

Letter 338
Drenthe, 19 November 1883

Theo,

Some time ago you wrote me about a certain difference in our respective physiognomies. All right. And your conclusion was that I was more of a thinker. What can I say to that? I do feel in myself a faculty for thinking, but that faculty is not what I feel specially organized in me. I think myself to be something other than specially a thinker. When I think of you, I see very characteristic action that is well and good, but also most decidedly not isolated but on the contrary accompanied by so much sentiment, and real thought too, that for me the conclusion is that there is more resemblance than difference between you and me. I do not say there is no difference – but having learned to know you better of late, the difference seems smaller to me than I used to think sometimes in former years.

When I consider our temperament and type of physiognomy, I find similarity, and a very pronounced resemblance between, for instance, the Puritans and ourselves besides. I mean the people in Cromwell's time or thereabouts, the little group of men and women who sailed from the Old World to America in the Mayflower, and settled there, firmly resolved to live simple lives.

Times are different – they cut down forests – we would turn to painting. I know that the initiative taken by a small group, called in history The Pilgrim Fathers, however small in itself, had great consequences; and as to ourselves, I think that in the first place we should philosophize but little about great consequences, and only try to find a path for ourselves to travel through life as straightforwardly as possible. To meditate on consequences is not our way, neither yours nor mine.

If I mention The Pilgrim Fathers, it is because of the physiognomy, to show you that certain reddish-haired people with square foreheads are neither only thinkers nor only men of action, but usually combine both elements. In one of Boughton's pictures I know a little figure of one of those Puritans, for which I should think you had posed if I didn't know better. It is exactly, exactly the same physiognomy – a small silhouette on a rock against a background of sea and fog; I can show you myself also, that is to say, that variation of the same physiognomy, but my profile is less characteristic.

Father used to ponder over the story of Jacob and Esau with regard to you and me – not quite wrongly – but fortunately there is less discord, to mention only one point of difference, and in the Bible itself there are plenty of examples of better relations between brothers than existed between the venerable patriarchs mentioned above.

I myself have sometimes thought about that being a thinker, but more and more it becomes clear to me that it was not my vocation, and because of the unfortunate prejudice that a man who feels the need to think things over is not practical, and belongs only among the dreamers, because this prejudice is greatly respected in Society, I often met with rebuffs because I didn't keep things to myself enough.

But since then that very history of the Puritans, and the history of Cromwell, as for instance Carlyle gives it, made me see that thinking and acting do not exclude each other, and that the sharp dividing lines which are drawn nowadays between thinking and acting – as if the one excluded the other – do not really exist. As to doubting whether one is an artist or not – that question is too much of an abstraction.

I confess, however, that I don't object to thinking it over, provided I can draw and paint at the same time. And my aim in my life is to make pictures and drawings, as many and as well as I can; then, at the end of my life, I hope to pass away, looking back with love and tender regret, and thinking, "Oh, the pictures I might have made!" But this does not exclude making what is possible, mind you. Do you object to this, either for me or for yourself?

I wish painting would become such a fixed idea in your mind that the problem of "Am I an artist or am I not?" would be placed in the category of abstractions, and the more practical questions of how to put together a figure or a landscape) being more amusing, would come to the fore.

Theo, I declare I prefer to think how arms, legs, head are attached to the trunk, rather than whether I myself am more or less an artist or not.

I suppose that you prefer thinking of a sky with grey clouds, and their silver lining above a muddy field, to being engrossed in the question of your own personality. Oh, for all that, I know sometimes the mind is full of it, which is only natural. But look here, brother, even if our mind is now and then full of the problem, "Is there a God or is there not?" it is no reason for us to commit an ungodly act intentionally.

In the same way, in the matter of art, the problem, "Am I an artist or am I not?" must not induce us not to draw or not to paint. Many things defy definition, and I consider it wrong to fritter one's time away on them. Certainly when one's work does not go smoothly and one is checked by difficulties, one gets bogged in the morass of such thoughts and insoluble problems. And because one feels sorely troubled by it, the best

thing to do is to conquer the cause of the distraction by acquiring a new insight into the practical part of the work.

Now I, for my part, seeing both in you and in myself something of the Puritan character, which so unites thinking and acting and is so far removed from wanting to be only a thinker or only a machine, which needs principles of simplicity as well as of sensible work, I do not admit a difference or divergence, much less a contrast between you and me.

In my view, it would be an *erreur de point de vue* [error of judgment] were you to continue in business in Paris. The conclusion then: two brother painters. Would that suit your nature? You may be involved in a difficult and fruitless struggle against it, a struggle that would impede your own liberation, just because you doubt whether you can do it. I know all this, alas, from my own experience.

Après tout, no matter how much we may be our own enemies, I am beginning to realize more and more: “L’homme s’agite, Dieu le mène [Man proposes and God disposes].” An infinitely powerful force prevails over our doing right and wrong. The same is true of your circumstances – act sensibly in them – perhaps even sensibly enough, in the end, to become a painter. Ultimately I should feel so reassured were you to take up a brush that I should consider the momentary calamity and shipwreck of lesser importance than the certain knowledge that your future is moving in a direction you will never regret.

But I wish that at the same time you may find rest for your heart in the matter of women. If this were possible, you would be even stronger, as being loved gives one certain wings, a certain surprising courage and energy. Then one is more of a complete man than otherwise. And the more one is this, the better.

At all events, I count it among the possibilities that you yourself may become conscious that painting is your vocation, and then, dear brother, Puritan “sans le savoir” [without knowing it], it might be that your days in Paris were numbered, that an old world closed itself to you, in a rather ungenerous way – but that at the same time a new world opened itself to you.

Well, think it over, a long or a short time. But it would be of little use if you said, Vincent, keep silent about it; for to that my answer is: Theo, it will not keep silent within yourself.

On le contient plus malaisément
Que la source des grands fleuves.
[It is more difficult to repress
Than the source of great rivers.]

Theo, I have heard from the poor woman a few times; she seems to be doing her best, working, washing for people, going out as a charwoman. Her writing is almost indecipherable and incoherent, she seems to regret some things in the past. The children are well and happy.

My pity and affection for her are certainly not dead, and I hope that a bond of affection may remain between us, though I do not see the possibility or the good of living together again – pity may not be love, but for all that it can be rooted deeply enough.

Well, brother, to change the subject, it is snowing here today, in the form of enormous hailstones. I call it snow because of the effect.

I don’t speak about the beauty of the scenery here because I should have to say too much about it to you. As to the work, I am almost too preoccupied with the idea that you should take it up too, which quite absorbs me. I wish it were settled, then we could make definite plans for working together. Drenthe is so beautiful, it absorbs and satisfies me so absolutely that if I could not be here forever, I should wish I had never seen it. It is inexpressibly beautiful.

With a handshake,

Yours sincerely, Vincent