

Letter 332
Drenthe, 12 October 1883

Dear Theo,

I just received your letter. I read it over and over again with the greatest interest, and one thing is becoming clear to me, which I have often thought about without getting very far.

That is to say, you have in common with me a time of secretly drawing the most impossible castles in the air, etc., which drawings stand in a curious relation to the throng of thoughts and aspirations – useless because nobody who might lend a helping hand takes any notice of them (only painters could show the right way then, but they have their thoughts elsewhere). That is a great inner struggle, which ends in discouragement, or in giving up the ideas as impracticable, and just about the age of twenty-one is very eager to do so.

What I may have said then, which was bound to contribute to that casting things overboard, at that moment my thoughts were perhaps the same as yours, that is to say, I regarded it as impossible. But as to that despairing struggle without getting any light anywhere, I know how awful it is too – with all one's energy one cannot do anything, and thinks oneself crazy, or Heaven knows what. In London how often I stood drawing on the Thames Embankment, on my way home from Southampton Street in the evening, and it came to nothing. If there had been someone then to tell me what perspective was, how much misery I should have been spared, how much further I should have been now! Well, let bygones be bygones. It has not been so. I spoke once or twice to Thijs Maris. I dared not speak to Boughton because his presence overawed me; but I did not find it there either, that help with the very first things, the A B C.

Let me repeat now that I believe in you as an artist, and that you may become so still, yes, that in a very short time you would think over in all calmness whether you are an artist or not, whether you succeed in producing something or not, if you learned to spell the above-mentioned A B C and if at the same time you wandered through the cornfields and the moors, to renew what you yourself express as “I used to feel myself part of nature; now I do not feel that way any longer.”

Let me tell you, brother, that I myself experienced so deeply, so very deeply what you say there. That I have been through a period of nervous, arid overstraining – there were days when I could not see anything in the most beautiful landscape just because I did not feel myself part of it. It is the street and the office and the care and the nerves that make it so.

Do not be angry with me when I say that at this moment your soul is sick – it is true, you know; it is not right for you not to feel yourself part of nature, and I think the most important thing is to restore that. I must look into my own past to find why I lived in that stony, arid mood for years, and why it became worse instead of better, though I tried to remedy it.

Not only did I feel hardened instead of sensitive toward nature, but, much worse still, I felt exactly the same toward people.

They said I was out of my mind, but I knew myself that it was not true, for the very reason that I felt my own disease deep within me, and tried to remedy it. I exhausted myself with hopeless, unsuccessful efforts, it is true, but because of that fixed idea of reaching a normal point of view again, I never mistook my own desperate doings, worryings and drudgings for my real innermost self. At least I always felt, “Just let me do something, be somewhere, and it must redress itself. I will rise above it, let me keep hold of patience to redress things.”

I do not believe somebody like ——(?) for instance – who proved really to be insane – thought that way, and therefore I repeat, I have often thought those years of grubbing over, but I do not see how in those circumstances I could have been different from what I was.

This was the ground which gave way under my feet; think how miserable anyone would be if such a ground gave way. I had been with Goupil for six years. I was rooted there, and thought that if I left them, I could look back on six years of clean work, and that if I presented myself elsewhere, I might refer to my past with full assurance.

It was by no means so; things are done so hurriedly that there is but little time for reflection, for questions or arguments. People act according to very arbitrary, very superficial impressions, and once one has left G. & Co., nobody remembers who G. & Co. is. It is a name like X & Co., without any meaning, so one is simply “someone out of work.” At once, suddenly, inevitably, that is how it is everywhere. Of course, just because one possesses a certain proper pride, one does not say, I am Mr. So-and-so, I am this or that. One applies for a new position in full earnest, without many words, fully intending to put one's hand to the plough. All right, but by and by a person out of work, “L'homme de quelque part,” becomes a suspicious character.

Now imagine your new boss to be a man whose business is rather mysterious, imagine him to have but one goal, "money." Can you, with all your energy, at once, on the spot, help him to a big amount? Not very likely, don't you think? But he wants money, money "quand même"; you want to know a little more about the business, and what you see or hear is rather disgusting.

"A person out of work" – "I do not want you any longer" soon is the answer.

Well, look here, you are becoming more and more "a person without work." You may go to England, you may go to America – it does not matter, you will be like an uprooted tree everywhere G. & Co., where you had been rooted since your earliest years, G. & Co., though indirectly they brought you to grief, because as a boy you thought them the finest, the best, the biggest in the world; G. & Co. – if you came back to them (I have not done so, I could not do it, my heart was too full, much too full) – G. & Co. would give you the cold shoulder, with a "nous n'avons plus à nous en occuper." [We need no longer bother about it.] For all that, one is uprooted, and the world reverses the facts and says that you have uprooted yourself. The fact is – your place no longer knows you.

