

Letter 326
Drenthe, c. 22 September 1883

Dear brother,

I just received your letter, many thanks for it.

I will tell you a few more of my experiences here. In the first place, I had a letter from Rappard from West Terschelling, and he is very hard at work there, first having been here in Drenthe at Rolde, in the neighbourhood of Assen. I hope to go and see him there this winter, and make a few studies – unless it is difficult to cross to Terschelling; as far as I can make out, the journey there and back will cost about 3 guilders.

But it is certainly worth that much to be with a painter again, and it will break my solitude.

I long very much for your next letter, which I hope will come soon. Do not forget to tell me the result of your approach to C. M., whether you have told him I was here and if that letter also remained unanswered. If so, I shall most certainly go and call on C. M. someday – not now, of course – to ask him to explain why he didn't answer. I will not write to him, but I am firmly resolved not to put up with his not answering, especially not answering you, and in addition, his not answering me.

I have never pretended that he was obliged to do something, nor do I now. I consider what he did or might do a favour, for which I have always thanked him; and for my part, I have given him studies for it, at least fifty in all, with the right to exchange them later.

This being so, I certainly need not put up with insults, and it is a decided insult that he did not acknowledge the receipt of the past packages of studies. Not a syllable.

And if it should happen that your letter remains unanswered too, then it would be cowardly to let the matter rest, and in that case I shall and must demand an explanation, and, as I said, even if I have to postpone it for some time, I shall do so very resolutely and by means of a personal visit. I would certainly not drop the matter in case he should be unwilling to receive me, for I am firmly resolved to get satisfaction. If he is willing to give it, all right then; but if he should refuse (I did not make use of a single discourteous expression in addressing him, I only wrote in a very cool vein), if he should refuse, then I shall tell him to give me – and I have a right to tell him so – an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, and then in my turn I shall insult him without restraint, quite cold-bloodedly.

Listen well, brother, understand this once and for all – however desirable it may be to get some financial help, this is far from being the principal thing. The principal thing is that he goes too far in losing sight of my rights as a human being. Even if I were a stranger (I never mention our relationship, I never count on that), I could not endure being treated as a reprobate, being judged or accused of things without being heard myself. I have the right, the full right, to demand an answer, and I must take it as a gross insult if he remains silent.

I must speak about this without reserve, seeing that until now I had thought matters would come out right of their own accord, and I should receive a few words in reply. But this suffering in silence has its limits, and, as I said, beyond these limits it would be cowardly and unmanly of me not to make a stern protest. So I beg you simply to tell me the result of your letter, then I shall know for myself what to do. I will not say another word about it, and even if more than a year passes over it, I will retain – just as untarnished, clear and bright as at this moment – the same conviction that I must have an explanation, and I will not rest before I have settled this matter with him in some way or other.

I believe you will approve of this feeling, even more so if you knew exactly what happened between him and me years ago, when I was very skeptical about the plan of studying, whether the promise to carry it through was sincere and well considered. I then thought that they had made the plan rashly and that I had approved of it rashly. And in my opinion it always remains an excellent thing that a stop was put to it then, which I brought about on purpose and arranged so that the shame of giving it up fell on me, and on nobody else. You understand that I, who have learned other languages, might have managed also to master that miserable little bit of Latin – which I declared, however, to be too much for me. This was a blind, because I then preferred not to explain to my protectors that the whole university, the theological faculty at least, is, in my eyes, an inexpressible mess, a breeding place of Pharisaism.

That I did not lack courage, I tried to prove by going to the Borinage, where life was certainly much harder than it would have been for me if I had become a student.

I thought that C. M., for instance, might have understood me better, and I have all the more reason to think him inconsiderate when I think how he has treated me with a certain suspicion since then. Then and now I have kept back a lot of things I might have said, but when the time comes for me to attack him, he will feel in his conscience, whatever he may say, that neither in the past nor at present have I ever committed a base

action towards him, so that there are no reasonable grounds for this insult of not answering. The more so as it would have been better if, from the moment I went to The Hague, we had let bygones be bygones, and all had been forgiven and forgotten, and we had decided to be on good terms with each other, as I told His Honour at the time. But, brother, I do not say peace at any price, and I prefer an unpleasant explanation to a poor-spirited letting things slide, whenever this would really be poor-spirited.

But be assured that I shall not mention you, although it is a fact that if he will not undo his insulting you (I have the impression he is inaugurating the same policy toward you), it makes my resolve to have it out with His Honour inexorable, and it is my firm intention to tell him a lot of home truths. Only I promise you that I shall seem to be speaking for myself alone, as if I did not know anything about you.

