

My dear sister,

Your letter affected me above all because I learned from it that you have returned in order to nurse Mme. Duquesne. Cancer is certainly a terrible disease – as for me, I always tremble when I see a case of it – and this is no rare occurrence in the South, though it is often not the real, incurable and mortal cancer, but cancerous tumors from which people occasionally recover. However this may be, I think it very brave of you, Sister, not to shrink from this Gethsamane. I feel I am less brave than you, when I think of such things, for I feel clumsy, unwieldy, awkward in their presence. If my memory does not deceive me, we have a Dutch proverb bearing on this – They are not the worst fruits that wasps gnaw at ...

This leads me straight to what I wanted to say. The ivy loves the old branchless willow – every spring the ivy loves the trunk of the old oak tree – and in the same way cancer, that mysterious plant, so often fastens on people whose lives were nothing but love and devotion. However terrible the mystery of these sufferings may be, yet there is in reality something sweet and pathetically touching about it, which has the same effect as seeing the abundant growth of green moss on the old thatched roof. All the same I know nothing about it, and I haven't the right to assert anything.

Not very far from here there is an old, old tomb, much older than Christ's sepulcher, bearing the following inscription: "Blessed be Thebe, daughter of Telhui, priestess of Osiris, who never complained of anyone." I could not help thinking of this when you told me that the patient you are nursing never complains ...

Mother will doubtless be pleased with Theo's marriage, and he writes me that she seems to be getting younger in appearance. This pleases me very much indeed. Now he too is very contented with his experience of matrimony, and feels considerably reassured. He has very few illusions about it all, for he possesses to a rare degree that strength of mind which enables him to take things as they are without expressing himself about the good or the bad of them. And he is quite right in this, for what do we know about what we are doing?

As for myself, I am going to an asylum in St. Rémy, not far from here, for three months. I have had in all four great crises, during which I didn't in the least know what I said, what I wanted and what I did. Not taking into account that I had previously had three fainting fits without any plausible reason, and without retaining the slightest remembrance of what I felt.

Well, this is bad enough, the fact is that I have been much calmer since then, and that I am perfectly well physically. I still feel incapable of taking a new studio. Notwithstanding this I am working, and have just finished two pictures of the hospital, one of a ward, a very long ward, with rows of beds with white curtains, in which some figures of patients are moving. The walls, the ceiling with big beams, all in white, lilac-white or green-white. Here and there a window with a pink or bright green curtain. The floor paved with red bricks. At the end a door with a crucifix over it. It is all very, very simple [F 646, JH 1686]. And then, as a pendant, the inner court. It is an arcaded gallery like those one finds in Arab buildings, all white-washed. In front of those galleries an antique garden with a pond in the middle, and eight flower beds, forget-me-nots, Christmas roses, anemones, ranunculus, wallflowers, daisies, and so on. And under the gallery orange trees and oleander [F 519, JH 1687]. So it is a picture quite full of flowers and vernal green. However, three gloomy black tree trunks pass through it like serpents, and in the foreground four big dismal clusters of somber box shrub. It is probable that people here won't see very much in it, but nevertheless it has always been my great desire to paint for those who do not know the artistic aspect of a picture.

What shall I say? You don't know the arguments of the good Father Pangloss in Voltaire's *Candide*, nor do you know Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet*.² These are books written by men for men, and I don't know whether women can understand them. But the memory of them often sustains me in the hours and days and nights that are hardly easy or enviable.

I have reread *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Beecher Stowe with extreme attention, for the very reason that it is a book written by a woman, written, as she tells us, while she was making soup for the children – and after that, also with extreme attention, Charles Dickens's *Christmas Tales*.

I read a little in order to meditate all the more. It is very probable that I shall have to suffer a great deal yet. And to tell the honest truth, this does not suit me at all, for under no circumstances do I long for a martyr's career. For I have always sought something different from heroism, which I do not have, which I certainly admire in others, but which, I tell you again, I consider neither my duty nor my ideal.

