

Letter 155
Etten, 9-10 November 1881

Old boy,

I cannot make out from the letter Father and Mother received today what you think of my last two letters. But since you did not mention their receipt or enclose a letter for me, I suppose I shall soon get one from you. And in this case I think it much better if you write after reading my two – or including this one, my three – letters which, though written singly, complement each other, than if you had immediately answered the first one only. How cold and harsh my first letter must have sounded, and I suppose you must have thought me very obstinate and obdurate then. But was I wrong in this, and you will reproach me for not laying before you my most intimate and tender feelings – since you, oh man of business, would have received them during your daily fever of affairs, when not exactly in the mood to appreciate love stories? So I thought, No, first we must awaken him, and only then sow the seeds of soft words in him. We must first prepare the soil for that man who “hammers away at business.” Therefore, the first letter was as cold as a ploughshare. But as to the second, was I wrong in asserting that it would be more serious and more intimate? And now that we are speaking more intimately, we shall continue to.

But “in the meantime,” just another little bit of the ploughshare. Here it comes... Though you have gone pretty far in the world without a “she, and no other,” though you stand firmly in your shoes without a she, and no other, though you know how to bring off business deals without a she, and no other, though you are a man of will power, energy and character without a she, and no other, though you have knowledge of men and experience without a she, and no other, though you have high spirits, buoyancy and courage without a she, and no other, though you dare to take sides and hate halting between two opinions without...

Yet you will get further in the world, stand more firmly in your shoes, be a man of more will power, energy and character, obtain more knowledge of men and experience, have higher spirits, more buoyancy and courage, take sides more decidedly, be more averse to halting between two opinions, to wavering, oscillating, etc., than you have until now as soon as you have somebody, to whom “she, and no other” then applies. In short, you will be more yourself with an honestly meant and deeply felt “she, and no other” than without the same.

This little bit of the ploughshare is still going on – don’t get cross at it.

Your letter to Father was rather melancholy and, to tell you the truth, I did not understand it and did not know what to make of it. Is there anything serious, yes or no? And some expressions astonished me, first, because it was you who used them and, second, because you wrote them to Father and Mother.

For you, more than anyone else, keep all your “grandes et petites misères de la vie humaine” to yourself; and if you did speak about them, it would be to those whom you knew to be strong in the things in which you might feel more or less weak. I believe that if you felt yourself weak in anything, you would only confess that weakness to someone whom you knew would be able to cure you of it. Besides, only this summer you told me yourself that you thought it better not to speak about the difficulties in life, but to keep them to yourself in order not to lose your buoyancy, as you put it. I thought this a very impressive resolve, though, indeed, I was far from sympathizing with it; I know only too well that my need for sympathy has often induced me to seek it from people who, instead of strengthening, unnerved me.

Father and Mother are very good at heart, but have little understanding of our inner feelings, and as little comprehension of your real circumstances as of mine. They love us with all their hearts – you especially – and we both, I as well as you, love them very much indeed; but alas, in many cases they cannot give us practical advice, and there are times when, with the best of intentions, they do not understand us. It is not their fault, but the difference in age and the difference in opinion and the difference in circumstances... But that our home is and will remain our resting place come what may, and that we must appreciate it and on our side respect that home, there I quite agree with you – though perhaps you did not expect such a candid declaration from me.

However, there is a resting place better, more necessary, more indispensable than our home with our parents, however good, however necessary, however indispensable it may be – and that is our own hearth and home, with our respective “she, and no other.”

There you are, oh man of business, closing profitable deals, your biggest deal – your own home with your own “she, and no other.”

In my opinion this is the point you would do well to bear in mind, the stimulant which more than any other “tonic” will keep alive your courage, strength, energy and love of life, and renew them more and more every day. Some expressions in your letter of today induce me to say now, Suppose there might be some special reason why you should be more than ever on the *qui vive*, and act more energetically and

intelligently, suppose they try to undermine your position, or there is some other trouble or moment of danger. Do not forget you are twenty-six, and in “la saison du renouveau” [the season of renewal]. Close the biggest deal of your life! Renew yourself radically by being principally on the qui vive in that you look at girls more seriously and attentively, and be very careful to find out if your “she, and no other” is not among them.

This is the end of the ploughshare.

You remember perhaps that this summer we spoke about women, both with a kind of desolation. That we felt, or thought we felt, “La femme est la désolation du juste.”

And – and – I felt, perhaps you did too, rather like Monsieur le Juste above – I am not able to decide whether this saying is true or untrue, because since this summer I have begun to doubt, if I ever knew distinctly, “qu’est-ce que c’est qu’une femme, et qu’est-ce que c’est qu’un juste?”

And I have resolved to examine these two problems, the result being that I often say to myself, Tu ne sais pas encore ce que c’est qu’une femme. Tu ne sais pas encore ce qu’est qu’une juste, si non toutefois que tu n’en es pas encore un” [You don’t yet know what a woman is. You don’t yet know what a just man is, except that you aren’t one yet for sure].