I have the deepest contempt for this mysterious, sphynxlike silence, and I hereby declare to you, I find it anything but straight and honest or upright. It may be like the general politics of the present day, I know that very well, but you know that I don't agree with the general politics of the present day, because I consider them mean and carrying all the signs of decadence which will lead to a regular periwig and pigtail period! One might almost weep over what is now spoiled on every side; what our predecessors gave their honest labour to is now neglected and abandoned in a cowardly way. The time we live in is perhaps outwardly a little more respectable than the one that is past, but the nobleness is disappearing too fast, so that one no longer expects from the future the same great things which they did in the past. Well, everybody must find his own way.

Now, to change the subject (but it was necessary to deal with this matter, though I do not like writing about it in the slightest), I come back to my experiences here. The more I walk around here, the better I like Hoogeveen, and I do not doubt that it will remain so.

Even without C. M.'s help. And I am afraid this will be the case, in the long run it will be cheaper here than in The Hague. But without C. M.'s help, I shall have to stint myself for a certain time before I can carry out my plans. And perhaps, after all, nothing will be lost by it.

But the fact is that I need money, and a supply of colours and various other things, before I can expect any good results from a ramble through the southeast corner of Drenthe.

But in six months, for instance, I hope to have saved up enough, and in the meantime I shall be able to make some things here. So for the present I will not go farther, but stay here and work in the neighbourhood. I will try to save some money for two trips, one to the southeast district, one through the moors between here and Assen. And I hope to combine the visit to friend Rappard with the latter excursion northward, and to stay awhile in Terschelling, at his inn called "The Shiplet."

It would be too reckless to undertake these two excursions if one did so without a stock of materials and without taking the necessary precautions. But with patience they will be possible, for I see clearly enough that I have fewer expenses here than in The Hague. And before undertaking them, I want to pay back Rappard, though it may be that later I shall borrow some more from him after having seen him, and when I know for sure that it will help me make something in particular.

At first I had some bad luck with my models on the heath; they laughed at me, and made fun of me, and I could not finish some studies of the figure I had started because of the unwillingness of the models, notwithstanding that I had paid them well, at least by local standards.

However, I did not give up, and on that same spot I concentrated on one single family, from which I can now have an old woman, a girl, and a man, and I hope they will remain willing. I have made a few studies of the heath which I shall send you when they are dry, and I have also started a few watercolours. And I began some pen drawings too, just with a view to painting, because with the pen one can enter into such details as are impossible in painted studies, and it is advisable to make two studies, one solely drawn for the composition and one painted for the colour. That is to say, if it is possible and circumstances permit, this is the way to put vigour into the painted studies later on.

The heath is splendid, and there are marshy meadows that often remind me of Th. Rousseau.

Well, I can tell you that the country air and life here are doing me a lot of good. Oh, if only the poor woman could have enjoyed it too. I think of her with such tender regret – though my common sense tells me clearly that it is impossible under the circumstances.

I am worried about her because I have not heard anything, and must conclude that either she did not want or was not able to do the things I advised her to do. I can hardly even write to her, because in the first place, as long as she continues to live in Bagijnestraat, I know that my letter will probably be opened by her brother or her mother; and in the second place, as long as she lives there, I do not want to have anything to do with them, not even with her. Well, perhaps I may hear something yet, but if not, it will give me a

melancholy feeling. I had hoped to have news from an address other than Bagijnestraat, namely that she had started a small laundry with her mother.

Oh, Theo, if she hadn't had any family, she would have behaved so much better. Women of her kind are certainly bad, but in the first place they are infinitely – oh, infinitely more to be pitied than condemned; and in the second place they have a certain passion, a certain warmth, which is so truly human that the virtuous people might take them as an example, and I for my part understand Jesus's words when He said to the superficially civilized, the respectable people of His time, "The harlots go into the Kingdom of God before you."

Women like her can be thoroughly bad (I do not speak here of the Nanas, hot blooded and voluptuous, but of the more nervous, reflective temperaments among them), women like her quite justify Proudhon's saying, "La femme est la désolation du juste" [Woman is the desolation of the just]; they do not care at all for what we call reason, and they act straightway and wickedly against it. I know that, but on the other hand they have that truly human feeling, so that one cannot but like them and cannot but spare them, and it makes one feel there is some good in them, a something very good even though one cannot define it otherwise than as a "je ne sais quoi qui fait qu'on les aime après tout" [I don't know what makes one like them after all].

