

Letter 113
Amsterdam, 19 November 1877

Dear Theo,

I am eager to write you again, because I often think of you and I wish it were Christmas, when we shall see each other again.

Here, the dark days before Christmas are as a long procession at the end of which shines such a light, the feast of the Nativity: the friendly lighthouse behind the rocks, when the water comes crashing against them on a dark night. This feast of Christmas has always been for us a bright spot, and may it always remain so. For the first time there has been an entrance examination at the university, I, too, shall have to take it here in this city. Besides the ordinary subjects, Latin, Greek, algebra and mathematics, one has to pass examinations on history, geography and Dutch grammar.

I have been looking for an algebra and mathematics teacher; I have found one, the cousin of Mendes, Teixeira de Mattos, who teaches religion at the Jewish pauper school. He has given me hope to cover all the programs before the month of October of next year.

If I should pass the examination, I will be able to congratulate myself, because they told me at the start of my studies that a minimum of two years would be necessary for me to deepen my knowledge of these four subjects. If I succeed in October, I will have made up in a lot less time. May God grant me the necessary wisdom and grant my wishes, that He will allow me to end my studies as early as possible in order that I become ordained, so that I can perform the duties of a clergyman.

The preparatory studies, which precede theological studies proper, which will be exercises in preaching and recitation, consist of history, Dutch grammar, the geography of Greece, Asia Minor and Italy. I apply myself to these studies with the tenacity of a dog that gnaws a bone; I should also like to know the grammar, history and geography of the Nordic countries, particularly those countries that border on the North Sea and the Channel.

At last I succeeded in making a map of Asia Minor, Greece and Italy, rather a large one (on which the travels of Paul are also indicated) and one of England which finally has the quality I wanted – Mendes, for one, sees it – namely that it has been made with feeling and love. The names I put on it came from a map in the Atlas Antiquus by Sprünner Menke, which Mendes has; it is one used for history. Do try your best to get a look at that atlas, and also at the one by Stieler especially, for it is the work of real artists.

I spent two evenings at Uncle Cor's looking over old books, including volumes of L'Illustration, in which I found many old friends (what an interesting magazine it is!). Among others, there was an old portrait of Dickens and a woodcut by De Lemud, "Cup of Coffee" – a young man with rather severe, sharp features and a serious expression who looks just as if he were pondering over a fragment from l'imitation de la vie monastique or planning some difficult but good work, as only une âme en peine can do. Such work is not always the worst, for what is wrought in sorrow, lives for all time. "Heureux celui que la vérité instruit, non par des mots fugitifs, mais par elle même en se montrant telle qu'elle est" [Happy the one who is taught by truth, not by fleeting words but by itself, showing itself as it is] is a good saying.

I was also at Uncle Cor's on Aunt's birthday last Friday. They played cards that evening, and as I cannot play, I read in Aug. Gruson, Histoire des Croisades (Pantheon Classique 50 cmes.). It is a fine little book, I should almost say written with the sentiment of Thijs Maris – for instance, when he paints an old castle on a rock with the autumn woods in twilight, and the black fields in the foreground, with a peasant and a white horse ploughing. It also reminded me of Michelet and Carlyle.

I should like very much to have Father know that etching, "A Young Citizen of the Year V." Shall we send it on or before Father's birthday, with some other small photographs on the subject of the Revolution, so that they form a whole and Father can see what occupies our thoughts so often?

You have heard, I suppose, that sad news arrived from Brussels today and that Father has gone there already. Uncle Jan, who received a telegram from Mother with this information, wired Father and received the answer, "Condition unchanged, do not come yet, I am here." Uncle Jan and Uncle Cor were ready to start for Brussels together, but now they are waiting for more news from Father. Will that long and terrible suffering come to an end at last?

Goodbye, Theo, write soon, boy, if you can. May God keep us in health and give us the lucidity, strength and cheerfulness which we need every day. A warm handshake from

Your loving brother, Vincent

The news about Uncle Hein came while I was writing this.