

Letter 123
Etten, 23 July 1878

Dear Theo,

I add a little word to Father's letter; I was glad to hear that you are getting on well in the foreign country and that you enjoy your life; how I should like to walk with you there sometime.

I suppose Father has written you that we went to Brussels last week, along with the Reverend Mr. Jones, of Isleworth, who stayed the day here over Sunday.

The impression of that journey was satisfactory in that we think I shall find my work there sometime – the course certainly is shorter and less expensive than in Holland; so it will be necessary to keep Belgium in mind and to look around there till we find something.

We saw the Flemish training school; it has a three-year course, while, as you know, in Holland the study would last for six years more at the least. And they do not even require that you quite finish the course, before you can apply for a place as an evangelist. What is wanted is the talent to give popular and attractive lectures to people, more short and interesting than long and learned. So they require less knowledge of ancient language and less theological study (although everything one knows is an asset), but they value more highly fitness for practical work and the faith that comes from the heart.

Still, there are many obstacles to overcome. First, one does not acquire at once, but only by long practice, the ability to speak to the people with seriousness and feeling, fluency and ease; what one says must have meaning and purpose and some persuasiveness to rouse one's listeners so that they will try to root their convictions in truth. In short, one must be a popular orator to succeed there.

Ces messieurs in Brussels wanted me to come for three months to become better acquainted, but that would again cause too much expense, and this must be avoided as much as possible. Therefore I am staying in Etten for the present, doing some preparatory work; from here I can occasionally visit both the Reverend Mr. Pietersen in Mechlin and the Reverend Mr. De Jong in Brussels, and in that way become mutually better acquainted. How long this will take depends entirely on what they will say over there. Father and I have just written them again.

Now I will try to write as well as I can some compositions which will prove useful to me later; I am writing one now on Rembrandt's picture, "The House of the Carpenter," in the Louvre. Yesterday Father had to preach in Zundert, and I went with him. The aunts send you their love. I was also at the house of Jan Doomen, who suffers much from rheumatism in his leg and complains that he cannot even walk to Breda any more; but when he is walking in the fields or the garden, it does not trouble him so much, except the pain forces him to get up very early in the morning. Old age is accompanied by many ailments, as the old Reverend Mr. Meyes used to say.

What a beautiful, excellent wood engraving there was in L'Illustration the other day of "A Young Citizen of the Year V" by Jules Goupil – did you see it? I have got hold of it and it is hanging on the wall of the room which is my own now, namely the old schoolroom which looks out on the garden and where the ivy climbs up around the windows. This is what was written in the magazine about that picture: "Un regard qui a vu le spectacle de l'affreuse guillotine, un pensée qui a survécu à toutes les scènes de la révolution. Il est presque étonné de se trouver encore vivant après tant de catastrophes" [A look (in the eyes) that has seen the spectacle of the horrible guillotine, a way of thought that has survived all the scenes of the revolution. He is astonished to find that he is still alive after so many catastrophes]. It has been a remarkable feature in art and will continue to have a great influence on many people, and it will always have an attraction for those who have a keen sense for high art, just as, for instance, a portrait by Fabritius does, or some more or less mystical pictures of the Rembrandt school.

That evening when we drove back from Zundert across the heath, Father and I got out and walked awhile. The sun was setting red behind the pine trees, and the evening sky was reflected in the pools; the heath and the yellow and white and grey sand were so full of harmony and sentiment – see, there are moments in life when everything, within us too, is full of peace and sentiment, and our whole life seems to be a path through the heath; but it is not always so.

This morning I went with Cor, who is on vacation, to the heath and the pine wood way beyond the mill; we gathered heather for his rabbits, who seem to be very fond of it, and also enough to fill a flower basket. We sat for some time in the pine wood, and together we drew a little map of Etten and surroundings with the Bremberg, Sprundel, t' Heike and De Hoeve.

Will you give my kindest regards to Soek and his family when you go there? Also to Frans Braat and Ernst and the others when you happen to see them. I often think of you, and am so glad that you are doing well and that you find things there which cheer you and feed your inner life. For this is what great art does, and

the works of those who apply themselves heart, mind and soul – as do many whom you know and perhaps meet personally, whose words and deeds are full of spirit and life.

A warm handshake in thought,

Your loving brother, Vincent

The words on the little map, written by Cor, mean: “Vincent and I did this in the pine wood – Cor – I must go to bed. Good night.”