

Dear Rappard,

Not having received any letter from you up to today, I thought, "Probably Rappard did not like my last letter at all, there seems to have been something in it that made him peevish." Qu'y faire? Suppose this were so, do you really think it nice of you? Speaking for myself, I cannot always quite make out whether my reasonings are right or wrong, proper or improper. But this much I know, that however roughly or harshly I may express myself toward you, I have such a warm sympathy for you that on quietly reading or rereading my letter you will see and feel, The person who speaks that way to me is not my enemy. And knowing this, is it quite impossible for you to hear with me and even swallow some expressions that are a little rough or harsh, which perhaps later on will prove to be less rough and harsh than you thought in the beginning?

Rappard, why do you think I speak and write to you as I do? Is it because I want to lay snares for you, because I am a sort of tempter who wants to make you fall into a pit, or is it possible that I had a sound reason for thinking, "Rappard is taking a chance on very slippery ice!" Oh, I well know that there are people who not only stay on their feet on the most slippery ice, but can even perform tours de force on it – but even if you were standing as firmly on your feet as all that (and I'm not saying you aren't), yet I would rather see you marching on a footpath or a paved road.

Please, don't get angry – read on – to the very end – if you get angry – don't tear up this letter without reading it – first count to ten. One... two... three... and so on....

That's tranquillizing... for you know, now there follows something dreadful indeed. What I want to say is this. Rappard, I believe that, though you are working at the academy, you are trying more and more to become a true realist and that even at the academy you will stick to reality – however, without being conscious of it yourself. Without knowing it, this academy is a mistress who prevents a more serious, a warmer, a more fruitful love from awakening in you. Let this mistress go, and fall desperately in love with your real sweetheart: Dame Nature or Reality.

I fell in love the same way too – desperately, I tell you – with a certain Dame Nature or Reality, and I have felt so happy ever since, though she is still resisting me cruelly, and does not want me yet, and often raps me over the knuckles when I dare prematurely to consider her mine. Consequently I cannot say that I have won her by a long shot, but what I can say is that I am wooing her, and that I am trying to find the key to her heart, notwithstanding the painful raps on the knuckles.

But never think that there is only one woman called Dame Nature or Reality; no, it is only the family name of many sisters with different Christian names. So we need not be rivals.

Is this clear to you, my friend? Of course it is meant in a purely artistic sense, you know².

Now, in my opinion there are two kinds of mistresses. There is the kind whom you may love and be loved by, all the time being aware that on one side or on both it is nothing permanent, and that you do not surrender yourself completely, unconditionally and without reservation.

Such mistresses enervate one, they flatter and spoil one, and then – then – they scorch the wings of quite a number of men.

The mistresses of the second kind are of an entirely different variety. Collets montés – female Pharisees – female Jesuits!!! These are women of marble – sphynxlike – frozen vipers – who would like to fetter men completely, once and for all, however, without on their part surrendering themselves unconditionally and without reservation. They are bloodsuckers, these mistresses, they freeze men and petrify them.

But I told you, old fellow, this is only meant in a purely artistic sense – and so I compare the first kind of mistress, those who scorch, to that school in art which lapses into vulgarity; and I compare the other kind of mistress (the collets montés) those who freeze and petrify, to the academic reality, or ... or ... if you want me to coat the pill, to the unacademic reality – more sugar won't stick to the pill, and I am afraid you can look through the thin layer. The pill is bitter, but very healthy ... it is quinine....

Have you understood this, old fellow?

Now there are – thank God – others besides these two kinds of women: they form that family of Dames Nature and Reality, but it takes a severe mental struggle to win one of them.

They demand nothing more nor less than the entire surrender of the heart, the Soul and the mind, in a certain respect all the love we have in us, and then – then – they surrender themselves too. These Dames Nature, though righteous as doves, are at the same time cautious as serpents and they know quite well how to distinguish those who are sincere from those who are false.

She renews, she refreshes, she gives life, this Dame Nature, this Dame Reality!

