

Letter 259
The Hague, c. 11 January 1883

Dear Theo,

When I read your letter this morning, I was greatly touched by what you wrote. ¹ This is one of those things of which the world sometimes says, "Why should he meddle with it?" And yet it is not so much our own will as circumstances which drive us to do it. And once we understand the situation, such a deep, fathomless pity is roused in us that we can no longer hesitate. And this is the case with you, I think... what else can I say? but that it seems to me that in such cases we must follow our impulses.

Victor Hugo says: "Par-dessus la raison il y a la conscience." [Above the intellect there is conscience]; there are things which we feel to be good and true, though many things remain incomprehensible and dark in the cold light of reason and calculation. And though the society in which we live considers such actions thoughtless, or reckless, or foolish, or I don't know what else – what can we say once the hidden forces of sympathy and love have been aroused in us? And though it may be that we cannot argue against the reasoning which society usually employs, against those who allow themselves to be led by sentiment and to act from impulse – arguing is not the principal thing, and he who has kept his faith in God sometimes hears the soft voice of conscience; then one does well to follow it with the naïveté of a child, without saying more about it to others than can be helped.

If one has such an encounter, one must expect it to cause a struggle, especially a struggle with oneself, because sometimes one literally does not know what to do or what not to do. But isn't this struggle – and even the mistakes one may make – better, and doesn't it develop us more than if we systematically avoid emotions? The latter thing is, in my opinion, what makes many so-called strong spirits into nothing but weaklings in reality.

You have my full sympathy in this matter, and as I myself am standing in the midst of realities and can tell you my experience since we spoke about it last, if you wish to hear something about it, or wish to speak about the future, or consult about whatever it may be, I am always entirely at your disposal.

And your writing that you will come to Holland before long is very welcome news indeed.

Perseverance is the great thing in love, once it has taken hold of us. That is, if the love is returned, for if it is decidedly not returned, one is literally absolutely helpless.

Well, I thank you for your confidence, and when I think it over, I am relatively confident of the result. Such a feeling is not "passion," for a deep, fathomless pity is at the root of it. Nor do I believe that such a thing makes you unfit for thinking about other things; on the contrary, it has a serious character which rouses and strengthens all your faculties and augments rather than diminishes your energy.

So after this you will not object to my saying a few more things about the drawings. I am very glad you think the old man's head typical – the model is really typical, I assure you. I did some more of him. Today I drew one with lithographic crayon. Then I threw a pail of water on the drawing, and in that moistness I began to model with pencil. If it succeeds, one gets very delicate tones; but it is a dangerous method, which may turn out badly. But if it succeeds, the result is quite "non ébarbé" – delicate tones of black which most resemble an etching. I also did a woman's head this way, standing out against the light, so the whole is in tone, with highlights on the profile, etc.

Did you receive the second roll with five heads sent from here, I think, on the fifth or sixth of January? It was the third roll mailed to you.

When you have looked at them for some time, I think you will find the same thing in them as in the first two, for there must be something of nature in them, as I literally wrested them from nature and worked after the model from beginning to end. I am very anxious to show you the studies – not because I am satisfied with my own work, but because, though I am not satisfied with it, I see that it is progressing, and that something is developing in it which will have some character.

When I came here to this town, what struck me most was, for instance, the Geest and those neighbourhoods. And slowly it is taking shape – but – what a struggle to bring such a thing to an end. Today I saw photos of drawings by Barnard, figures from Dickens; at the time I saw the original drawings in London. There is a force in them as in Nicolaes Maes, for instance, but quite a modern sentiment and conception. Such things warm my heart so much, and are so cheering, because I think of the models here, how they would look if they were drawn in that way, and then of course I say to myself, "Forward!" Work on till we have quite mastered the Black and White. There is a similarity between art and love, it is like swinging between "je l'ai depuis longtemps" and "je ne l'aurais jamais" [I have had it for a long time, *and* I shall never have it], as Michelet expresses it, and one passes from melancholy to animation and

enthusiasm; and this will always remain so – only the oscillations become stronger. Victor Hugo speaks of “comme un phare à éclipse” [like an occluding light], and that’s also a good comparison.

If you have received my letter of the fifth or sixth of January, with the second roll of drawings, you will remember that then I was already quite out of cash. Now today I had to pay the rent and the three models whom I hadn’t been able to pay before, and I also absolutely needed various drawing materials. I am working very hard at present, and I must not stop, but really the models eat me out of house and home. Well, it would certainly be good if I could have something extra – would it be possible? I hesitate to ask it because of what you just wrote me about yourself, and I understand perfectly that it brings you cares, which I respect and with which I sympathize. But the thing with me is that I got somewhat in arrears by working so hard, and when I receive the money, I at once have to pay out more than half of it. I cannot live more economically than we do, I have economized wherever possible; but the work is developing, especially these last weeks, and I can hardly control it any longer – that is, the expenses it causes. Would it be possible for you to send me a little more? I think you will understand it when you see the studies. Well, forgive me for mentioning it, but I cannot do otherwise, I am in arrears for the daily expenses, and that is why I am absolutely penniless before the tenth day.

At all events, write me soon, and be assured of my full sympathy in regard to what you wrote me. Adieu, boy. A handshake in thought,
Yours sincerely, Vincent

1. Theo had met a young woman who was sick and alone in Paris and had come to her aid [Jo’s note].