

My Dear Theo,

I am writing to you rather reluctantly because, for a good many reasons, I have kept silent for such a long time. To some extent you have become a stranger to me, and I to you perhaps more than you think. It is probably better for us not to go on like that. It is probable that I would not have written to you even now, were it not that I feel obliged, compelled, to do so – because, be it noted, you yourself have compelled me to.

I heard in Etten that you had sent 50 francs for me. Well, I have accepted them. With reluctance, of course, with a feeling of some despondency, of course, but I have reached a sort of impasse, am in trouble, what else can I do? And so I am writing to thank you.

As you may know, I am back in the Borinage. Father said he would prefer me to stay somewhere near Etten, but I refused and I believe I was right to do so. To the family, I have, willy-nilly, become a more or less objectionable and shady sort of character, at any rate a bad lot. How then could I then be of any use to anyone? And so I am inclined to think the best and most sensible solution all round would be for me to go away and to keep my distance, to cease to be, as it were. What the moulting season is for birds – the time when they lose their feathers – setbacks, misfortune and hard times are for us human beings. You can cling on to the moulting season, you can also emerge from it reborn, but it must not be done in public.

The thing is far from amusing, not very exhilarating, and so one should take care to keep out of the way. Well, so be it.

Now, though it is a fairly hopeless task to regain the trust of an entire family, one which has perhaps never been wholly weaned from prejudice and other equally honourable and respectable qualities, I am not entirely without hope that, bit by bit, slowly but surely, the good relationship between one and all may be restored. In the first place I should be glad to see this good relationship – to put it no more strongly than that – restored at least between Father and me, and further, I set great store by seeing it restored between the two of us. A good relationship is infinitely preferable to a misunderstanding.

Now I must trouble you with certain abstract matters, hoping that you will listen to them patiently. I am a man of passions, capable of and given to doing more or less outrageous things for which I sometimes feel a little sorry. Every so often I say or do something too hastily, when it would have been better to have shown a little more patience. Other people also act rashly at times, I think.

This being the case, what can be done about it? Should I consider myself a dangerous person, unfit for anything? I think not. Rather, every means should be tried to put these very passions to good effect.

To mention just one by way of an example, I have a more or less irresistible passion for books and the constant need to eat bread. You will understand that. When I lived in other surroundings, surroundings full of pictures and works of art, I conceived a violent, almost fanatical passion for those surroundings, as you know. And I do not regret that, and even now, far from home, I often feel homesick for the land of pictures

You may remember that I knew very well (and it may be that I know it still) what Rembrandt was or what Millet was or Jules Dupré or Delacroix or Millais or Matthijs Maris.

Well, today I am no longer in those surroundings, yet they say that what is known as the soul never dies but lives on for ever, continuing to seek for ever and again.

So instead of succumbing to my homesickness I told myself: your land, your fatherland, is all around. So instead of giving in to despair I chose active melancholy, in so far as I was capable of activity, in other words I chose the kind of melancholy that hopes, that strives and that seeks, in preference to the melancholy that despairs numbly and in distress. I accordingly made a more or less serious study of the books within my reach, such as the Bible and Michelet's *La révolution Française*, and then last winter Shakespeare and a little Victor Hugo and Dickens and Beecher Stowe and recently Æschylus and then various less classical writers, a few great minor masters. You know, don't you, that Fabritius and Bida are counted among the minor masters?

Now anyone who becomes absorbed in all this is sometimes considered outrageous, 'shocking,' sinning more or less unwillingly against certain forms and customs and proprieties. It is a pity that people take that amiss.

You know, for example, that I have often neglected my appearance. I admit it, and I also admit that it is 'shocking.' But look here, lack of money and poverty have something to do with it too, as well as a profound disillusionment, and besides, it is sometimes a good way of ensuring the solitude you need, of concentrating more or less on whatever study you are immersed in. One essential study is that of medicine. There is scarcely anybody who does not try to acquire some knowledge of it, who does not at least try to grasp what it is about (and you see, I still know absolutely nothing about it). And all these things absorb you, preoccupy you, set you dreaming, musing and thinking.

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Now for the past five years or so, I don't know how long exactly, I have been more or less without permanent employment, wandering from pillar to post. You will say, ever since such and such a time you have been going downhill, you have been feeble, you have done nothing. Is that entirely true?

