

Letter 161
Etten, 23 November 1881

Dear brother,

I am very glad that you wrote to Father and Mother about a few things, as I asked you. I think it can only have a good influence – at least gradually. Of course you understand that I am not the man intentionally to grieve Father and Mother with anything. When I must do something contrary to their wishes and which often grieves them without cause, I feel very sorry about it myself.

But don't think that the recent regrettable scene was caused only by hot temper. Alas, previously when I declared that I would not continue with my study in Amsterdam, and later in the Borinage when I refused to do what the clergymen there wanted me to do, Father said something similar. So there is indeed a lasting, deep-rooted misunderstanding between Father and myself. And I believe that it never can be quite cleared up. But on both sides we can respect each other because we agree in so many things, though sometimes we have quite different – aye, even opposite – views.

So I do not consider Father an enemy, but a friend who would be even more my friend if he were less afraid that I might “infect” him with French “errors” (?). I think if Father understood my real intentions, I could often be of some use to him, even with his sermons, because I sometimes see a text in quite a different light. But Father thinks my opinion entirely wrong, considers it contraband, and systematically rejects it. Now in regard to the “case in question,” as Uncle Stricker calls what happened between Kee and me, I must tell you that I have risked an attack on the above-mentioned Mr. S.: by means of a registered letter. I was afraid unregistered letters would be ignored, but he will be obliged to read this one, and in it I have tried to draw his attention to some points which I fear he overlooked or which he would take no notice of. It is a very “undiplomatic” letter, very bold, but I am sure it will at least make an impression on him. But perhaps at first it will cause him to use a certain expletive which he certainly would not use in a sermon.

There really are no more unbelieving and hard-hearted and worldly people than clergymen and especially clergymen's wives (a rule with exceptions). But even clergymen sometimes have a human heart under three layers of steel armour.

But I am in terrible suspense and am quite ready to go to Amsterdam, except that the journey is very expensive and I must not waste my powder; the trip to Amsterdam is my reserve if my letter has no effect. Do you know that Uncle Stricker is really a very clever man, in fact, an artist? His books are very good and give proof of deep feeling. This summer I read a little book he had just published on the “minor prophets” and a few of the other less known books in the Bible. So I certainly hope that after some time has passed, there will be more sympathy between us than there has been hitherto.

The letter I received from him a few months ago was not unsympathetic or written in anger, but he wrote very positively, “Her no is quite decisive.” But when, notwithstanding this letter, I continued to write Kee, he thought the intervention of Prinsenhage would put a spoke in my wheel. This spoke did not prove strong enough. It was not the lever to lift me off my feet.

Apropos! you must write me soon. I have often thought over what I wrote you.

If you thought I meant to insinuate that if a man's passions were, for instance, ambition in business or financial affairs, he must clip their wings, tone them down, or quite overcome them, you were mistaken. On the contrary, but those passions must bear more and a better kind of fruit. They must not decrease, but be counter-balanced by love. Greed is a very ugly word, but that demon does not let anybody alone; I should be greatly astonished if it hadn't sometimes tempted you and me, even to the extent that for the moment we were inclined to say, “Money is the ruler, money can do everything, money is No. 1.”

Not that you or I really bow to that Mr. Mammon and serve him, but it is true that he worries you and me a great deal. Me, by poverty through many a year; you, through a high salary. These two both present the temptation to bow to the power of money. We may be more or less strong in those temptations, but I hope neither you nor I are destined to become entirely the prey of that money devil; but won't he get some hold on us? Now that money devil may not play you the trick of making you think it a crime to earn much money and making me think that there is some merit in my poverty. No indeed, there is no merit in being so slow to earn money as I am, and I shall have to remedy that; and you will give me many a useful hint, I hope.

But it certainly is my conviction that your attention, your best, your most concentrated, attention must be centered at this time on the development of a vital force which is still slumbering within you – Love. For indeed, of all powers it is the most powerful – it makes us dependent in appearance only; the truth is, there is no real independence, no real liberty, no steady self-reliance, except through Love. I say, our sense of duty is sharpened and our work becomes clear to us through Love; and in loving and fulfilling the duties of

love we perform God's will. In the Bible it is not written in vain, "Love will cover a multitude of sins" [see I Pet. 4:8], and again, "In Thee O God will be mercy, that Thou wilt be feared" [see Ps. 130:4]. But I think you will derive more profit from rereading Michelet than from the Bible.

As for me, I could not do without Michelet for anything in the world. It is true the Bible is eternal and everlasting, but Michelet gives such very practical and clear hints, so directly applicable to this hurried and feverish modern life in which you and I find ourselves, that he helps us to progress rapidly; we cannot do without him. The Bible consists of different parts and there is growth from one to the next; for instance, there is a difference between Moses and Noah on the one hand, and Jesus and Paul on the other. Now take Michelet and Beecher Stowe: they don't tell you the Gospel is no longer of any value but they show how it may be applied in our time, in this our life, by you and me, for instance. Michelet even expresses completely and aloud things which the Gospel whispers only the germ of.