I haven't reread the excellent books by Renan, but how often I think of them here, where we have olive trees and other characteristic plants, and the blue sky ...

Oh, how right Renan is, and how beautiful that work of his, in which he speaks to us in a French that nobody else speaks. A French that contains, in the sound of the words, the blue sky, the soft rustling of the olive trees, and finally a

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thousand true and explanatory things which give his History the character of a Resurrection. One of the saddest things I know is that prejudice of people who in their self-conceit oppose so many good and beautiful things which were created in our own time. Ah, the eternal “ignorance,” the eternal misunderstandings – and how much good it does one to come across a word which is really serene ...

Blessed be Thebe, daughter of Telhui, priestess of Osiris, who never complained of anyone.

As for me, I am rather often uneasy in my mind, because I think that my life has not been calm enough; all those bitter disappointments, adversities, changes keep me from developing fully and naturally in my artistic career.

“A rolling stone gathers no moss,” they say, don’t they?

But what does it matter, seeing that, as the above-mentioned Father Pangloss proves all by himself “[que] tout va pour le mieux dans le meilleur des mondes.”

Last year I did ten or a dozen orchards in bloom, and this year I have done only four, so the work doesn’t go very vigorously.

If you have the book by Drône which you speak about I should like very much to read it, but do me the favour of not buying it expressly for me at the present moment. I have seen very interesting nuns here, but the majority of the priests seem to be in a wretched state. I have been so afraid of religion for many years. For instance, do you happen to know that love may not exist in the way people imagine? – the resident physician here, the worthiest man you could possibly imagine to yourself, the most devoted, the most courageous, a warm and manly heart, amuses himself now and then by mystifying the good women here by telling them that love is a microbe. And when on hearing this the good women and even some men raise a loud outcry, he doesn’t care a rap, and remains imperturbable on this point. And as regards kissing, all the other things we like to do in addition, these only actions of a natural order, like drinking a glass of water or eating a slice of bread. Certainly kissing is rather indispensable, otherwise serious disorders might result. Now must the intellectual sympathies always go with or without what went on previously? Why regulate all this, what is the good of it?

As far as I’m concerned, I won’t dispute that love is a microbe, and notwithstanding this it would not prevent one from feeling something like respect in the face of the sufferings caused by cancer, for instance.

And look here, the doctors, who you say cannot do very much now and then, which you are at liberty to say as often as you think proper – very well – but do you know what they can do nevertheless? – they can press your hand more cordially and more gently than many other people can, and their presence may at times be very sympathetic and reassuring.

Look here, very often I let myself talk on and on, and yet I cannot write two lines, and I am much afraid that this time too my ideas are futile and incoherent.

Only in any case I wanted to write you a letter which you would receive while you’re there.

I am unable to describe exactly what is the matter with me; now and then there are horrible fits of anxiety, apparently without cause, or otherwise a feeling of emptiness and fatigue in the head.

I look upon the whole thing as a simple accident. There can be no doubt that much of this is my own fault, and at times I have attacks of melancholy and of atrocious remorse; but you know, the fact is, that when all this discourages me and gives me spleen, I am not ashamed to tell myself that the remorse and all the other things that are wrong might possibly be caused by microbes too, like love.

Every day I take the remedy which the incomparable Dickens prescribes against suicide. It consists of a glass of wine, a piece of bread with cheese and a pipe of tobacco. This is not complicated, you will tell me, and you will hardly be able to believe that this is the limit to which melancholy will take me; all the same, at some moments – oh dear me ...

Well, it is not always pleasant, but I do my best not to forget altogether how to make contemptuous fun of it. I try to avoid everything that has any connection with heroism or martyrdom; in short, I do my best not to take lugubrious things lugubriously.

Now I wish you good night, and my kind regards to your patient, though I do not know her.

All yours, Vincent

I do not know whether Lies is at Soesterberg at the moment; if she is there, remember me most kindly to her.

1. Written in French.
2. See letter 588 to Theo.