All of which is quite different from my opinion of this summer. Not I, but Father Michelet says to all young men like you and me:

Il faut qu’une femme souffle sur toi pour que tu sois homme. Elle a soufflé sur moi, mon cher!
Faut-il de même et par rencontre qu’un homme souffle sur une femme pour qu’elle soit femme?
Je le pense très certainement.

[A woman must breathe on you for you to be a man. She has breathed on me, dear chap!
On the other hand, must a man breathe on a woman for her to be a woman?
I most certainly think so.]

So, man of business, there is a love story for you! Do you think it very dull and very sentimental? When I had firmly resolved not to leave her, even if it should arouse her displeasure at first, not to turn away from her, when I clung only to that “she, and no other” and “aimer encore” then I felt a certain calm and firmness come over me.

Then my melancholy left me, then all things became new for me, then also my energy increased. I know there are persons who think I ought to resign myself, and that it is against the rules not to consider myself beaten; but if they say of my proposal this summer, “If you sing before breakfast, you will cry before night,” then you know the verse,

He lost his feather in a fight
But knew they’d grow again all right,
Far finer than before.

However, now it is one of the little miseries of human life for me that I cannot go to see her once in a while or write to her, and that some people, who might have a good influence in undermining that “never, no, never,” on the contrary, feed that “never, no, never.” I wish that she found no sympathy anywhere for her “never, no, never” and that everyone would join in efforts to bankrupt the “never, no, never.” That they would quite reduce it to a warning monument for other “never, no, never” – saying ladies and for the encouragement of those who say, “Aimer encore.” But we have not come that far.

I should like it very much if you could persuade Father and Mother to be less pessimistic and to have more good courage and humanity, for they are awfully pessimistic, and call what I did this summer “premature and indelicate” (till I requested them quite firmly and definitely not to use such expressions any more).

A word from you perhaps influences them more than anything I can say, and it would be so much better, for them as well as for me, to let me go my way quietly.

They want me to stop all correspondence, for instance, with Uncle and Aunt; of course I cannot promise such a thing, and even if I did stop writing awhile, I would certainly start again with new vigour later.

She refuses to read my letters but – but – but the frost and the winter cold are too bitter to last very long.

I think it much more natural and sensible that when I spoke to her for the first time about these things, she at once uttered that “never, no, never” so energetically. That very thing convinces me that there was some fatal disease, and I hope I have touched the core of the fatal disease of burying herself too much in the past;

now a crisis of indignation follows, but the surgeon laughs up his sleeve and says, "Touché!" This is just between ourselves, however, Theo – she must not know that I laughed up my sleeve over the result of the knife" thrust. Toward her I am of course more or less repentant: "Did I hurt you? Oh, how brusque and rough I was! How could I be so?" That is my attitude toward her. A very repentant and humble letter to Uncle; but still I told him, "she, and no other." You will not betray me, brother? To act as if nothing had happened between us is all nonsense and humbug. None of that. Boy, I am so glad with my "never, no, never," I should like to shout with glee; but I must not show it, and must attack her again in some other way. But how to approach her, how to come near her? I must do it someday quite unexpectedly and take her unawares. For if I do not stick with it, then the fatal evil of burying herself in the past will come back with sevenfold strength, and yet "aimer encore" is such a good thing, and worth all the efforts of one's soul. Now, I have been complaining a little about Father and Mother, but except that they do not understand the least bit of it and do not understand anything of the "aimer encore" and could only call it "untimely and indelicate" until I put a stop to that – after all, they are very good to me and kinder than ever. But I would rather they could understand more of my thoughts and opinions on many things. Theirs is a system of resignation in many matters to which I cannot resign myself. Now I think a letter from you, speaking lightly about that "never, no, never," would perhaps be very effective. One word from Mother this summer would have given me the opportunity of saying many things to her which could not be said in public. But Mother very decidedly refused to say that word; on the contrary, she cut off every opportunity for me. And she came to me with a face full of pity and with many comforting words, and I am sure she had prayed a beautiful prayer for me, that I might receive strength for resignation.

But until now that prayer has found no hearing; on the contrary, I have received strength for action. You understand that a man who wants to act cannot quite approve of the fact that his mother prays for his resignation. And that he also thinks her words of comfort a little out of place as long as he does not despair, but, on the contrary, says from the bottom of his heart, "Je n'accepte point le joug du désespoir" [I won't accept the yoke of despair]. I wish she had not prayed for me, but had given me the chance of having an intimate conversation with her. And instead of agreeing with that "never, no, never," she might have taken my part with a little more sympathy when Kee spoke to her in confidence and poured out her heart to her. I tell you these things to convince you that an energetic word from you to Father and Mother would be of great help to me. For it is true, is it not, brother, that we are not only brothers, but friends and congenial spirits?

Since I really love, there is more reality in my drawings, and I sit writing to you now in the little room with quite a collection around me of men, women and children from the "Heike," etc. Mauve is ill, but Father and Mother have invited him to come here to recover as soon as he can undertake the journey.

Adieu. Write soon, a handshake in thought, believe me,

Ever yours, Vincent