What is true is that I have at times earned my own crust of bread, and at other times a friend has given it to me out of the goodness of his heart. I have lived whatever way I could, for better or for worse, taking things just as they came. It is true that I have forfeited the trust of various people, it is true that my financial affairs are in a sorry state, it is true that the future looks rather bleak, it is true that I might have done better, it is true that I have wasted time when it comes to earning a living, it is true that my studies are in a fairly lamentable and appalling state, and that my needs are greater, infinitely greater than my resources. But does that mean going downhill and doing nothing?

You might say, but why didn't you go through with university, continue as they wanted you to? To that I can only reply that it was too expensive, and besides, the future then looked no better than it does now, along the path I am now taking.

And I must continue to follow the path I take now. If I do nothing, if I study nothing, if I cease searching, then, woe is me, I am lost. That is how I look at it – keep going, keep going come what may.

But what is your final goal, you may ask. That goal will become clearer, will emerge slowly but surely, much as the rough draught turns into a sketch, and the sketch into a painting through the serious work done on it, through the elaboration of the original vague idea and through the consolidation of the first fleeting and passing thought.

You should know that it is the same with evangelists as it is with artists. There is an old academic school, often odious and tyrannical, the 'abomination of desolation', in short, men who dress, as it were, in a suit of steel armour, a cuirass, of prejudice and convention. When they are in charge, it is they who hand out the jobs and try, with much red tape, to keep them for their proteges and to exclude the man with an open mind.

Their God is like the God of Shakespeare's drunken Falstaff, "the inside of a church." Indeed, by a strange coincidence, some evangelical (???) gentlemen have the same view of matters spiritual as that drunkard (which might surprise them somewhat were they capable of human emotion). But there is little fear that their blindness will ever turn into insight.

This is a bad state of affairs for anyone who differs from them and protests with heart and soul and all the indignation he can muster. For my part, I hold those academicians who are not like these academicians in high esteem, but the decent ones are thinner on the ground than you might think.

Now, one of the reasons why I have no regular job, and why I have not had a regular job for years, is quite simply that my ideas differ from those of the gentlemen who hand out the jobs to individuals who think as they do. It is not just a question of my appearance, which is what they have sanctimoniously reproached me with. It goes deeper, I do assure you.

I am telling you all this not to complain, not to make excuses for matters in which I may perhaps have been somewhat at fault, but simply to tell you the following: during your final visit last summer when we were walking together near that abandoned mineshaft which they call "La Sorcière," you reminded me of another walk we once took at another time near the old canal and the mill at Rijswijk, and, you said, we used to agree about many things, but, you added, "You have changed since then, you are no longer the same." Well, that is not entirely true. What has changed is that my life then was less difficult and my future seemingly less gloomy, but as far as my inner self, my way of looking at things and of thinking is concerned, that has not changed. But if there has indeed been a change, then it is that I think, believe and love more seriously now what I thought, believed and loved even then.

So you would be mistaken should you continue to think that I have become less keen on, say, Rembrandt, Millet, or Delacroix or whoever or whatever, for the reverse is the case, but there are many different things worth believing and loving, you see – there is something of Rembrandt in Shakespeare, something of Correggio or of Sarto in Michelet and something of Delacroix in Victor Hugo, and there is also something of Rembrandt in the Gospel or, if you prefer, something of the Gospel in Rembrandt, it comes to much the same thing, provided you understand it properly, do not try to distort it and bear in mind that the elements of the comparisons are not intended to detract in any way from the merits of the original individuals.

And in Bunyan there is something of M. Maris or of Millet, a reality that, in a manner of speaking, is more real than reality itself, something hitherto unknown that, if only you can read it, will tell you untold things. And in Beecher Stowe there is something of Ary Scheffer.

Now, if you can forgive someone for immersing himself in pictures, perhaps you will also grant that the love of books is as sacred as that of Rembrandt, indeed, I believe that the two complement each other.

I very much admire the portrait of a man by Fabritius that we stood looking at for a long time in the gallery in Haarlem one day when we took another walk together. Admittedly, I am as fond of Dickens's 'Richard Cartone' [Sydney Carton] in his Paris & Londres in 1793 [A Tale of Two Cities], and I could point to other particularly

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gripping characters in other books with a more or less striking resemblance. And I think that Kent, a character in Shakespeare's "King Lear," is as noble and distinguished a man as that figure by Th. de Keyser, though Kent and King Lear are reputed to have lived much earlier.

Let me stop there, but my God, how beautiful Shakespeare is, who else is as mysterious as he is; his language and method are like a brush trembling with excitement and ecstasy. But one must learn to read, just as one must learn to see and learn to live.

