

Letter 266
The Hague, 8 February 1883

Dear brother,

Another Sunday, and so I am writing you again. Sometimes it seems to me that I didn't express warmly and cordially enough how much I was touched by what you recently told me. As to the question of whether an honest love might become "une illusion perdue" [a lost illusion], I do not doubt that it may sometimes happen; however, it would greatly astonish me if it should happen in your case, nor do I believe it will with me.

Curiously enough, Michelet says that at first love is as frail as a spider's web, and grows to be as strong as a cable.

But only on condition of faithfulness.

I have often walked on the Geest recently, in those streets and alleys where I often walked with the woman last year, in the beginning. The weather was damp, everything was beautiful there, and when I came home, I said to the woman, "It is still just the same as last year." I tell you this because you spoke of disenchantment; no, no, it is true there is a withering and budding in love as in nature, but nothing dies entirely. It is true there is an ebb and flow, but the sea remains the sea. And in love, either for a woman or for art, there are times of exhaustion and impotence, but there is no permanent disenchantment.

I consider love as well as friendship not just a feeling but also a positive action, and as such it requires doing things and exerting oneself, and exhaustion and impotence are the consequences.

A sincere and true love is a blessing, I think, though that doesn't prevent occasional hard times.

I am glad that my eyes are no worse, rather a little better, but it is not quite over yet and I must be careful. I can tell you, it was quite upsetting. How I should love to talk with you – for I am not discouraged about the work, nor listless nor disheartened, but I am at a standstill, and that is, perhaps, because I ought to have some intercourse with someone who is sympathetic to me and whom I could talk to about it; right now there is not a soul here whom I can confide in. I do not mean that nobody can be trusted, far from it, but unfortunately I am not in touch with them. I sometimes think of years ago when I came to The Hague for the first time, and of the three years I spent at Goupil and Co.; the first two were rather unpleasant, but the last one was much happier, so who knows whether the same won't happen now?

I like the proverb, "When things are at their worst, they are sure to mend," but now and then I ask myself, "Haven't we by any chance reached the worst?" for the "mending" would not be at all unwelcome to me.

Well, we'll see.

Lately I read *Le Peuple* by Michelet, or rather I read it some time ago this winter, but recently I was strongly reminded of it. That book was written quickly, and apparently in a hurry, and if it were the only one of Michelet's books one read, one wouldn't think it very good, and wouldn't be struck by it. But knowing his more polished works, *La Femme*, *L'Amour*, *La Mer*, and *Histoire de la Révolution*, I thought this one like the rough sketch of a painter whom I like very much, and, as such, it had a peculiar charm. To me Michelet's style is enviable. I don't doubt that there will be many authors who disapprove of Michelet's technique, as there are some painters who think they have the right to find fault with Israël's technique. Michelet has strong emotions, and he smears what he feels onto paper without caring in the least how he does it, and without giving the slightest thought to technique or conventional forms – just shaping it into any form that can be understood by those who want to understand it. To me *Le Peuple* is not so much a first idea or impression as an unfinished but well-thought-out and studied conception. Some parts are apparently done hurriedly from nature and joined to other parts which are more finished and studied.

De Bock seems to be in very flourishing circumstances, judging from his fur coat. I hadn't seen him for months, but met him a few days ago in the above-mentioned beautiful fur coat. Yet I cannot say he himself looked flourishing. Have you ever felt sympathetic to a person whom you saw was unhappy, but who pretended and was considered to be flourishing; and have you felt in your heart, If I tried to be friends with him, he would either think that I was making fun of him and it would be almost impossible to gain his confidence or his friendship – or if I got that far, he would still say, "I have chosen my course, and will stick to it," and we should have no influence on each other. This is the way I think of De Bock, and though I feel a real sympathy for him and admire much of his work, I do not think that he and I would profit by each other's society, especially as we have diametrically different views of life, and of art too. It is sometimes difficult for me to give up a friendship, but if I go into a studio and have to think, Talk about inane things, don't mention anything of importance and don't express your real feeling about art – that would make me more melancholy than if I stayed away altogether. Just because I should like to find and keep up a real friendship, it is difficult for me to conform to a conventional friendship.

