

Dear Theo,

Mauve once told me, "You will find yourself if you persist at your art, if you go more deeply into it than you have been doing up to now." He said that 2 years ago.

Lately I have been thinking a lot about those words of his. I have found myself – I am that dog. The notion may be a bit overstated – real[ity] may have less pronounced, less starkly dramatic, contrasts – but I believe that fundamentally the rough character-sketch applies.

The shaggy sheepdog I tried to portray for you in yesterday's letter is my character, and the animal's life is my life, if, that is, one omits the details and merely states the essentials. That may seem exaggerated to you – but I do not take it back.

Personalities aside, just as an impartial character study – as if I were talking about strangers and not about you and me and Father – for the sake of analysis I draw your attention once more to last summer. I see two brothers walking in The Hague (look upon them as strangers, as other people, do not think of yourself or of me or Father).

One of them says, "I am getting more and more like Father – I have to maintain a certain social position – a certain affluence (very moderate both in your case and in Father's) – I must stay in business. I don't think I'm going to become a painter."

The other says, "I am getting [less and less] like Father – I am turning into a dog, I feel that the future will probably make me uglier and rougher still and I foresee 'a degree of poverty' as my lot – but, but, man or dog, I shall be a painter, in short a creature with feeling."

So, for the one, a certain position or affluence, and a dealer. For the other, a degree of poverty and exclusion, and a painter.

And I see those same brothers in earlier years – when you had just entered the art world, had just begun to read, etc., etc. – near the Rijswijk mill, or, for example, on a winter outing to Chaam across the snowy heath early one morning! Feeling, thinking and believing the same to such an extent – that I ask myself, can those be the same two? The question is, what will the outcome be – will they separate for ever, or will they take the same path once and for all?

I tell you, I am choosing the said dog's path. I am remaining a dog, I shall be poor, I shall be a painter, I want to remain human, in nature. To my mind anyone who turns away from nature, whose head is forever filled with thoughts of keeping up this and keeping up that, even if that should remove him from nature to such an extent that he cannot help admitting it – oh, going on like that, one so easily arrives at a point where one can no longer tell white from black – and, and one becomes the precise opposite of what one is taken for or believes oneself to be.

For instance at present you still have a manly fear of mediocrity in the worst sense of that word. Why then, in spite of that, are you going to kill, to extinguish the best in your soul? Then, yes, then your fear might well come true. How does one become mediocre? By complying with and conforming to one thing today and another tomorrow as the world dictates, by never contradicting the world and by heeding public opinion!

Do not misunderstand me, what I am trying to say is just that basically you are better than that – I see this when, for example, you take Father's part once you think I have made things difficult for Father. If I may say so, to my mind your opposition in that case is misdirected. I do appreciate what you are doing, and I say, do be more sensible, direct your anger elsewhere and fight with the same strength against other influences than, of all things, mine, and, and then you will probably be less upset.

I don't mind Father when I consider him on his own, but I do mind him when I compare him with the great Father Millet, for instance. His doctrine is so great that Father's way of thinking looks extremely petty by comparison. Now you will think this is terrible of me – I can't help that – it is my deep conviction and I confess it freely, because you confuse Father's character with Corot's, for instance. How do I see Father? As someone with the same kind of character as Corot's father – but Father has nothing of Corot himself. Anyway, Corot loved his father, but did not follow him. I love Father, too, so long as my path is not made too difficult by differences of opinion. I do not love Father at the moment, when a certain petty-minded pride stands in the way of the generous and satisfactory accomplishment of a complete, permanent and most desirable reconciliation.

I had no intention whatever of putting you or Father to expense by the steps I had in mind when I came back home. On the contrary, I wanted to use the money to better advantage so that we should lose less, that is, less time, less money and less energy. Am I to be blamed when I point to the Rappards who, although richer than Father or you or I, manage things more sensibly and get better results from acting in concord, though it is probably not always very easy for them either?

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Am I to be blamed for wanting to put an end to the discord in the family with a “thus far but no further”? In what respect am I wrong for wanting this to be brought about thoroughly and conclusively and for not being content with a sham or a too half-hearted reconciliation? Reconciliation with mental reservations, conditions, etc., bah! It just won't do. Readily or not at all – with emprossement [eagerness], otherwise it is absolutely useless and worse may be expected.

