

Letter 317
The Hague, 22 or 23 August 1883

Dear Theo,

This morning I was at Van der Weele's and saw the studies he had brought from Gelderland. And my longing to go to Drenthe was not lessened by what I heard from him. As luck would have it, he knew of one of the villages I had in mind – the landscape there is beautiful and full of character.

I told him again that I was sorry I had not learned more about painting this year.

His answer was, "Oh, don't bother about that: in the first place, everybody has his own weak points – if he learns from somebody else, he often acquires his master's faults in addition to his own; go your own way quietly, without worrying about that." Well, at heart I think exactly the same, except that I should think myself too conceited if I was not always ready to learn something from others. But it may be considered a piece of good luck if one can hear or learn something from somebody else this way.

You will get a small proof of how infirm the woman's character is when I tell you that notwithstanding her recent positive promise not to go to see her mother again, she has been there after all. I told her that if she could not keep such a promise for even three days, how could she expect me to think her capable of keeping a promise of faith forever.

For I think this very mean of her, and must also suppose that she belongs more to those people than to me. Then she says that she is very sorry again, but – tomorrow she will do it again, that's what I am beginning to think, but she says – "Oh no." In this sense I am almost sorry that I take things seriously. When I made her promise, I said to her, "It is a kind of prostitution when you go there for three reasons: first, because you used to live with your mother, and she herself encouraged you to walk the street; second, because she lives in a slum, which you, more than anyone else, have reason to avoid; and finally, your brother's mistress lives in the same house."

She is worrying about many things, this I know; now and then she worries so much that one feels compassion for her – except that she might have trusted me completely – a long time ago, or rather from the very beginning – and she hasn't, although I told her she could from the first, and showed it, too. She preferred to listen to and believe people who told her that I should desert her, which – if it should come to that in the end – would be her family's fault, because she takes their view of things, at least more their fault than hers, for the family never stopped upsetting her with this talk.

However, it isn't absolutely impossible that when, for instance, she has been living in the country for some time, away from all that family, she will stay straight; but who can assure me that out there she won't say, "What a miserable hole, why did you bring me here?" She makes me afraid of such things, even when I try my utmost to avoid the extremity of leaving her.

What Zola says seems to me to be true: "Pourtant ces femmes-là ne sont point mauvaises, leurs erreurs et leurs chûtes ayant pour cause l'impossibilité d'une vie droite, dans les commérages, les médisances des faubourgs corrompus." You know what I mean, from L'Assommoir.

I know there is difference too, but there are also similarities between my attitude toward her and that passage in L'Assommoir where the blacksmith sees how Gervaise goes wrong but hasn't the slightest influence on her; because of her hypocrisy and her inability to see things clearly, she cannot make up her mind what course to choose.

I pity the woman more than ever, because I see she is more restless than ever. I think she has, for the moment, no better friend than me, who would help her with all my heart if she would let me. But she does not seek my confidence, and makes me absolutely powerless by trusting those who are really her enemies. I am amazed that she doesn't see that she acts wrongly – or doesn't want to see it, for that's what sometimes I think. The period when her faults made me angry is over, I went through it last year. Now when I see her falling into the same errors, I'm no longer astonished, and if I knew it would save her, I think I would put up with them. Because my opinion of her is such that "quand bien même" I do not think her bad, she has never seen what is good, how can she be good.

I mean she is not responsible, like somebody who understands the distinction between good and evil. That understanding only comes to her very vaguely and confusedly through intuition. I think if she knew what was right, she'd do it.

What you said – that you believe it would do her good to leave me – is a thing which I myself would think probable if she didn't go back to her people – in the first place – and secondly, if she didn't have to leave the only thing that keeps her relatively straight – her children. It is a case which I see no solution for. I don't know whether you understand my explanation, but it's like this – "au fond" she wants to stay with me and is attached to me, but she does not see how she estranges herself from me, and when I say something about it, she answers, "Yes, I know it quite well, you don't want me to stay with you."