Rappard, there are people, and perhaps you and I belong among them, who – only when they are really in love – realize that before that time they have had mistresses of either variety, consciously or unconsciously, or who at any rate are not unacquainted with both species.

So, according to me, you have a mistress who freezes you, who petrifies you, who sucks your blood.

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Therefore I tell you, my friend, you must tear yourself from the arms of this woman of marble (or is it plaster of Paris??? how horrible!), or you will freeze to death.

Meanwhile remember, if I be a tempter digging a deep pit for you to fall into, that pit may be a “well wherein truth dwells.”

And that’s that. Nevermore sound the praises of any unacademic mistress to me (speaking artistically)! In my opinion she is a shrew. Old fellow, I think she will cheat you if you let her capture you. Let her go to the devil. Drive her away on the double, but listen, this is meant purely in the artistic sense, old fellow.

Oh well! if there is anything over and above this, that is another matter – even so, I shan’t take back my words, though I should like to take my own words in a nonfigurative sense. Do you understand, old fellow? – and – and – say! – you will now write to me without loss of time, hein?

A handshake, and believe me

Ever yours, Vincent

Recently I made a drawing. Lunch hour: a labourer resting and drinking his coffee and cutting a slice of bread. On the ground a spade, with which he returned from the field.

[The following part of the postscript is written mostly in French.] ²

Yet she is somewhat cold, my friend, the woman whom you say you love, and who is your ideal for the time being. She certainly is what I had imagined: – marble, plaster of Paris, how can I tell? A somnambulist at best. Alive? – no!

So you say:

Where does she come from?...from Heaven.

Where does she dwell?...everywhere in the world.

Her intentions?...beauty and sublimity.

But, good heavens, at least you are sincere, and without knowing it you agree with me to the extent of admitting that you have chosen a mistress among those to whom I have assigned the name of collets montés, etc, etc.

Truly this is quite right, you have described her very correctly. But how Pharisaical she is, this beautiful lady, and how much you are in love with her – what a pity.

Lady, who are you? I am Beauty and Sublimity. Just tell me, beautiful and sublime lady, she who feels so, is she really so? I readily admit that in certain crises in life – in great pain, in the exaltation of joy – one may feel one is beautiful as well as sublime; I hope I belong to those who can appreciate such feelings. Notwithstanding all that, the fact is, my lady, that you leave me cold and without emotion – what is the cause of this? I feel sure that I do not have too thick a skin; I hope that quite a few females, some not even pretty nor exactly sublime, have charmed me. But you, my lady, you do not charm me in the least. One should not claim to possess beauty and sublimity!

My lady, I do not love you at all, and besides, I do not believe that you know how to love, or it might be in some academic heaven; this may be true – but somewhere on the heath, or by the fireside, intimately? – no, a thousand times no! Don’t tell me that story, my Lady Beauty and Sublimity, you know nothing of that.

You see, my lady, I am only a man with human passions, and as long as I am rambling on the heath “here below,” I have no time to meddle with some celestial and mystical love, for I feel a love of a more earthly and frank character.

I certainly want beauty and sublimity, I admit it, but above all I want something else – to begin with: goodness, kindness, tenderness – do you have much of that, my Pharisaical lady? I am inclined to doubt it. And then, my lady, please tell me, do you really have a body and a soul? – I am inclined to doubt that too, by heaven, and I mean the body as well as the soul.

Listen, beautiful lady, wherever you pretend to come from, you who tell me that your fundamental intentions are “beauty and sublimity” (which, however, can only be results and never intentions), whatever place you come from, you certainly did not issue from the body of the living God, neither did you from the body of a woman.

Get you gone, sphinx, begone at this very instant, I tell you – you are nothing but a humbug ... You do not exist at all. (Le tiaple n’eczisdé boind,³ as Nucingen would say.) But if you really exist, in point of fact you come from somewhere, are you quite sure that your progenitor was not Satan himself, the father of lies; are you less viper and less serpent than he, my beautiful, my sublime lady?