If there is a desire to be friendly on both sides, there may be some difference of opinion, but for all that, one doesn't fall out so easily, and if one does, it is easily made up. Where it is conventional, bitterness is almost unavoidable, just because one does not feel free, and even though one doesn't express one's real feelings, they are sufficiently apparent to leave a continuing disagreeable impression on both sides and to make it hopeless for one to profit from the other's society. Where there is conventional, there is mistrust, and mistrust gives rise to all kinds of intrigues. And with a little more mutual sincerity, our lives would be so much easier.

Meanwhile, one gets used to things as they are, but it is not normal, and if it were possible to go back suddenly to the period of thirty, forty or fifty years ago, I think one would feel more at home in that period than in the present one – that is to say, you and I, for instance, would feel more at home in it. I don't think anyone would want to go back to this period fifty years from now, for if a time of antiquated decay or a time of “periwigs and crinolines” follows, people will be too dull to think about it, and if there is a change for the better, tant mieux.

I do not think it absurd to expect that such a time of stagnation may arrive, for what is called “the period of periwigs and crinolines” in Dutch history also had its origin in the relinquishment of principles and the substitution of the conventional for the original. At their best the Dutch people are Rembrandt's “Syndics,” but if the salt loses its savour, a time of stagnation follows, of “periwigs” – not immediately, but history proves that it may.

It is sometimes hard for me to believe that a period of, for instance, only fifty years is sufficient to bring about such a total change that everything is the other way around. But just by reflecting on history one learns to see those relatively quick and continual changes; from it I conclude that every man weighs the scale somewhat, no matter how little, and that how one thinks and acts does make a difference. The battle is but short, and sincerity is worth while. If many are sincere and firm, the whole period becomes good – at least, energetic.

Yes, I often think of what you wrote me recently. I think there must be a great difference between the woman you met and the one I have already lived with for a full year, but what they have in common is their misfortune and their sex.

Don't you also think that if one meets someone in such a way – I mean, so weak and defenseless – something makes one surrender completely, so that one cannot imagine ever being able to desert such a person? Generally speaking, such an encounter is an apparition. Have you read Erckmann-Chatrian's Madame Thérèse? It has a description of a woman who is recovering – very touching and beautiful; it is a simple book, but at the same time, deep.

If you don't know Madame Thérèse, do read it. I think she will like it too, and be touched by it.

At times I regret that the woman with whom I live understands neither books nor art. But (though she definitely can't) doesn't my still being so attached to her prove that there is something sincere between us? Perhaps she will learn later on, and it may strengthen the bond between us; but now, with the children, you will understand that she has her hands full already. And especially because of the children she comes into contact with reality, and involuntarily she learns. Books and reality and art are alike to me. Somebody out of touch with real life would bore me, but somebody right in the midst of it knows and feels naturally.

If I did not look for art in reality, I should probably find her stupid; as it is I only wish it were otherwise, but after all I am contented with things as they are.

I hope to be able to work regularly again this week. I feel so strongly that I must work doubly hard to make up for my having started so late; it is the feeling that I am behind because of my age which worries me. These days Montmartre will have those curious effects which Michel, for instance, has painted; that dry, withered grass and the sand against a grey sky. At least at present the colour in the meadows often reminds me of Michel, the soil, yellowish-brown; withered grass with a muddy road full of puddles; black tree trunks; a greyish-white sky; the houses at a distance subdued, but with the red roofs lending a little touch of colour.

Those effects are striking enough, and Michel's secret (like Weissenbruch's) depends on taking the proper measurements and finding the correct proportion of the foreground to the background, and feeling the exact direction in which the perspective lines run. These things are no accident (Michel's works are plentiful enough, and I see clearly from them that he had reached such a height that it seemed like child's play to him), it is a science, and I think that before he succeeded, Michel must have been perplexed and disappointed sometimes because things wouldn't go right.

Simple though it may seem, there is a very extensive general science behind it all, as there is behind even more simple-looking works, Daumier's, for instance.

Well, I must finish this letter. Write soon, if you haven't already. I am longing to hear whether your patient has had any serious consequences of the operation. Isn't it curious that in the very first letter I had from Rappard after his illness, he again talks with great animation of some wood engravings he has found, including some of Lançon's? he is now so eager for them that I need not urge him on, and at first he cared for them as little as others do. He is getting a very good collection, and I think I see the influence of those same Englishmen in his work and intentions – though, of course, he is far from imitating them in the slightest. But, for instance, the fact that before his illness he went to make studies in the asylum for the blind is the direct practical result of his love for draughtsmen like Herkomer or Frank Holl.

Adieu, boy, write soon. With a handshake,
Yours sincerely, Vincent