So please don't think that I am renouncing anything, I am reasonably faithful in my unfaithfulness and though I have changed, I am the same, and what preys on my mind is simply this one question: what am I good for, could I not be of service or use in some way, how can I become more knowledgeable and study some subject or other in depth? That is what keeps preying on my mind, you see, and then one feels imprisoned by poverty, barred from taking part in this or that project and all sorts of necessities are out of one's reach. As a result one cannot rid oneself of melancholy, one feels emptiness where there might have been friendship and sublime and genuine affection, and one feels dreadful disappointment gnawing at one's spiritual energy, fate seems to stand in the way of affection or one feels a wave of disgust welling up inside. And then one says "How long, my God!"

Well, that's how it is, can you tell what goes on within by looking at what happens without? There may be a great fire in our soul, but no one ever comes to warm himself by it, all that passers-by can see is a little smoke coming out of the chimney, and they walk on.

All right, then, what is to be done, should one tend that inward fire, turn to oneself for strength, wait patiently – yet with how much impatience! – wait, I say, for the moment when someone who wants to comes and sits down beside one's fire and perhaps stays on? Let him who believes in God await the moment that will sooner or later arrive.

Well, right now it seems that things are going very badly for me, have been doing so for some considerable time, and may continue to do so well into the future. But it is possible that everything will get better after it has all seemed to go wrong. I am not counting on it, it may never happen, but if there should be a change for the better I should regard that as a gain, I should rejoice, I should say, at last! So there was something after all!

But, you will say, what a dreadful person you are, with your impossible religious notions and idiotic scruples. If my ideas are impossible or idiotic then I would like nothing better than to be rid of them. But this is roughly the way I see things. In *Le Philosophe sous les Toits* by Souvestre you can read what a man of the people, a simple craftsman, pitiful if you will, thinks of his country: "Tu n'as peut-être jamais pensé à ce que c'est la patrie, reprit-il, en me posant une main sur l'épaulé; c'est tout ce qui t'entoure, tout ce qui t'a élevé et nourri, tout ce que tu as aimé. Cette campagne que tu vois, ces maisons, ces arbres, ces jeunes filles qui passent là en riant, c'est la patrie! Les lois qui te protègent, le pain qui paye ton travail, les paroles que tu échanges, la joie et la tristesse qui te viennent des hommes et des choses parmi lesquels tu vis, c'est la patrie! La petite chambre où tu as autrefois vu ta mère, les souvenirs qu'elle t'a laissés, la terre où elle repose, c'est la patrie! Tu la vois, tu la respères partout! Figure toi, tes affections et tes besoins, tes souvenirs et ta reconnaissance, réunis tout ça sous un seul nom et ce nom sera la patrie." [You may never have thought what your country really is, he continued, placing his hand on my shoulder; it is everything around you, everything that has raised and nourished you, everything that you have loved. This countryside that you see; these houses, these trees, these young girls laughing as they pass, that is your country! The laws that protect you, the bread that rewards your labour, the words you speak, the joy and sorrow that come from the people and things in whose midst you live, that is your country! The little room where you used in days gone by to see your mother, the memories she left you, the earth in which she rests, that is your country! You see it, you breathe it, everywhere! Imagine your rights and your duties, your affections and your needs, your memories and your gratitude, gather all that together under a single name, and that name will be your country.]

In the same way I think that everything that is really good and beautiful, the inner, moral, spiritual and sublime beauty in men and their works, comes from God, and everything that is bad and evil in the works of men and in men is not from God, and God does not approve of it.

But I cannot help thinking that the best way of knowing God is to love many things. Love this friend, this person, this thing, whatever you like, and you will be on the right road to understanding Him better, that is what I keep telling myself. But you must love with a sublime, genuine, profound sympathy, with devotion, with intelligence, and you must try all the time to understand Him more, better and yet more. That will lead to God, that will lead to an unshakeable faith.

To take an example: one man will love Rembrandt, genuinely, and that man will surely know that there is a God, he will really believe it. Another will make a thorough study of the French Revolution – he will not be an unbeliever, he will see that there is a supreme authority that manifests itself in great affairs. Yet another has recently attended a free course of lectures at the great university of sorrow and has heeded the things he saw with his eyes and heard with his

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ears, and has reflected upon them. He too will come to believe in the end and will perhaps have learned more than he can tell.

Try to grasp the essence of what the great artists, the serious masters, say in their masterpieces, and you will again find God in them. One man has written or said it in a book, another in a painting. Just read the Bible and the Gospel, that will start you thinking, thinking about many things, thinking about everything, well then, think about many things, think about everything, that will lift your thoughts above the humdrum despite yourself. We know how to read, so let us read!

