

Dear Rappard,

To talk less abstractly this time, I am going to discuss some facts with you. You say that Ten Cate spoke to you about similar matters as I did. All right, but if this Mr. Ten Cate is the same person whom on a certain day I saw in your studio for a moment, I very much doubt whether he and I have exactly the same ideas fundamentally. Is he a man of small stature with black or at least dark hair, who on that occasion had a very pale complexion, or at any rate was very neatly dressed in a suit of black cloth? You should know that I am in the habit of observing very accurately the physical exteriors of people in order to get at their real mental make-up. However, I saw this Mr. Ten Cate only once, and that very fleetingly – at least if I saw him at all – and so I cannot make up my mind about him. All the same, it is possible that in some respects he spoke to you as I did, and I don't object to that – all the better, I say. Actually your answer to my letter is no more than half an answer, thanks all the same. I think you will tell me the other half some time, but not in the near future. The other half, still to come, will be longer than the one I received, and much more satisfactory.

Suppose at some time you leave the academy for good then I think that you will eventually have to struggle against a very peculiar difficulty, which is not quite unknown to you even now. A man who, like you, is working at the academy regularly cannot help feeling more or less out of his element when, instead of knowing, This or that is my task for today, he is forced to improvise, or rather create, his task every day anew. Especially in the long run this looking for and finding your work will not prove such an easy job by any means. At least it would not surprise me if, after having broken away from the academy for good, you did not occasionally feel that the ground was giving way under your feet. But I think you are not the kind of man to be thrown into a panic by such a natural phenomenon, and you will soon regain your balance.

However, when you have thrown yourself once and for all, headlong and without reservation into reality (for after you have thrown yourself into it, you will never go back), you will speak to others who are still clinging to the academy; exactly as Ten Cate does and exactly as I do. For from what you have told me Mr. Ten Cate I infer that his reasoning can be reduced to the following words: Rappard, give up your reservations, and throw yourself headlong into reality.

The Open Sea is your true element and even at the academy you do not belie your true character and nature; that is why the worthy gentlemen there will not recognize you in fact, and put you off with idle talk.

Mr. Ten Cate is not yet an able seaman, and I myself much less, and we cannot steer and manoeuvre yet as we would like to; but if we do not get drowned or smashed on the rocks in the seething breakers, we shall become good sailors. There is no help for it, everyone has to go through a period of worrying and fumbling after he has risked himself on the open sea. At first we catch little or no fish, but we get acquainted with our course and learn to steer our little vessel, and this is indispensable to begin with. And after a while we shall catch a lot of fish, and big ones too, be sure of that!

But I think Mr. Ten Cate is casting his nets for another kind of fish than I am, because to my mind our temperaments diverge; for every fisherman has a right to his own specialty, but now and then a fish of one kind will swim into the net meant for another kind, and vice versa, and so it may happen that at times there is a similarity between his catch and mine.

Now from time to time you dislike sowers and seamstresses and diggers. Well, what of it? So do I. However, with me this "disliking from time to time" is far outweighed by a certain enthusiasm, but with you the two things seem to have equal weight.

Have you kept my epistles? If you have a little time to spare, and they have not perished in the flames, then I say: read them again, although it may seem pretentious to ask such a thing of you. But I did not write them without serious intentions, though I was not afraid to speak my mind freely and to give free rein to my imagination. Now you say that I am a fanatic at heart, and that most certainly I am preaching a doctrine.

Well, if you want to take it that way, so be it; when it comes to the point I don't object to it, I am not ashamed of my feelings, I do not blush to own that I am a man with principles and a creed. But where does my fanaticism seek to drive people, especially myself? To the open sea! And what is the doctrine I preach? My friends, let us give our souls to our cause, let us work with our heart, and truly love what we love.

Love what we love, how superfluous a warning this seems to be, and yet it is justified to an enormous extent! For how many there are who waste their best efforts on something that is not worth their best efforts, whereas they treat what they love in a stepmotherly way instead of yielding wholly to the irresistible urge of their hearts. And yet we venture to call this conduct "firmness of character," and "strength of mind," and we waste our energy on an unworthy creature, all the while neglecting our true sweetheart. And all this "with the most sacred intentions,"

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thinking “we are compelled to do it,” out of “moral conviction” and a “Sense of duty.” And so we have the “beam in our own eye,” confusing a pseudo- or would-be conscience with our true conscience. The person who at this moment is writing to his dear friend Rappard has been marching around on this earth with one, or even more than one, such object – but then of a monstrous size – in his eye for a long time.

Has this beam been got rid of? you ask. Well, what can the present writer answer to this? Of one thing he is sure, namely that one very big beam is got rid of, provisionally; but, for the very reason that he did not notice it when he was labouring under it, he does not deem it impossible that there are others of whose existence or nonexistence he is not fully aware. However, the person in question has learned to be on his guard against diseases of and beams in the eyes. The excessively big beam in question was of a more or less inartistic character. I won't tell you just now what kind of beam it was. For there are all kinds of eye beams, artistic, theological, moral eye beams (quite a multitude of them), practical eye beams and theoretical eye beams (sometimes the two are combined – very ruinous indeed!), and ... oh well, a lot more.

We must not let ourselves be thrown into too much of a panic if we are not without them, provided this “not being in a panic” does not lead us into carelessness or indifference in this respect, or even into stubbornness.

A few days ago I had a nice letter from my brother Theo, who also inquired after you; I had sent him some drawings, and he strongly advised me to go on with those Brabant types. What he says about art is always to the point and purpose, and he often gives hints that are practical and practicable.

Today I have again been attacking a certain “bête noire” of mine, to wit, the system of resignation; I believe this “bête noire” is of the race of the hydra – that is to say the more serpent's heads you cut off, the more spring up again. And yet there have been men who have succeeded in killing off such a “bête noir.”

It is always my favorite occupation, as soon as I can find a spare half-hour, to resume the fight against this old “bête noir.” But perhaps you do not know that in theology there exists a system of resignation with mortification as a side branch. And if this were a thing that existed only in the imagination and the writings or sermons of the theologians, I should not take notice of it; but alas, it is one of those insufferable burdens which certain theologians lay on the shoulders of men, without touching them themselves with their little finger.

And so – more's the pity – this resignation belongs to the domain of reality, and causes many great and petites misères de la vie humaine. But when they wanted to put this yoke upon my shoulders, I said, “Go to hell!” And this they thought very disrespectful. Well, so be it. Whatever may be the raison d'être of this resignation, it – the resignation, I mean – is only for those who can be resigned, and religious belief is for those who can believe. And what can I do if I am not cut out by nature for the former, i.e. resignation, but on the contrary for the latter, i.e. religious belief, with all its consequences?

Well, if you have a little time to spare, write me again, and in the meantime believe me, with a handshake,
Ever yours, Vincent