

Letter 082a
Isleworth, 1 September 1876

Mijn oog o ween niet meer, maar houd uw tranen,
Mijn ziele, treur niet meer, maar bid, maar bid, mijn ziel.
[Mine eye, oh weep no more, but hold your tears,
My soul, mourn no more, but pray, but pray, my soul.]

Dear Theo,

Thanks for the letter I received this morning. There are hours and days and periods in life when God hides His countenance, as it were; but for those who love God those times, those sad times, are not wholly devoid of God, but as if they were full of prophecies for the future and full of voices from the past, “so far the Lord has led you,” “cherish the old faith again.”

If things you had not expected should happen to you, strengthen in yourself the sorrowing for God, and the voice, “Abba, Father.”

It was an autumn day when I stood on the steps before Mr. Provily’s school, watching the carriage in which Pa and Mother were driving home. One could see the little yellow carriage far down the road – wet with rain and with spare trees on either side – running through the meadows.

The grey sky above it all was mirrored in the pools.

And about a fortnight later I was standing in the corner of the playground when someone came and told me that a man was there, asking for me; I knew who it was, and a moment later I fell on Father’s neck. What I felt then, could not it have been “because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father”? It was a moment in which we both felt we had a Father in heaven; for Father too looked upward, and in his heart there was a greater voice than mine, crying, “Abba, Father.”

(Try to send me the page from Michelet.)

[Written in the margin] Do you ever go to Communion? They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.

Between that moment and the present there lie years of exile. – There is a phrase that accompanies us, and seems to grow up with us – sorrowful yet always rejoicing. There is the prayer for a mother for her children, a prayer which is very powerful, for the prayer of the righteous has great power:

Father, I pray unto Thee not that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil.

There is the faithful hand of the father which blessed us when we left the parental home.

And then, boy, as I told you before, there is a strong craving for the day when He will no longer remember the sins of my youth. Who rejoices in grey hairs? As far as the east is from the west, so far I shall remove your transgressions from you [Ps. 103:12]. “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.” Whoever doth not hate his own life cannot be a disciple of Christ [Luke. 14:20]. Once Pa sent me this:

Zucht tot heiliging

Wie zal voor immer en volkomen ons bevrijden
Van ‘t lichaam dezer daad gebogen onder ‘t juk...

[Translation of the whole poem]

CRAVING FOR SANCTITY

Who shall deliver me completely and forever
From the body of this deed; bowed down beneath the yoke,
How long shall I have to fight against myself
Before I can tear this heart away from the service of sin?

I had promised my God that He should be called my God,
That I should follow Him with undivided mind;
I was tried – and my oath was forgotten;
I was tempted – and my foot wavered.

No, not with my own strength shall I learn to conquer –
Confess your weakness, O my soul, and self-deceit, begone!
The Father shall fashion the child's heart;
The Master shall be the guiding spirit of the pupil.

Well then, father! Let Thy love make me capable;
My Master, take my hand, and show me Thy banner.
I stood alone – and fell; now we go together.
I broke down – Thou fightest for me and I am victorious.

Only now do I feel strong, now that I feel I am weak,
Powerless in myself, all-powerful in the Lord!
Let sin tempt, let angry passions churn,
Thou, God in me! strikest down all enemies.

I am sad, but it is a godly grief,
A cloud of night, but edged with the heavenly red of dawn;
I weep, O God! but with joy in my heart;
I bow my head, but, Father, onto thy lap.

Who rejoices in grey hairs? Who can look behind it, like Felix Holt did behind the word failure? Who is there to see when the first years of life, life of youth and adolescence, life of worldly enjoyment and vanity will perforce wither – and they shall, even as the blossom falls from the tree – and vigorous new life shoots up, the life of love unto Christ Who is importunate and of sorrowing that is unrepenting, unto God; how then in our close dependence on God, and in the unmistakable and keen sensation of it, we find more favour in His eyes, which are too pure to see evil, and He can and will entrust His Holy Spirit more safely to our weakness, His Holy Spirit, Which grants life, and urges us to do good works; who rejoices in grey hairs? Who is sorrowful yet always rejoicing, chastised but not slain, to die but lo! we live – oh, who rejoices in falling and rising again, long-suffering and meek? – who rejoices in the green wood of the straight pines and cedars, and ivy and holly and moss in winter? – Withered wood does give more heat, a bright fire and light, when it is kindled, than green wood. “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear...”

Vader onder al mijn noden
Vader onder heil en straf...

[Literal translation of the whole poem.]

Father, in all my troubles
Father, in bliss and punishment
Father, even in the realm of the dead,
Father, even in the silent tomb
Whenever I may behold change
Thou, O God, standest firm forever.
My dust rests also on Thy faithful security
Slumbers in Thy home.

Therefore years, speed freely on
With your gladness and your grief
Whatever disaster I may bewail
God, my God changeth not.
When we sit in mournful darkness
Still that Eternal Light will keep
All its brilliance and all its glory
Worthy of all praise and poetry.

