anything with my work for the next few years, I get the feeling that there is a marked contrast here, that while you stand on your dignity, I – precisely because I don't sell, no matter how hard I work – am forced to say, "Theo, I am 25 guilders short, couldn't you see your way to letting me have a little bit extra?" Which then proves to be impossible.

What is so very contrary about you is that when one sends you something or one asks, please try to find me an opening with the illustrated papers so that I can earn something – one hears nothing in reply and you do not lift a finger – but one is not allowed to say, I can't manage on the money. Up to now, at any rate – but things can't go on like this.

And I should like to add that I shan't be asking you whether you approve or disapprove of anything I do or don't do – I shall have no scruples, and if I should feel like going to Paris, for example, I shan't ask whether or not you have any objection.