Well, that's in her good moods, and the bad ones are even more exasperating. Then she says openly, "Yes, I am careless and lazy, and I have always been that way, and it can't be helped," or, "Yes, it's true I'm a whore, and the only end for me will be to drown myself."

When I think of that neglected character of hers, half or rather entirely spoiled – one might almost call it dragged through the gutter – then I say to myself: “After all she cannot be different than she is,” and I should think myself stupid and conceited if I condemned her in big solemn words. Perhaps you will better understand now than before, how I came to apply to her what Father Bienvenue in Victor Hugo’s *Misérables* used to say to ugly, even venomous insects, “Pauvre bête, ce n’est pas sa faute qu’elle est ainsi” [Poor beast, it isn’t its fault that it is like that], and you will understand that I am so anxious to save her that if, for instance, I could do so by marrying her, I would marry her even now. But would it save her? If once in Drenthe she kept nagging, “Why did you bring me here?” we should not have advanced much.

It is impossible to explain such a matter fully, any more than it is possible to understand it fully. But this much you will understand. She is an intensely unhappy creature, and because of her erratic temperament, little fitted for regular employment, whatever it may be. And for that matter, in Leyden they said she should not be allowed to do heavy work. And moreover, there is the fact that nursing the baby has been very exhausting because of the weakness of her constitution, which, as I see it, is another reason for putting up with a great deal of laxity on her part.

I am keeping this letter back for a few days. In the meantime father sent me a letter. My intention in writing Father the letter which you read at home was first to let Father know, and you too, that the reason I do not write much to the people at home is that it is the simplest thing to do as long as there are motives for avoiding mentioning things. But seeing that there was the question of my not being confiding enough, I wanted to show them that is not my intention to hide my motives, but to let people understand for themselves that it was better to be silent about many things. I doubt whether Father has inferred this from my letter. Well, never mind. He assumed it to be more of a complaint on my part, or a request for advice, which the letter certainly was not; it was simply intended to explain my motives in acting as I did, so that no doubt of my frankness could remain.

The thing I hope you will not object to, under the circumstances given – is the necessity of going on, and, after mature consideration, my intention of staying with her if she herself does not make it absolutely impossible – I repeat, the thing I hope you will not object to, is my immediate carrying out the plan of going to Drenthe. Whether the woman goes with me or not depends on herself – I know she is deliberating with her mother. I do not know what. I do not ask, either.

But if she wants to come with me, do let her. Leaving her would mean driving her back to prostitution – how could this be done by the same hand that tried to save her?

For my work and as an economy measure, Drenthe is the best thing we can do, in my opinion, and I think you will see it in the same way. So leaving her out of the question for the moment, we shall execute that plan if you approve of it. At the time of departure I shall say to the woman, “Will you come or stay?” If she comes with me, I think I shall have more influence on her there, and make her behave better.

Today I sent a number of studies to C. M.

I am very glad about your revised opinion about my work – your revised opinion tallies with Rappard’s – Van der Weele also thinks there is something in my work. Personally, I believe that in every painter’s life there is a period when he makes absurdities, and for myself, I think that period is already a long time behind me. Further, I think that I am making progress slowly but steadily, and that the better work I do later will cast a reflex on the work I am doing now, and will show more clearly that even now there is already some truth and simplicity in it, and as you yourself express it, a manly conception and perception.

So that if you now find something in a study, you will not have to retract that opinion, and later better work will never make you indifferent to the first.

Last year Weissenbruch already said something like that to me – go your own way quietly, and in your old age, you will look back on your first studies with satisfaction.

The main thing now is to paint a great deal. That, and again saturating myself in nature’s serenity on the heath, will bring us victory in the end – do not doubt it – and progress from month to month.

I’m very busy painting these days; I have several studies of the wood. Adieu, and write soon.

Yours sincerely, Vincent

It will be the same with the painted studies as it is with the drawings. Later, when I shall have made more progress, people will see that a certain figure, a certain bit of scenery, already bears a personal character.

Well, if things go well, I hope to send you some studies from Drenthe this autumn.