I know to Whom I entrust myself;
Though day and night may alternate,
I know the rock on which I build:
He Who awaits my salvation will not fail me.
Once in the evening of my life,
Tired of cares and struggling, I shall offer up
Unto Thee for every day granted me here
A loftier and purer song of praise.

Oh my soul, why art thou bowed down
Why art thou troubled within me?
Regain thy old faith
In the joy in the praise of the Most High.
Many a time hath He changed
Thy burden into happiness.
Put thy trust in Him, raise thine eyes to Heaven
For I shall glorify my God forever.

And above all love one another with a fervent love, for love shall cover a multitude of sins [*sic.* 1 Pet. 4:8].

Waar liefde woont gebiedt de Heer Zijn zegen
Daar woont Hij zelf
Daat wordt Zijn heil verkregen
En't leven tot in eeuwigheid.

[Where love dwells the Lord commands His blessing
There He lives Himself
There His Grace is won
And life eternal.]

Let us bear love one unto another that God may augment and strengthen our love, and gather love around us, and if there should be no human being that you can love enough, love the town in which you dwell, as you do, too – don't I love Paris and London, though I am a child of the pine woods and of the beach at Ramsgate? And seek to please the poor and to find favour in their eyes. "Strengthen thine heart." "Because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying: Abba, Father." "He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love." And this is life eternal: knowing God and Christ Whom He sent [John 17:3]. "There is no fear in love." "In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so I would have told you." "And yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me." "It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man." It is better to fall into the hands of the Lord than into the hands of men. Let Christ be the centre of your longing, Comforter of the disquieted mind. "Strengthen thine heart" also in this sense; eat thy bread in simplicity of heart; at least do this, I cannot do otherwise, God help me, if there be peril in doing it: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." Eat your bread but live simply, and smoke your pipe, which I do myself whenever I can manage to go out once in a while. "And turn thy way unto the Lord, He will pave it."

[Written in the margin] Do not be afraid to sing a hymn in the evening when you are out for a walk and nobody is about: "As pants the hart for cooling streams, when heated in the chase," or, "Oh my soul, why art thou bowed down," or, "Centre of our craving," or, "I know to Whom I entrust myself." The years between twenty and thirty are full of perils of all kinds, full of great perils, ay, perils of sin and death, but also full of God's light and comfort; struggling, thou shalt prevail, and when the dangers are past, thou shalt recall them poignantly and say, It was a good time after all.

“Strengthen thy charity.” What, however, is this Charity Paul speaks of? And what are those wonderful words thou knowest also, 1 Cor. 13? This Charity is Life in Christ, this Charity is our Mother; all the good things of the earth belong to Her, for all is good if enjoyed with thankfulness, but She extends much further than those good things of the earth. To Her belongs the draught of water from a brook on a hike or from a fountain in the hot streets of London or Paris, to Her belong also “I shall make thy bed in sickness,” “as one whom his mother comforteth, so I will comfort you,” and to Her belongs: “Constancy unto death toward Christ, who giveth us the strength to do all.”

“There is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother.”

“Strengthen thy hope,” for there is much that is good in life; for the one who loves Christ the world is what it is, and all things seem to fall to his share. Certainly it is true that much joy lies behind us, and much that we formerly anticipated joyfully, and if perchance much joy lies before us, we have seen already: “the world passeth away, and the lust thereof.” And if it be true:

I've found a joy in sorrow, a secret balm for pain
A beautiful tomorrow of sunshine after rain
I've found a branch of healing near every bitter spring
A whispered promise stealing (from every?) broken string.

thus it is true that there is no joy without unhappiness. Sorrow is better than laughter, and it is better to go to the house of mourning, than to the house of feasts...for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better [Eccles. 7:2-3]. Even in mirth the heart is sad.

For myself, I will strive after the Love of Christ and after working for Him all my life; though it fail and though I fail, there will always remain that standing from afar and longing for the heights away from the misery here below. But I will seek Faith and Love, and go on beseeching the Spirit of God under all circumstances. For this is my vow unto the Lord, my ... [illegible], my rock. If I am forsaken, I am forsaken, but He is faithful and loves with an eternal Love, and grants that the longing of our hearts be ever green.

[Written in the margin] Regards to Roos, Haanebeek, Tersteeg, Borchers, Carolien and Marie.

[Written at the top of the next page] Read in the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah: Is. 9, 11, 35, Is. 40, 42, 43, 44, 45:2 and the following verses 49,53, 55, 58, 61, 63, 65; Jer. 3, 17, 30, 31.

The Lord is thy keeper: He is thy shade upon thy right hand. In Him is deliverance from death, in Him is everlasting life. My boy, there will come days when we shall no longer believe because we heard It said, but when we shall know It and felt It and love It. Then we shall be moved, when we hear the name of God pronounced, yea, even as we are moved when we see our father again after having been away from home for a long time. And we shall all be brethren and sisters and children of the Shepherd, as if anew, and in many a sense.