You say you think it cowardly of me to rebel against Father. In the first place this is a verbal rebellion – no violence is involved. On the other hand it might be argued that I am all the sadder and more disappointed and I speak all the more gravely and resolutely precisely because Father's grey hairs make it evident to me that the time left to us for reconciliation is perhaps, in truth, not very long. I do not much care for deathbed reconciliations, I prefer to see them during life.

I am quite prepared to grant that Father means well, but I should far rather it didn't stop at meaning well but might, for once, lead to a mutual understanding, though it has been left very late. But I am afraid it will never happen! If you knew how sad I think this is, if you knew how I grieve over it.

You say: Father has other things to think about – oh, really, well, to my mind those things preventing Father from thinking matters through, year in, year out, are quite unimportant. And that is just the point – Father doesn't feel that there is anything to be reconciled about or to be made up. Father has other things to think about – very well – leave him to his other things, I am beginning to tell myself. Are you, too, sticking to your “other things”? Father says, “We have always been good to you,” etc., and I say, “Oh, really, you may be satisfied, I am not.”

Something better than the days of the Rijswijk mill – namely the same thing but for good and all – two poor brother artists – bound up in one and the same feeling, for one and the same nature and art – will it ever come to that? Or will the certain social position, the certain affluence, win the day? Oh, let them win it – but I foresee that it will only be for a while, that you will grow disillusioned with them before you are 30. And if not, well, if not – then, then, then – tant pis [too bad]. With a handshake,

Ever yours, Vincent

[Enclosed in this letter]

Dear brother, these are certainly ticklish questions to discuss, but do not take offense at my being unable to find better words for what is in my mind, and look upon my attempts to speak to you confidentially and unreservedly as a brother toward a brother, as a friend toward a friend.

Theo, in the past I often quarreled with Father, because Father said dictatorially:

“It is like this,” and I told him, “Pa, you are contradicting yourself, what you say militates absolutely against what you vaguely feel at your heart's core, even if you do not want to feel it.” Theo, I stopped quarreling with Father wholly and completely long ago, because it is now clear to me that Father has never reflected upon certain very important things, and never will reflect upon them, and that he clings to a system and does not reason, nor did he ever, nor will he ever reason on the basis of the naked facts. There are too many who do as he does, so that he always finds certain support and strength in the thought, Everyone thinks this about it (namely primarily all the well-regulated, respectable clergymen). But he has no other strength, and it is all built on convention and a system, otherwise it would collapse like any other vanity. Father does not wrestle with the plain truth. But now I am of the opinion that one is one's own enemy if one does not want to think things out, if one does not say (especially in one's youth): Look here, for myself I do not want to be sustained by a system, I want to attack things according to reason and conscience. I take less notice of my own father, though he is not a bad man, and though I do not speak about him, than I do of people in whom I find more truth.

You see, dear brother, I feel a deep, deep, deep respect for Millet, Corot, Daubigny, Breton, Herkomer, Boughton, Jules Dupré, etc., etc., Israëls – I am far from confusing myself with them – I do not consider myself their equal – no – yet I say, however conceited or whatever else people may think me – for all this I say, You will show me the way, and I am ready to follow your example rather than Father's, or some schoolmaster's, or whoever else's.

I myself find in Father and Tersteeg something of the school of Delaroche, Muller, Dabuffe, and so on – I may think it clever, I may be silent about it, may take it at its face value, I may even have a certain respect for – but all this does not prevent my saying, The least painter or man who wrestles directly with the naked truths of nature is more than you are.

In short, my dear fellow, neither Father nor Tersteeg has given other than a spurious tranquillity to my conscience, and they have not given me freedom, not have they ever approved of my desire for freedom and plain truth and of my feeling of ignorance and darkness.

Now, left to myself, I have not attained the light of what I wanted to do yet, never mind; but by resolutely rejecting their systems I think I have gained a certain hope that my exertions will not be unavailing.