I felt too melancholy to try to redress things, and I do not remember ever having been in a mood to speak about it to anybody the way I do to you now. Because, to my surprise, in your letter I read the words, "The gentlemen made things almost impossible when I spoke to them this week," and I never for a moment had supposed they would dare treat you as they did me. My dear boy, you know how things are with me, but if you are feeling miserable about one thing and another, don't feel alone. It is too much to bear alone, and in part, at least, I can sympathize with you.

Now, stick to your point, and don't let your grief let you lose your head; if the gentlemen behave like that, then stand on your honour, and do not accept your dismissal except on conditions which guarantee your getting a new situation.

Don't fly into a rage, they are not worth that, though they incite you to it. I flew into a rage and walked out. Now again, my position was different from yours. I was one of the least, you, one of the foremost, yet I am afraid you would feel what I say about being uprooted too if you were out of it, so face this fact coolly, don't give in, and don't let yourself be turned out without being somewhat prepared for the difficult situation of having to start anew.

And in that extreme case: do not go to America, for it is just the same there as in Paris. No, beware of the moment when one says, I shall make myself scarce; I went through that moment myself, I hope you will not know it. And if it comes your way, I repeat, Beware of it, resist it quite collectedly, and say, This proves that I am striking a stone wall. Such a wall is for bulls to beat against; it is true that I am a bull myself, but an intelligent one, I am a bull in the matter of becoming an artist. In short, don't let yourself be induced to crush your own skull, that's all. I do not say things will turn out that way; I only hope there will be no question whatever of striking a stone wall.

And know this well, in case of being uprooted, in case of a failure when starting anew, do not despair. Suppose there were a whirlpool somewhere, with sharp-edged, rocky promontories; well, then I should just think one might sail around them, mightn't one? You will perhaps admit that rock to be there, as you yourself pulled me out of that whirlpool when I myself no longer had any hope of getting out, and was hopelessly unable to struggle against it any longer.

I mean, sail around that whirlpool at a great distance – it has already begun to suck you in to the extent of your being estranged from nature. Do you think me foolish if I dare to say, Change your course enough now so that you try to restore the harmony between yourself and nature? The longer you remain in this mood, the more you foster nervousness, your constant enemy and mine. I have had more experience than you with what tricks it might play on you.

You are now entering upon a situation that may disturb you in so far as the relation with nature is disrupted. Take this quite calmly as a sign of aberration. Say, "Oh, no, not that way, please." Look for a new aim, an interest in something, for instance, think that basically perspective must be the simplest of all things after all, and chiaroscuro, a simple, not a complicated thing. It must be something that speaks for itself, otherwise I do not care much for it. Try to get back to nature this way.

Well, simply believe this, boy, that while writing this, I have got back something of the same feeling of years ago. That I again take pleasure in castles in the air, for instance, that especially here in Drenthe I am feeling pretty much the way I did at the time when first I began to see the beauty of art. You will agree with me when I call this normal, won't you? I mean to admire the things of nature, to be calm enough to draw them, to paint them.

But suppose you are faced by a stone wall, would you think a person in my frame of mind tranquil enough to be tempted to take a little walk with you to divert your thoughts at the moment when, because of nervous

tension, these thoughts are beginning to contain an element of despair? At the core you are yourself, and have not changed, but your nerves are getting upset from overstrain. Well, take care of your nerves, and do not think lightly of them, for they may tempt you to quick-tempered manoeuvres; anyway, you know something about that yourself.

Theo, understand clearly what I mean at this moment: Father, Mother, Wil, Marie and particularly I myself are all assisted by you; you think you will have to stick it out for all our sakes, and believe me, I quite enter into your feelings about this, at least I can sympathize with them to a great extent. But think it over. What is the purpose – your own purpose and Father’s, Mother’s, Wil’s, Marie’s and mine? What do we all want? We want to pull through, acting righteously; we all want to arrive at a clear position, not a false position, don’t we? This is what we want unanimously and earnestly, however much or little we may differ. What is it that we all want to set against fate? All, all of us without exception, want to work steadily, want quiet. Am I wrong in looking at the situation this way? All right, what is facing us now? A calamity is facing us which, hitting you, will hit us all. All right. A thunderstorm is threatening us; we see it threaten, we may be struck by lightning. All right, what are we going to do now? Are we frightened out of our wits? I do not think this would be our state of mind – although we all have certain nerves in our bodies, although certain fibres of the heart even more delicate than nerves might be shocked or suffer pain. “We are today what we were yesterday,” even if the lightning strikes, even if the thunder rolls. Are we or aren’t we the sort who can face things collectedly? – that’s the simple question, and I do not see any reason why we should not be. What I further see is this:

That at this moment our mutual position is straight; to keep it so, a closer solidarity between us is desirable, and in my opinion, there are in ourselves a few things which we must settle between us.