Let us go on in life as long as our legs will carry us, and though the foot may get tired, and the tribulation great, and though the ear may hum with the noise of the world, which it has heard for so many years, and though the whole head be weary, and the going hard, let us go on in life, because our Father and our Mother say unto us, “Go on and don't look back”; and if we may do good along the way, let us not forbear; but still, God desires more our heart than our works. Pa and Mother say, Go on, and they love us – did not Pa say, My boy, you know very well I would give my last shirt for you. Let us go on as long as our legs will carry us, and thou shalt find that God giveth strength to the weary and fortifieth him that is weak, that God supporteth us; for there is greater love in the future, therefore we delight and have faith in the life that is to come.

An imaginary handshake, it is late already, à Dieu. Well, brother, this is the fruit of the pen and of the heart. Your loving brother, Vincent

[Written in the margin] If you can manage it, please send Mother a carte de visite Nr. 669 l'enfant prodigue by Scheffer for her birthday.

I am happily looking forward to Christmas; two years ago we took a walk in the snow in the evening, do you remember? And saw the moon rise over the Marienhof? I also quite clearly remember the night, that same Christmastide, I drove from Bois-le-Duc to Helvoirt in a little open cart, it was terribly cold and the road was slippery; how beautiful Bois-le-Duc looked, the market square and the streets covered with snow and the dark houses with snow on the roofs. Brabant is ever Brabant, and one's native country is ever one's native country, and countries of exile are ever countries of exile. And viewed from the distant road to Bois-le-Duc, how pleasant Helvoirt looked that evening and the lights in the village and the steeple amidst the snow-covered poplars. But it is love that gives it all so much beauty and animation. And do you remember that trip to St. Michiel's Gestel.

"The redeemed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion; and everlasting joy shall be on their head: and they shall obtain gladness and joy; and sorrow and mourning shall flee away."

"A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rahel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not."

"Thus saith the Lord, Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: for thy work shall be rewarded, saith the Lord; and they shall come again from the land of the enemy."

"Strengthen ye the weak hands and confirm the feeble knees." "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."

[Written at the top of the following page] There is no better nor surer way to follow through life than Love, above all for our Father: in His name we go on from one day to the next. But we can also bear love unto others. How often the memory of one already gone to my Father's house – where there are many mansions – has warmed me and made my heart glow with Love on my evening walks through the streets of London, and in the cabbage fields outside the town. And as often as I walk in the streets of London, the thought of Him and the Love of Him rise up in me.

When Lies came home at Christmas we had a pleasant meeting. She and Albertien came in Uncle Vincent's carriage from Breda. Pa, Cor and I went along the road to meet them, and when we saw the carriage in the distance I ran ahead of the other two. It was twilight, and the carriage was dark. Through the window one saw the road with the fields and a row of trees on either side. At the end of the road the church was dark against the sky. Behind the church lowered big dark evening clouds, but edged with silver. It was such an unexpected joy to see the little lass again – a much greater joy than I had anticipated.

Anna will be back in Welwyn by now, I suppose; when she leaves Welwyn, she will realize how much she has loved it. You know how in winter she used to be the first to get up and light the fire – she has been a blessing in the house. Her little room is so lovely – with the ivy about the window and the view of the garden and the big chestnuts around which swarms of swallows fly in summer – when the sun is setting behind the trees. And the rooks nest there, too. The "Mater Dolorosa" by Delaroche hung over her bed. Do you happen to have kept that page from Michelet beginning, "Je vois d'ici une dame"? If you have, please copy it for me; I want it, but don't have the book any more.

Heeft de overhand op mij
O Mijn weerspanning overtreden...

[Translation of the whole poem]

Oh, if my waywardness
Prevail over me,
Be Thou the one to reconcile and purify me!
Most blessed is he whom Thou hast chosen,
Whom in the midst of the tumult of the earth
Thou bidst draw near and hear Thy holy voice,
Yea, dwell in Thy house.
Most blessed is he whose sins are forgiven,
Who is delivered from punishment forever,
Whose defiling iniquities
Are hidden from the holy eye of the Lord.

Most blessed is the man whom
God does not hold guilty in justice,
But who, with a devout and undissembling mind,
Nourishes no wicked deceit, only white righteousness.

How shall these things come to pass?

“Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre?”

“I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight: I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron...”

“I am...the beginning and the end, the first and the last.”

“Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee.”

“Hear now this, thou afflicted, and drunken, but not with wine: ...Behold, I have taken out of thine hand the cup of trembling, even the dregs of the cup of my fury; thou shalt no more drink it again.”

“For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee.”

“The sun shall be no more thy light by day; neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto thee; but the Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory. Thy sun shall no more go down; neither shall thy moon withdraw itself: for the Lord shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended.”

“As one whom his Mother comforteth, so I will comfort you ... saith the Lord. Wilt thou not from this time cry unto me, My Father, thou art the guide of youth? ... Thou shalt call me, My Father; and shalt not turn away from me.”

“Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved.” Redeem me, and I shall be redeemed.

For I am with thee, saith the Lord, to save thee ... All thy lovers have forgotten thee ... I shall restore health unto thee, and take the plagues away from thee.

“The Lord hath appeared of old to me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love.” “As one whom his Mother comforteth, so I will comfort you, saith the Lord.” “There is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother.”