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And that, before I close my eyes forever, I shall see the rayon blanc. However fierce the struggle in my mind may have been because of my not having found it, I have never regretted saying that I considered the rayon noir the rayon noir, and having definitely avoided it – except that one should not quarrel over it, and I ever quarreled over it, it was a mistake.

Now for myself, knowing what I know, I look at you and ask the question, “What shall he do with it?” Theo, when we quarreled a little some time ago in The Hague, and you said, I feel more and more drawn to Father, I told you, Boy, this is a difficult question, follow your own conscience. But since then I have tried to explain to you too that for myself I cannot find tranquillity in Father’s and H. C. Tersteeg’s way of thinking, the latter’s being about the same, I think – and that I have become increasingly aware of the fact that there is a rayon noir and a rayon blanc and that I have found their light to be black and a mere convention compared to the cool honesty of Millet and Corot, for instance. Now I have been thinking all this over four years longer than you have, as I am four years older and calmer – in any case time and experience have induced me to reject and avoid certain things. And I do not want to influence you, but on the other hand I do not want to conceal myself from you, or to do otherwise than speak openly. I come to the following conclusion:

What Father and Tersteeg tried to force on me as a duty was the spectre of a duty. What they really said was (though not in so many words) “Earn money, and your life will become straight.” Millet says to me: Make your life straight (at least try to do so and to wrestle with the naked truth), and even earning money can be managed, and in this too you will not be dishonest.

And I felt then, and I feel more and more strongly now, that Father and Tersteeg, and for instance C. M. and I don’t know who else (although they thought their intentions straight, and I do not suspect them of dishonesty – but as I said, I take them at their face value – and leave them alone), that they and all the influences of the past dragged me more and more out of nature. Now, whatever may be said of Millet, at least it was he who took me back into nature, more than any other might have been able to do in my desperate state of mind.

My youth was gloomy and cold and sterile under the influence of the rayon noir. And, brother, essentially your youth too. My dear fellow, this time I will not flatter you. After all, I will reproach nobody but myself with it – yet the rayon noir is unutterably cruel – unutterably – And at this moment I feel within myself as many repressed tears as there are in a figure by Monteyne!

But, brother, my very grief over so much proves to me that I myself have definitely done with the systems in question. I have suffered from them, but in my heart of hearts I no longer belong to that side of life. And now I say to you, as brother to brother and as friend to friend, Though your youth was gloomy and frustrated, in the future let us seek that soft light for which I know no better name than the white ray of light or the good.

Not looking upon ourselves as having obtained it, of course, but as seeking it, believing in it with the *foi de charbonnier*. Whatever may be true of my losing patience with Father as well as with Tersteeg, etc., etc., do not think of me as being in the least influenced by hate or spitefulness toward them. I do not envy them, in my opinion they are not happy themselves, and in my heart of hearts I am certainly not their enemy nor do I bear them malice, neither do I look upon them as my enemies, although it is a fact that I do not recall their influence with much pleasure. I do not suspect them of wicked intentions. I think they do follow their conscience, but that it is haunted by ghosts. And I do not see in Millet or Corot that there were ghosts haunting their consciences. There I see greater calm and serenity of a higher quality. Once again: I am far removed from this myself. However, every study I make, every attempt in the direction of painting, every new love for or struggle with nature, successful or unsuccessful, gets me one little unsteady step nearer. As far as religion is concerned, I find less of it in Father than in Uncle Jan, for instance, though it stands to reason that many would say the reverse. I think Father the opposite of a man of faith. Well look here, going in for painting requires a certain *foi de charbonnier* because one cannot prove at the outset that it will succeed and everyone takes a gloomy view of it. But, Theo, though it be true that you as well as I begin with as many repressed tears as the figures by Monteyne and Grollo, at the same time we have a little quiet hope mixed with all our sadness. In the first years of hard struggling it may even be a sowing of tears, so be it, but we shall check them, and in the far distance we may have a little quiet hope of the harvest.

With a handshake,
Yours sincerely, Vincent

Since writing the enclosed letter, I have thought some more about your remarks and have spoken to Father again. I had as good as made up my mind not to stay on here – regardless of how they might take it or what the result might be. But then the conversation took a fresh turn when I said, I have been here now for 14 days and feel I have got no further than during the first half hour, had we understood each other better we should have settled all sorts of things

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by now – I have no time to waste and must reach a decision. A door has to be either open or shut, I cannot see how there can be anything in between, and in fact there cannot.