You must not be astonished when, even at the risk of your taking me for a fanatic, I tell you that in order to love, I think it absolutely necessary to believe in God. To believe in God (that does not mean that you should believe all the sermons of the clergymen and the arguments and Jesuitism of the "bégueules dévotes collet monté" [bigoted, genteel prudes], far from it); to me, to believe in God is to feel that there is a God, not dead or stuffed but alive, urging us toward aimer encore with irresistible force – that is my opinion. I have sent Mauve a drawing of a man digging potatoes in the field; I wanted to show him some sign of life. I wish he would come soon. As soon as he has seen my studies, I will send you some again. If you do not like my writing you so often and so long, then say Stop; but perhaps there will soon be another reason for stopping, for instance when the time left for correspondence will all have to be devoted to her. These very long letters will not continue forever.

It is so curious that I am entirely in the dark about what is going on in Amsterdam: I mean, I don't know anything, but only feel. How can one feel things at a distance? Indeed, I can't explain it to you, but just fall in love yourself, and then perhaps you will also hear voices in the distance, and see little things which lead you to surmise bigger ones – as one guesses there is a fire from seeing the smoke. Fortunately the weather is warm and calm: that has a beneficial influence on people. If it were biting cold with a north wind, my "case in question" would be worse off.

Meanwhile Uncle and Aunt Stricker's silver wedding is approaching; Father and Mother intend to go there. I am very glad you have written them before that time, for I would rather not have them come out with their "conscientious objections" to "the untimeliness and indelicacy" of my love. Hoping to hear from you again, believe me, with a handshake,
Yours sincerely, Vincent

You must be sure that I try very hard to change many things in myself – especially the sad state of my money affairs. And then I also think it would be good for me to associate more with other people. Now the best and most effective way to better myself financially is to work hard. "Travaillez, prenez de la peine, c'est le fonds qui manque le moins." But this alone is not sufficient, or rather, there are still other things for which I must work. Perhaps it is not bad that I have lived so long "underground," as it were, that I have been "one who has been down." But now I need not go back into the abyss, and I think it right to do away with all melancholy and to take a somewhat broader and more cheerful view of life – to walk on level ground, and to renew old relations as much as possible, and to enter into new ones.

It may be that I shall meet with rebuff here and there, but I want to carry it through and try and struggle to the surface. I have often wondered whether it would not be possible and good to go to The Hague for a time, always considering the sphere of action here and the Brabant types my real work. Notwithstanding everything, I must hold onto this; now that I have grown familiar with it, I can find subjects here for years and years. But keeping at those Brabant types need not prevent my seeking new relations elsewhere, and even living elsewhere for a time.

All artists and draughtsmen do.

Do you know what I should like? Kee's beginning to say better things than "no, never never"; then it would be possible to plan an artistic campaign. But as things are now, I have first to fight "Jesuitism," and must spend much of my energy on it; and second, I cannot begin another campaign before the "case in question" has been settled.

Do you think Kee knows how terribly she unintentionally thwarts me? Well, she will have to make up for it afterward!!! That means I count on her joining in many artistic campaigns with me, you see.

But I am afraid I am busy selling the skins of many bears that I have not yet killed. However, there is one bearskin with which I want to speculate.

Recently Father said to me, "My conscience has never allowed me to influence two people to marry." Well, personally my conscience tells me exactly the opposite. Luckily Michelet never had such scruples or else his books would never have been written. And out of gratitude to Michelet I promise that later on when I associate more with artists who so often "beat about the bush," I shall do all I can to make it clear to them that they must marry. For the benefit of art dealers who are afraid that "keeping a family" costs more than not "keeping a family," I add that a married artist with his wife spends less and is more productive than an unmarried one with a mistress.

Do you think father Millet had more expenses than so many Italians and Spaniards who "live in the desert where the sky is of brass and the soil of iron"? Is a wife more expensive than a mistress? You do pay the mistress anyhow, Messrs. Art Dealers, and those ladies laugh at you behind your backs. "Qui est-ce qui vous tire des carottes [who are cheating you...], messieurs Goupil et Cie? Les femmes comme il en faut" – or "les femmes comme il faut? On est sûr de périr à part, on ne se sauve qu'ensemble." That is one of the things Michelet says so simply. Sometimes it seems that he must be mistaken, but later one sees that he was right after all.

The saying, "il faut les avoir aimé, puis désaimé, puis aimé encore," can also be applied to Michelet's books.

Do you think this mild weather will be mild enough to thaw the "never, no, never" one of these days? Will they expel me on or shortly after the silver wedding party? God forbid.

Do you think that Trojan horse in the form of a registered letter has been taken inside the walls of Troy? And, if so, will the Greeks that were hidden in that horse – that is to say, the things that were written in the letter – storm the fortress?

I am in the greatest suspense on that point. Adieu.

Yours sincerely, Vincent