In the first place I should think it a very good thing if your relations with Marie were put on a firmer basis, if possible a formal engagement. In the second place I should wish that we both understood that circumstances urgently demand that Brabant no longer be closed to me. I myself think it best not to go there if it can be avoided, but in case of a calamity, as Father has a house there rent-free, I might save the rent I am obliged to pay here.

I have reached the point where my work will probably yield some profit soon. And now if we could reduce the expenses to a minimum, even below the present rate, I could perhaps earn a little instead of spending, become positive instead of negative.

If this is urgent that we must earn money, I see a chance of it in that way, if they have patience at home, if they realize what is necessary, and especially if the whole family helps in the question of posing for me. As to their being my models, they should decidedly have to do what I want, they should have to trust in my having reasons for it. If I say to them, You must pose, they ought to do so. Of course I would not ask anything unreasonable.

You remember the basic cause of my leaving home, a misunderstanding of each other in almost everything. Can one live together in such a case? Yes, for a time, if it must be, and if both sides feel that everything must be subordinated to what the force majeure of circumstances demands. I wish that had been understood at the time; besides, I did not take the initiative in going away; but when I was told to go, I went.

Well, I just mention this, because I see that circumstances may demand that you must have your hands free, and if my living at home for a time might further that, I think Father and I must agree to it at once. Though, if it is not absolutely necessary – “tant mieux” – but I do not say that I absolutely must be in Drenthe, it doesn’t matter in the least where I am.

So rest assured on that score, I would do anything you thought advisable.

And today I shall simply write Father this: In case Theo considers it advisable that my expenses be reduced to a minimum and I should have to live at home for a while, I hope, for myself as much as for you, that we shall possess the wisdom not to make a mess of things by discord, and that, ignoring the past, we shall resign ourselves to what the new circumstances may bring. Nothing further about you or about business matters, and in case I should have to live at home, I should not speak about you otherwise than in general terms. And certainly not mention Marie for the present.

Theo, when, perhaps a year ago, you said you would certainly not become a painter, but would definitely stay in your present profession, I could not but acquiesce; now I no longer acquiesce to the same extent: throughout the history of art one repeatedly finds the phenomenon of two brothers being painters. I know that the future is unpredictable, at least for myself I declare that I do not know how things will turn out. But it is a fact that I believe in you as a painter, in which belief I am strengthened by your last letter.

But mind, there is one thing I tell you is urgently necessary. Beware of your nerves – avail yourself of all means to keep your mind at ease. If it is possible, go and consult a doctor every day, not particularly

because a doctor could do something for you that would prove effective, but because the measure of going to see a doctor, etc., would force you to bear in mind, this is nervousness, this is what I am. It is a question of self-knowledge, of serenity notwithstanding all the tricks nerves must play. As I see it, the whole idea of the possibility of making yourself scarce is caused by nerves. Assume this to be the case, and you will do wisely and well.

I hope you will not pull off a coup; I hope you will not make a financial invention; I hope you will become a painter. If your cool, self-possessed exterior shows that you do not give a damn about the crisis the gentlemen have purposely conjured up, it will be like water off a duck's back with you; tell them, "I'm not leaving like that, certainly not at present, never that way" – if you say, I have plans, but they are not even of a commercial nature, and as soon as they are ripe for execution, I shall withdraw in all quietness; until such time, as long as you can find no fault with my activities and behaviour, leave things as they are; but bear in mind that you would be gravely mistaken in my personality if you thought that I should run away because you make the situation unbearable for me, or that I should part with you in an unreasonable way. Do you want to get rid of me? All right, I for my part want to be rid of you, but amicably and in an orderly way – that, however, you are not the slightest bit bent on staying, but that you will not get out before you see a favourable moment. I think this is the way in which you will be able to frustrate what they are now trying to do to make it impossible for you to stay on. Perhaps they suspect you of entering into negotiations with others, and in such a case their making things impossible might be venomous indeed. If they should turn venomous, nothing can be done, so forestall it – perhaps mentioning in a quiet way on what terms you should be willing to retire would be the best thing to do.

In the meantime, if I should have to go home for a time in order to give you a free hand, please give me warning. And again – Father, Mother, Wil, Marie and I, in a word all of us, think more of you than of your money. This making yourself scarce is purely nerves.

But redress – try to redress if you cannot do it at once – the relation between yourself and nature and people. And if it cannot be done in any other way than by your becoming a painter, well then, do so, notwithstanding all objections and obstacles. Say, do write soon, be sure you do so, with a handshake,
Yours sincerely, Vincent

I am sending you the enclosed sketches to give you an idea of the many extremely different things this apparently monotonous country presents. You see, I am just sampling at random – I catch hold of one thing and another; later things will arrange themselves and settle into shape of their own accord. But here I will not begin with a prearranged plan; on the contrary, I want my plan to result from my studies. As yet I do not know the real character of the country; now I draw everything that presents itself, but later on, after some experience, I shall try to reproduce it in its real character.