It all ended with the little room at home where the mangle now stands being put at my disposal for storing my bits and pieces and if need be for use as a studio too. And a start has been made with clearing the room, which had not been done while things were still in the air.

I want to tell you something that I appreciate better now than when I wrote to you about Father. My opinion has softened, not least because I can see that Father (and one of your hints seems to bear this out to some extent) is genuinely unable to follow me when I try to explain things to him. He hangs on to a part of what I say, and that makes no sense when it is taken out of context. This may all be due to more than one cause, but old age must bear most of the blame. Well, I respect old age and its weaknesses as much as you do, even though it may not seem so to you or you may not credit me with it. What I mean is that some of the things I should take amiss in a man in full possession of his mental powers, I shall probably put up with in Father's case – for the above-mentioned reasons. I also thought of Michelet's saying (who had it from a zoologist), "Le mâle est très sauvage." [The male is very savage.] And because at this time of my life I know myself to have strong passions and believe that I should have them, I grant that I may well be "très sauvage" myself. And yet my passion subsides when I face someone weaker than myself, and then I don't fight. Although, mark you, taking issue in words or over principles with a man who holds a position in society, and please note, as a guide to man's spiritual life, is not only permissible but cannot possibly be cowardly. After all, our weapons are equal.

Do please think it over, the more so as I tell you that for many reasons I want to give up even the verbal struggle, because it occasionally occurs to me that Father no longer has the full mental power it takes to concentrate one's thoughts on a single point. Yet in some cases a man's age grants him additional power.

Getting to the heart of the matter, I take this opportunity of telling you that, in my view, it was Father's influence that made you concentrate on business more than is in your nature. And that I believe, no matter how certain you may now feel that you must remain a businessman, that a certain something in your original nature will endure and may well produce a stronger reaction than you bargain for.

Since I know that our thoughts coincided during our early days at G. & Co, that is, that both you and I then thought of becoming painters, but so deep down that we did not dare tell even each other straight out, it might well happen, in these later years, that we draw more closely together. The more so because of circumstances and conditions in the trade itself, which has undergone a change since our early years and in my view will change even more.

At the time I did violence to myself, and was moreover so oppressed by the preoccupation that I was no painter, that even after I had left G. & Co, I never thought of becoming one but turned to something else (which was a second mistake on top of the first), feeling discouraged about my prospects because the timid, very timid, approaches to a few painters were not even acknowledged. I am telling you this, not because I want to force you to think as I do – I do not force anybody – but only out of a sense of fraternal and friendly concern.

My views may sometimes be incongruous, that may well be so, but I do believe that there must be some truth in them and in their action and direction.

It was not primarily for selfish reasons that I tried to get them to open up the house to me again, even to give me a studio. What I do feel is that, though we do not see eye to eye in many things, Father, you and I have the will to pull together, either all the time or by fits and starts. Our estrangement having already lasted so long, it can do no harm to place some weight on the other side, so that to the eyes of the world, too, we do not look more divided than we actually are, so that to the eyes of the world we do not seem to have gone to extremes.

Rappard said to me, "A human being is not a lump of peat, since a human being cannot bear being flung into a loft to be forgotten there." And he pointed out that he considered it a great misfortune for me not to be able to live at home. Do please give that some thought.

I believe a little too much emphasis has been laid on the charge that I acted willfully or recklessly – well, you know that better than I do – when in fact I was forced to do certain things and could not act differently from the way they saw me act or wanted to see me act. And it was their biased view that my objectives were base, etc., which made me grow cold and feel quite indifferent toward many people.

One more thing, brother – at this time of your life you would do well to reflect deeply on this: I believe you are in danger of taking a distorted view of a great many things, and I think you will have to examine your perspective on life very carefully and that your life will improve as a result. I am not saying this as if it were something I know and you do not, I am saying it because I am coming to see more and more how terribly hard it is to tell where one is right or where one is wrong.