To say that your mistress, “the Beautiful and Sublime One, who says that she comes from heaven and dwells everywhere on earth,” is a more than suspect person would mean expressing the thing not strongly enough.

Ask her if she is good and useful, if she loves and craves for love. Then she will be troubled in her mind, and if she answers Yes, it is a lie.

She – that is to say the other one, not the one with the intentions aforementioned – where does she come from?

Far be it from me to deny her divinity, her immortality; most certainly I believe in these, and in the first place too, but on the other hand she is also quite earthly, and also certainly a woman born of a woman.

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She? Where she dwells? I well know where, and it is not far from any of us.

She? Her intentions? What do I know of them, how can I express myself?

I want to be silent – and yet, because I must speak – well then – as it seems to me: to love and to be lovable – to live – to give life, to renew it, to restore it, to preserve it – and to work, giving a spark for a spark, and above all to be good, to be useful, to be helpful in something, for instance lighting a fire, giving a slice of bread and butter to a child, a glass of water to a sufferer.

Oh! but all this is very beautiful, very sublime. Yes, but she did not know the names for it, and moreover she believed it was quite simple, she did not do it expressly, it was not her intention to make so much noise: she thought nobody took any notice of it.

Those “reasonings” of hers, you see, are not so very brilliant, not so very exquisite – but her feelings are always right.

“To know what’s her duty she does not go to her head she goes to her heart.”⁴

But this one is not a mistress at all. Puisqu’une dame est une dame, as Michelet says.

Meanwhile, Rappard, I thought that competition affair rather funny.

In the first place number 11 is the fools’ number, and further, to be “the last one” is also a good sign, so I congratulate you from the bottom of my heart – I think it all a good omen for you. It is promising.

Well, I have many objections to various dogmas of yours too, but seeing that under the present circumstances the said mistress is my particular bête noire, I shall leave your dogmas alone. If only you could send the Lady Beauty and Sublimity packing, and fall in love with the other one, I think this would put quite different dogmas into your head and into your heart. And certain phenomena give me the impression that, however much you may be attached to my Lady Beauty and Sublimity, you will not be able to stand her company much longer. If only she does not petrify, and freeze, and immobilize you in this way, but I do not consider this very probable: you have too much good sense for that. Be careful – see to it that you keep warm (by way of a little precaution against her freezing influence) – take many walks (especially when you feel a certain petrification beginning); a warned man counts as two, so here is your warning.

Do not take this in bad part – if the phrase were not so academic, I should say: it is for your own good.

Enfin, keep going strong, I have yet another bête noire to pursue, but at the moment I won’t tell you which it is.

However, listen, I am going to tell you all the same. This other bête noire is “resignation under disappointments.” Another Pharisaical invention of an incredible Jesuitism. But it is theological, very theological. My dear fellow, never be resigned, and never get disappointed, this is the best advice I can give you; it is worth even more than the other advice namely to send that cold mistress of yours to the devil – the more so as the two advices are really one.

A handshake. Always believe me

Yours, Vincent

1. Vincent himself dated this letter 12/9/1881, but there is every reason to suppose that this was a slip of the pen, and that he meant 12/11. In the first letter of October 1st there is no question of the academy yet; Vincent is only inquiring after Rappard’s plans for the following winter. From the second letter of October 15th it appears that R. had informed Vincent of his intention to go to Brussels, and now there begins Vincent’s attack on the bête noire of the academy. In the third letter (of November 3: R. is already at Brussels) the attack is continued. Apparently R. was annoyed by this letter, and did not hasten to answer it then letter R 4 followed.
2. These and many other sentences in this letter were written in French, because Van Rappard was living in Brussels. For a better understanding of these letters from Etten, compare with letters 153 ff. to Theo.
3. The rather exaggerated German pronunciation of *le diable n’existe point*, “the devil does not exist at all.”
4. This sentence was written in English.