

Dear Theo,

I am writing to you especially to tell you how grateful I am for your visit. It had been quite a long time since we had seen each other or had written as we used to do. Still, it is better to be close than dead to each other, the more so as, until one is truly entitled to be called dead by virtue of one's legal demise, it smacks of hypocrisy or at least childishness to carry on as if it were true. Childish in the manner of a young man of 14 who believes his dignity and rank in society oblige him to wear a top hat.

The hours we spent together have at least assured us that we are both still in the land of the living. When I saw you again and walked with you, I had a feeling I used to have more often than I do now, namely that life is something good and precious which one should value, and I felt more cheerful and alive than I have been feeling for a long time, because in spite of myself my life has gradually become less precious, much less important and more a matter of indifference to me, or so it seemed.

When one lives with others and is bound by feelings of affection, then one realizes that one has a reason for living, that one may not be utterly worthless and expendable, but is perhaps good for something, since we need one another and are journeying together as *compagnons de voyage*. But our proper sense of self-esteem is also highly dependent upon our relationship with others.

A prisoner who is condemned to solitude, who is prevented from working, etc., will in the long run, especially if the run is too long, suffer from the effects as surely as one who has gone hungry too long. Like everyone else, I need friendly or affectionate relationships or intimate companionship, and am not made of stone or iron like a pump or a lamppost, and like any man of culture or decency I cannot do without these things and not feel a void, a lack of something – and I tell you all this to let you know how much good your visit has done me.

And just as I would not want us to become estranged, so I would want to keep in with all at home. For the moment, however, I am not very keen on going back there and would much rather stay on here. Yet it may well all have been my own fault and you could be right about my not seeing things straight. And so, despite my great reluctance and though it is a hard course for me to take, I may yet go to Etten, at least for a few days.

As I think back with gratitude to your visit, my thoughts return to our discussions as well, of course. I have had similar ones before, even a good many and often. Plans for improvement and change and generating energy – and yet, do not be offended, I am a little frightened by them, not least because I have sometimes acted upon them only to have my hopes dashed.

How fresh my memory of that time in Amsterdam is. You were there yourself, so you know how things were planned and discussed, argued and considered, talked over with wisdom, with the best intentions, and yet how miserable the result was, how ridiculous the whole undertaking, how utterly foolish. I still shudder when I think of it.

It was the worst time I have ever lived through. How desirable and attractive have become the difficult days, full of care, here in this poor country, in these uncivilized surroundings, compared to that. I fear a similar result if I follow wise advice given with the best intentions.

Such experiences are too dreadful – the harm, the sorrow, the affliction is too great – not to try on both sides to become wiser by this dearly bought experience. If we do not learn from this, what shall we learn from? To try “to reach the goal which was set before me,” as the expression was then; indeed, I no longer aspire to it, the ambition has greatly abated. Even if it looked and sounded well before, now I look at those things from another point of view gained by experience, although this opinion is not permissible.

Not permissible, aye, just as Frank the Evangelist thought it reprehensible of me to assert that the sermons of the Reverend Mr. John Andry are only a little more evangelical than those of a Roman Catholic priest. I would rather die a natural death than be prepared for it by the Academy, and I have sometimes had a lesson from a German mower that was of more use to me than one in Greek.

A change for the better in my life, shouldn't I long for that, or are there times when one has no need of betterment? I hope I do become much improved. But precisely because that is what I long for, I am afraid of *remèdes pires que le mal* [cures worse than the disease]. Can you blame a patient for standing up to his doctor and preferring not to be given the wrong treatment or quack remedies?

Is it wrong for someone suffering from consumption or typhus to insist that a more potent remedy than barley water might be indicated, might indeed be essential, or, while finding nothing wrong with barley water as such, to question its effectiveness and potency in his particular case? The doctor who prescribed the barley water would be wrong to say: this patient is an obstinate mule who is courting his own

destruction because he refuses to take his medicine – no, it is not that the man is unwilling, but that the so-called remedy is worthless, because though it might well be good for something, it does not fit the case. Can you blame a person for remaining indifferent to a painting listed in the catalogue as a Memling, but having nothing more in common with a Memling than that it has a similar subject from the Gothic period, but without artistic merit?

And if you should conclude from these remarks that I meant to suggest your advice was worthy of a quack, then you have completely misunderstood me, as I have no such thoughts or opinions about you. If, on the other hand, you believe that I would do well to follow your advice literally to become an engraver of invoice headings and visiting cards, or a bookkeeper or a carpenter's apprentice – or follow the advice of my very dear sister Anna to devote myself to the baker's trade or many other similar things (curiously at odds and hardly compatible) that other people advise me.

But you say, "I do not expect you to take that advice literally; I was just afraid you were too fond of spending your days in idleness, and I thought you should put an end to it."

May I observe that this is a rather strange sort of "idleness." It is somewhat difficult for me to defend myself, but I should be very sorry if, sooner or later, you could not see it differently. I am not sure it would be right to combat such an accusation by becoming a baker, for instance. It would indeed be a decisive answer (always supposing that it were possible to assume, quick as lightning, the form of a baker, a barber or a librarian); but at the same time it would be a foolish answer, more or less like the action of a man who, when reproached with cruelty for riding a donkey, immediately dismounted and continued his way with the donkey on his shoulders.

And now, all joking aside, it is my honest opinion that it would be better if the relationship between us were to become closer on both sides. If ever I came to believe seriously that I was being a nuisance or a burden to you or those at home, of no use to anyone, and were obliged to look upon myself as an intruder or to feel superfluous so far as you are concerned, so that it would be better if I were not there at all, and if I should have to try all the time to keep out of other people's way – were I really to think that, then I should be overwhelmed by a feeling of sadness and should have to wrestle with despair.

I find it hard to bear this thought and even harder to bear the thought that so much dissension, misery and sorrow between us, and in our home, may have been caused by me. Should that indeed be the case, then I might wish it were granted me not to have much longer to live.

Yet when this thought sometimes depresses me beyond measure, far too deeply, then after a long time another occurs too: 'Perhaps it is only an awful, frightening dream and later we may learn to see and understand it more clearly.' Or is it real, and will it ever get better rather than worse? Many people would undoubtedly consider it foolish and superstitious to go on believing in a change for the better.

It is sometimes so bitterly cold in the winter that one says, 'The cold is too awful for me to care whether summer is coming or not; the harm outdoes the good.' But with or without our approval, the severe weather does come to an end eventually and one fine morning the wind changes and there is the thaw. When I compare the state of the weather to our state of mind and our circumstances, subject to change and fluctuation like the weather, then I still have some hope that things may get better.

If you were to write again soon, you would make me very happy. Should you do so, please address your letter care of J. B. Denis, Rue du Petit Wasmes à Wasmes (Hainaut).

Walked to Wasmes the evening after you left. Have drawn yet another portrait since. Goodbye, accept a handshake in my thoughts and believe me,

Yours truly, Vincent