One thing depends so much on another that one must catch hold of everything; however much one should like to concentrate on a single subject, not one thing can be left out.

So there is work enough. I now have a pretty large room (where a stove has been put), which happens to have a small balcony, from which I can see the heath with the huts. In the distance I see a very curious drawbridge.

Downstairs there is the inn, and a farmer's kitchen with a peat fire on the hearth, very cosy in the evening. Such a fireplace with a cradle beside it is an excellent place for meditation. When I am feeling melancholy or worried about something, I just run downstairs for a while.

I can tell you that in a roundabout way I have heard something about the woman. I could not imagine why she did not write me.

So I wrote the carpenter next door, if the woman had not been to ask my address. And the scoundrel answered: "Oh yes, sir, but I thought you wouldn't like her to know your address, so I pretended not to know it." The damned wretch.

So I wrote her at once, though it was not as good as the express arrangement I had made with him and with her; but I do not want to hide myself now or ever, and I would rather write her at her family's address than conceal myself in any way. That's my opinion about it. And I also sent her some money; if this should have bad consequences, I am not responsible for it. I will not act falsely. I found that scoundrel's letter at Hoogeveen on my last visit there.

Friend Rappard has written to me again from Terschelling, and now today from Utrecht – he is home again. He has brought studies from there, especially of the almshouse. I don't understand it exactly, he told me the doctor had prescribed sea air for him during the winter; besides, he longed to spend a winter in the country, but it seems to have turned out differently in the end.

You wrote to me about Liebermann: his palette consists of slate-grey tones, principally running from brown to yellowish-grey. I have never seen anything of his, but now that I have seen the landscape here, I can understand perfectly how logically he is led to it.

Often the colour of things reminds me of Michel; you know, he also has a grey sky (slate-coloured sometimes), a brown soil with yellowish-greys. It is absolutely true, and according to nature.

There are Jules Dupré effects, to be sure, but in this autumn season it is exactly that – and you describe Liebermann's palette. And if I may find what I seek – and why shouldn't I find it? – I shall certainly often do it in the same way, in that same chromatic gamut.

Mind you, to see it like that, one must not look at the local colour by itself, but in conjunction with the colour of the sky!

That sky is grey –but so iridescent that even our pure white would be unable to render this light and shimmer. Now, if one begins by painting this sky grey, thus remaining far below the intensity of nature, how much more necessary it is to tone down the browns and yellowish-greys of the soil to a lower key, in order to be consistent. I think if once one analyses it thus, it is so logical, one can hardly understand not having always seen it so.

But it is the local colour of a green field, or a ruddy brown heath, which, considered apart, easily leads one astray.

Write again soon, for your last letter was remarkably brief, too brief, but it was obviously written in the office.

What about that Triennial Exhibition? There will be many beautiful things. I long to hear about it, because these certainly are the characteristic things of the present, and not of past years. So if you have a moment, tell me about it.

There was a rumour that Liebermann is somewhere here in the neighbourhood. I should like to meet him. I must say I am very glad to have found a better place to work in, so that I needn't sit idle at home now that there is so much rain and bad weather is expected. I wish you could see the country here. In the evening it is inexpressibly beautiful.

And I think, with snow, it will also be splendid.

I read a very beautiful little book of Carlyle's, *Heroes and Hero Worship*, nice sayings, as, for instance: we have the duty to be brave, though in general this is wrongly considered to be an exception. In life it is the same, goodness rises so high above everything that of course we cannot reach such a height. The most reasonable thing, and the thing that makes life less impossible, is to put our gamut in a lower key, and not to try to be luminous, and not to subside into dullness.

One finds here the most wonderful types of Nonconformist clergymen, with pigs' faces and three-cornered hats. Also adorable Jews, who look uncommonly ugly amidst Millet-like types or on this naive, desolate moor. But they are very characteristic. I travelled with a party of Jews who held theological discussions with some farmers. How is it possible for such absurdities to exist in a country like this? Why couldn't they look out of the windows or smoke their pipes, or at least behave as reasonably as, for instance, their pigs, which make no disturbance whatever, though they are pigs, and are in place in these surroundings and in harmony with them. But before the clergymen of the type I saw here reach the cultural and rational level of ordinary pigs, they must improve considerably, and probably it will take ages before they arrive at this point. Now any pig is better, as far as I can see.

Well, I am off again for a walk, write me if you can spare a moment, and look out for something of Liebermann's at the exhibition.

Good-by, my address is here for the present. Best wishes, with a handshake,

Yours sincerely, Vincent