Now then, you may well have bouts of being a little absent-minded, a little dreamy, indeed there are some who become too absent-minded, a little too dreamy. That may indeed have happened with me, but all in all that is my own fault, maybe there as a reason for it, perhaps I was lost in thought for one reason or another, anxious, worried, but one gets over that in the end. The dreamer sometimes falls into the doldrums, but is said to emerge from them again. And the absent-minded person also makes up for it with bouts of perspicacity. Sometimes he is a person whose right to exist has a justification that is not always immediately obvious to you, or more usually, you may absent-mindedly allow it to slip from your mind. Someone who has been wandering about for a long time, tossed to and fro on a stormy sea, will in the end reach his destination. Someone who has seemed to be good for nothing, unable to fill any job, any appointment, will find one in the end and, energetic and capable, will prove himself quite different from what he seemed at first.

I am writing somewhat at random, writing whatever flows from my pen. I should be very happy if you could see in me something more than a kind of fainéant [idler]. For there is a great difference between one idler and another idler. There is someone who is an idler out of laziness and lack of character, owing to the baseness of his nature. If you like, you may take me for one of those. Then there is the other kind of idler, the idler despite himself, who is inwardly consumed by a great longing for action who does nothing because his hands are tied, because he is, so to speak, imprisoned somewhere, because he lacks what he needs to be productive, because disastrous circumstances have brought him forcibly to this end. Such a one does not always know what he can do, but he nevertheless instinctively feels, I am good for something! My existence is not without reason! I know that I could be a quite a different person! How can I be of use, how can I be of service? There is something inside me, but what can it be? He is quite another idler. If you like you may take me for one of those.

A caged bird in spring knows perfectly well that there is some way in which he should be able to serve. He is well aware that there is something to be done, but he is unable to do it. What is it? He cannot quite remember, but then he gets a vague inkling and he says to himself, "The others are building their nests and hatching their young and bringing them up," and then he bangs his head against the bars of the cage. But the cage does not give way and the bird is maddened by pain. "What an idler," says another bird passing by – what an idler. Yet the prisoner lives and does not die. There are no outward signs of what is going on inside him; he is doing well, he is quite cheerful in the sunshine.

But then the season of the great migration arrives, an attack of melancholy. He has everything he needs, say the children who tend him in his cage – but he looks out, at the heavy thundery sky, and in his heart of hearts he rebels against his fate. I am caged, I am caged and you say I need nothing, you idiots! I have everything I need, indeed! Oh! please give me the freedom to be a bird like other birds!

A kind of idler of a person resembles that kind of idler of a bird. And people are often unable to do anything, imprisoned as they are in I don't know what kind of terrible, terrible, oh such terrible cage.

I do know that there is a release, the belated release. A justly or unjustly ruined reputation, poverty, disastrous circumstances, misfortune, they all turn you into a prisoner. You cannot always tell what keeps you confined, what immures you, what seems to bury you, and yet you can feel those elusive bars, railings, walls. Is all this illusion, imagination? I don't think so. And then one asks: My God! will it be for long, will it be for ever, will it be for eternity?

Do you know what makes the prison disappear? Every deep, genuine affection. Being friends, being brothers, loving, that is what opens the prison, with supreme power, by some magic force. Without these one stays dead. But whenever affection is revived, there life revives. Moreover, the prison is sometimes called prejudice, misunderstanding, fatal ignorance of one thing or another, suspicion, false modesty.

But to change the subject – if I have come down in the world, you have in a different way come up in it. And if I have forfeited sympathy, you have gained it. I am glad of that, I say that in all sincerity, and it will always give me pleasure. If you lacked seriousness or consideration, I would be fearful that it might not last, but since I think that you are very serious and very considerate, I tend to believe it will!

But if you could see me as something other than a idler of the bad sort, I should be very happy.

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For the rest, if I can ever do anything for you, be of some use to you, know that I am at your disposal. Now that I have accepted what you have given me, you are, should I be able to render you some service, in a position to ask me. It would make me happy, and I should take it a sign of trust. We have moved rather far apart and may in certain respects have perhaps different views, but some time, some day, one of us may be of service to the other.

For now I shake your hand, thanking you once again for having been so good to me. If, one of these days, you feel like writing, my address is, chez Ch. Decrucq, Rue du Pavillon 8, Cuesmes, near Mons, and know that it will do me good to hear from you.

Yours, Vincent