

Letter 189
The Hague, c. 15 – 27 April 1882

Dear Theo,

I sometimes think, If my life were somewhat easier, how much more and how much better I should then be able to work! But I do work, and as you must have noticed from my last drawings, I begin to see a light that will conquer the difficulties. But you know that in addition to the exertion of drawing, scarcely a day passes without bringing some difficulty or other which in itself would be hard enough to bear. And, you see, there is a sorrow which I think I don't really deserve – at least I don't know in what way I deserve it – and which I should like to get rid of. You must tell me frankly, if you will be so kind, whether you know the cause of the following, and can give me any information about it.

Near the end of January, I think a fortnight after my arrival here, Mauve's attitude toward me changed suddenly – became as unfriendly as it had been friendly before. I ascribed it to his not being satisfied with my work, and I was so anxious and worried over it that it quite upset me and made me ill, as I wrote you at the time. Mauve then came to see me, and again reassured me that everything would turn out all right, and encouraged me.

But then on a certain evening shortly thereafter, he again began to speak to me in such a different way that it seemed as if quite a different man was before me. I thought, My dear friend, it seems as if they have poisoned your ear with slander; but I was in the dark as to the side from which the poisonous wind had blown. Among other things, Mauve began to imitate my speech and my manners, saying, "Your face looks like this," "You speak like this" – all in a spiteful way. But he is very clever at those things, and I must say it was like a good caricature of me, but drawn with hatred.

On that occasion he said a few things that only Tersteeg used to say, and I asked him, Mauve, have you seen Tersteeg lately? "No," said Mauve, and we talked on, but about ten minutes later he remarked that Tersteeg had been to see him that same day.

Then involuntarily the thought of Tersteeg stayed with me, and I thought, Is it possible, my dear Tersteeg, that you are behind all this? And I wrote him a note, not impolite, deliberately not impolite, I only said to him, Sir, I am so sorry when things such as "You do not earn your living" or "You do not work" are said about me; you must understand such things are too unreasonable for me to let them pass, and they dishearten me. During recent years I have had too many such things to grieve me, and I think there must come an end to it now.

This was the note which Tersteeg spoke to you about on his first visit to Paris.

When he came back from Paris, I went to see him and told him that if I had charged him with things for which he was not responsible, I hoped he would excuse me, because I was quite in the dark as to the cause of my difficulty. Well, then he was very kind to me again – but though I still visited Mauve once in a while, Mauve was moody and rather unkind. And I was told he was not at home a few times, in short, there were all the signs of a decided estrangement. I went to see him less and less, and Mauve never came to my house again, though it is not far away.

Mauve's talk also became narrow-minded, if I may call it so, as it used to be broad-minded. I had to draw from casts, that was the principal thing, he said. I hate drawing from casts, but I had a few plaster hands and feet hanging in my studio, though not for drawing purposes. Once he spoke to me about drawing from casts in a way such as the worst teacher at the academy would not have spoken; I kept quiet, but when I got home I was so angry that I threw those poor plaster casts into the coalbin, and they were smashed to pieces. And I thought, I will draw from those casts only when they become whole and white again, and when there are no more hands and feet of living beings to draw from.

Then I said to Mauve, Man, don't mention plaster to me again, because I can't stand it. That was followed by a note from Mauve, telling me that he would not have anything to do with me for two months. Indeed, we did not see each other during those two months, but meanwhile I have not been idle, though I have not drawn from casts, I can tell you, and I must say I worked with more animation and earnestness once I was free.

When the two months were almost up, I just wrote to congratulate him on having finished his large picture, and once I spoke to him on the street for a moment.

Now the two months have long since past, and he has not come to see me. And since then things have happened with Tersteeg which made me write Mauve: "Let us shake hands and not feel animosity or bitterness toward each other, but it is too difficult for you to guide me and it is too difficult for me to be guided by you if you require 'strict obedience' to all you say – I cannot give that. So that's the end of the guiding and being guided. But it does not alter my feeling of gratefulness and obligation toward you."

Mauve has not answered this and I have not seen him since. What urged me to say to Mauve, We must each go our own way, was the evidence that Tersteeg really influenced Mauve. I learned it from Tersteeg himself when he told me he would see to it that you stopped sending me money, "Mauve and I will see to it that there is an end to this."

I then wrote H. G. Tersteeg a less amiable note than the first – and I particularly thanked him for his kind endeavours to "guide" me. This time I thought fit to speak my mind, Theo, for you see, I remembered that on the first evening I recognized one of H. G. T.'s expressions, Mauve did not want to confess he had seen him. And then I thought, Well, Tersteeg, are these your "distinguished manners," that first you go and poison Mauve's mind, and later try to take from me the only assistance I receive! I didn't know such things were called "distinguished manners"; I thought they were called treachery.

Theo, I am a man with faults and errors and passions, but I don't think I ever tried to deprive anyone of his bread or his friends. I have sometimes fought people with words, but attempting a man's life because of a difference of opinion is not the work of an honest man – at least, these are not honest weapons.

Can you understand now that I am sometimes grieved over many things, grieved to the heart; and that I am grieved about Mauve? For though I shouldn't want to have the same "guidance" from him again, I should like to shake hands with him once more, and I wish he would do the same with me.

Do you perhaps know something that I do not, or can you give me some information about this matter?
Adieu.

Yours sincerely, Vincent

Forgive me if I trouble you about it, but, you see, I am so in the dark. I finished another drawing of a woman's figure such as "Sorrow," but larger and I think better than the first; and I am doing a drawing of a street where they are digging to lay sewer or water pipes, "Diggers in a Trench." [F 930a, JH 131]

Breitner is still in the hospital and will perhaps have to stay there another month.

I am making the drawings for C. M., but I have been so depressed about what I have written you that it hindered my work; and then I thought, I must have light, perhaps Theo can give me some information.