

Letter W13  
Saint-Rémy, 2 July 1889

My dear sister,

Some days ago now I started writing another letter in reply to yours, but I discovered that I was not sufficiently master of my head to be able to write.

I thank you and Lies for the book by Rod<sup>1</sup>, which I have read, and which I shall return to you soon. The terrifying title *Le sens de la vie* scared me a little, but seeing that the subject is fortunately hardly discussed in the book, I much enjoyed reading something which bears a family resemblance to *Le philosophe sous les toits* by Souvestre, or to *Monsieur, Madame et bébé* by Diuz. The moral of the story is that under certain circumstances a gentleman prefers ultimately to live with a sweet and very devoted wife and his child, rather than to live in the restaurants and cafés of the boulevards, a life he had led before without committing too many excesses. This is undoubtedly very nice.

It is remarkable that the good Madame Duquesne's illness came to an unexpected end after all. Nevertheless it must have been a day of blessed deliverance for her.

If you say in your letter that, as you observe so many other people who try to make their way in life, they seem to be making more progress – coming and going – than you – oh well, what shall I say to that? I myself occasionally have a feeling of stupefaction when I look at my own life, and for that matter at the lives of so many other workers in my profession.

Today I sent Theo a dozen drawings after canvases I am working on; otherwise my life is definitely as inept as it was when I was a twelve-year-old boy at boarding school, where I learned absolutely nothing.

An enormous number of painters who would decidedly not be able to do my twelve canvases, either in two months or in twelve, are now living in town or in the country and are looked up to as artists as well as intelligent people. But believe me, I say this in order to explain my meaning, and not because I want to give expression to the urgency, or possibility, or desire on my part to change things. We hardly know life, we know so little of its foundation, and besides, we are living in a period in which everybody seems to be talking raving nonsense, and everything seems to be in a tottering state, so that it cannot be called being unhappy if we have found a duty that forces us to remain quietly in our corner, busy with our modest work, which is simpler than that imposed by certain other duties whose existence also makes sense. In the days we are living through, one runs the risk of returning from a battle ashamed of having fought a battle.

So my friend who was with me at Arles and some others have organized an exhibition,<sup>1</sup> which I should have participated in if I had been in good health. And what have they been able to do? – next to nothing – and yet there was something new in their canvases, something good, which gave me pleasure, for instance, and aroused my enthusiasm – this I assure you. Among artists, we no longer know what to say to each other, we don't know whether we ought to laugh or to weep at it, and the damnable fact is that we are doing neither one nor the other; we are happiest after all when we possess a small quantity of paint and canvas – which we lack at times too – and can at least work.

But all thoughts of a regular life, all thoughts of being able to evoke in ourselves or in others gentle ideas or sensations – all this must of necessity appear purely utopian to us.

And though only yesterday they paid over half a million francs for Millet's "Angelus," don't think that more souls will now feel what Millet had in mind, or that middle-class people or workmen are now going to hang lithographs of this "Angelus" of Millet's in their houses, for instance. Don't think that for such a reason those painters who are still at work among the peasants in Brittany should become more encouraged or suffer less under the black need that always tortured Millet, need of courage above all. Alas, we often get out of breath and faith, which is certainly the wrong thing to do – but there, now we return to our starting point: if we nevertheless want to go on working, we have to resign ourselves to the obstinate callousness of the times and to our isolation, which is sometimes as hard to endure as living in exile. And so we have to expect, after the years that, relatively speaking, we lost, poverty, sickness, old age, madness and always exile. Yes, certainly, this is the moment to say, "Blessed be Thebe, daughter of Telhui, priestess of Osiris, who never complained of anyone."

Wouldn't cherishing the memory of good people be of greater value on the whole than being among the ambitious? I am now rather absorbed in reading Shakespeare, whose words Theo sent me here, where I am at last quiet enough to be able to engage in a little more difficult reading.

I have started with the historical plays, and have already read *Richard II*, *Henry IV*, *Henry V*, and part of *Henry VI* – for these dramas were the least known to me.<sup>2</sup> Did you ever read *King Lear*? But never mind, I think I am not going to urge you too much to read books or dramas, seeing that I myself, after reading them for some time, feel obliged to go out and look at a blade of grass, the branch of a fir tree, an ear of

wheat, in order to calm down. So if you want to do, as the artists do, go look at the red and white poppies with their bluish leaves, their buds soaring on gracefully bent stems. The hours of trouble and strife will know how to find us without our going to look for them.

The separation from Cor will be hard; it is drawing nearer and nearer. What else can one do, when we think of all the things we do not know the reason for, than go look at a field of wheat? The history of those plants is like our own; for aren't we, who live on bread, to a considerable extent like wheat, at least aren't we forced to submit to growing like a plant without the power to move, by which I mean in what way our imagination impels us, and to being reaped when we are ripe, like the same wheat?

What I want to tell you is that the wisest thing to do is not to long for complete recovery, not to long to get back more strength than I have now, and I shall probably get used to the idea that I shall be broken a little sooner or a little later – what does it matter after all?

What you write about Theo's health is something I know quite well. Nevertheless I hope that this domestic life will fully restore his health. I think his wife sensible and affectionate enough to take very good care of him, and to see to it that he does not eat that restaurant stuff exclusively, but that he once more comes to know the true Dutch cooking. That Dutch cooking is very good, so let her more or less change into a cook and let her assume a reassuring attitude, even if she should have to be a bit tart about it. Theo himself is obliged to be a Parisian, but notwithstanding that he is absolutely in need of being reminded of his youth and his past. I, who have neither wife nor child, feel the need of seeing the wheat fields, and it would be difficult for me to stay in a city for any length of time. Besides, knowing his character, I fully expect that his marriage will do him an enormous amount of good. Before one can arrive at an opinion about his health, it is more or less necessary to give them time to take root together and attain harmony.

And besides, I dare say she will have found the means to make life a bit more pleasant for him than it has been up to now. For he has been through hard times.

That is all for now, for I have to finish this letter if I want it to go off today, and I haven't got time to read it over. So in case I have made many blunders, you will kindly excuse me. Be prosperous, and don't worry too much; and by cultivating your garden, and by doing all the other things, be well assured that you are making headway against trouble. A kiss in thought.

Yours, Vincent

1. See letter 601 to Theo.
2. See letter 597 to Theo.