Gavarni was quite serious when he said, "Avec chacune que j'ai quittée, j'ai senti quelque chose se mourir en moi." [With every one of them whom I have left I felt something die within me.] And the most beautiful saying and the best I know about women is the one you also know, "O femme que j'aurais aimée" [O woman whom I might have loved], and one should like to enter eternity with it – without wanting to know any more about it than that. I know that there are women absurd enough to be entirely governed by ambition (they do even more harm with it than men). Lady Macbeth is the archetype of such; these women are dangerous, and notwithstanding their charm, one must avoid them, or one becomes a scoundrel, and in a short time finds oneself face to face with a terrible evil one has committed and can never repair. But that was not the case with the one whom I was with, though she was vain, as we all are at times; the only thing I felt in the beginning was, Poor, poor, poor creature, and I still feel it at the end. Bad? que soit? but who is there that is good in these times? What man feels himself so pure that he can set himself to judge? Far from it. Delacroix would have understood her, I say, and I sometimes think God's mercy will understand her even better.

As I told you, the little boy was very fond of me, and when I was already on the train, I still had him on my lap. And so I think we parted from both sides with inexpressible sadness, but not more than that.

I tell you, brother, I am not good from a clergyman's point of view. I know full well that, frankly speaking, prostitutes are bad, but I feel something human in them which prevents me from feeling the slightest scruple about associating with them; I see nothing very wrong in them. I haven't the slightest regret about any past or present association with them. If our society were pure and well regulated, yes, then they would be seducers; but now, in my opinion, one may often consider them more as sisters of charity.

And now, as in other periods when civilization is in a decline, the corruption of society has turned all the relations of good and evil upside down, and one falls back logically upon the old saying, "The first shall be last, and the last shall be first."

Like you, I have visited "Père Lachaise." I have seen there graves of marble, for which I have an indescribable respect. I feel the same respect before the humble tombstone of Béranger's mistress, which I looked for on purpose (if I remember correctly, it is in a corner behind his own), and there I particularly remembered Corot's mistress too. Silent muses these women were, and in the emotion of those gentle masters, in the intimacy, the pathos of their poetry, I always feel a woman's influence everywhere.

I am speaking rather seriously in this letter, not because I think Father's feelings and opinion wrong in everything – far from it; in many things you will do well to follow Father's advice. We spoke about Father during your visit here, as you will remember, and also at the moment of your departure – but I can now express in clear terms what I felt only vaguely at the time: If you speak with Father, then think of Corot at the same time; then you will be able to avoid certain extremes, to which Father is far too much inclined; but as I see it, provided there is less inflexibility, Father's advice is generally sound, and I myself have taken it more than once. But I just want to point out that Father and many others do not know that besides their own righteous lives – for Father's life is righteous – there are other righteous lives in a milder spirit, like Corot's, Béranger's, for instance. At all events you, and I too, feel this more strongly. Because Father and others do not know this, they are often hopelessly mistaken in their judgement of certain things, mistakes of the kind that, for instance, C. M. makes, who feels sure that De Groux is a bad man, in which, however sure he may be of it, he is mistaken.

I will tell you another thing now, to prove to you that I am not speaking abstractly, but about things of foundation and substance.

Do you want an example of somebody who originally possessed an ordinary good Dutch character and feeling, and yet has since modified that feeling, having thought better of it, and who, I think, will modify it even more? Then I mention as an example Rappard, who now is already much more gentle and humane than when I first became acquainted with him. In my opinion, he has improved greatly, though he was good already; but I am afraid that not everybody will think so, and that he has been in conflict about it already. It is true he was good already, but still he became dissatisfied with that, and is now deeper and more humane than he was. It has not made his life easier – he used to have less inner struggle – I am sure of that, for I used to call him jokingly “the tranquil conscience,” and teased him about it, which I no longer do at all now, because I see a revolution has taken place in him. He is a little less elegant, and he is much less superficial as a man, and a certain germ of genius has begun to develop, and he has sailed clear of the cliff of “withering.”

As to people who honestly seek the best, I think what Hugo says so true: Il y a le rayon noir et il y a le rayon blanc. [There is a black ray and there is a white ray.] In my opinion, Father has more the rayon noir and Corot has more the rayon blanc, but both have a rayon d'en haut.

So I do not call anybody we mentioned bad, quand même I do not; but I say that the rayon noir has a perilous side. And as I have more than once thought over what you said on the station platform when you went away, I now say by way of explanation of what I could not find words for at the time: I know Father is Father, but there is something apart from that, namely what we may call the rayon blanc. And in this I find more positive, more veritable peace, and my attention is much more fixed on it.

As to Millet, he is, above all others, the man who has this white light. Millet has a gospel, and I ask you, isn't there a difference between a drawing of his and a nice sermon? The sermon becomes black by comparison, even supposing the sermon to be good in itself.

I know that you too are having a hard struggle these days, though I do not know exactly how or what it is. At all events I tell you exactly what I think about some things out of sympathy, because I, too, have had a hard struggle, and have it still.

And more and more I wish this white light were yours. Thanks for what you sent me, and a handshake in thought,

Yours sincerely, Vincent