

Letter 333  
Drenthe, 13 October 1883

Dear brother,

My thoughts are always with you, no wonder that I write rather often.

Besides, my impressions have become more fixed, my thoughts are more collected, things adjust themselves, become more tangible. So I can write you about it in all calmness. In the first place, I don't see much probability of your remaining on good terms with Goupil's. It is such an enormous business that it certainly will take a long time before one cannot put up with things any longer, before the corruption has penetrated everywhere. But, look here – in my opinion there has already been a very long period of corruption, so I should not be at all astonished if it were far advanced.

Wisselingh waited – before he went. And it was in vain – his heart was entirely in his work – I believe he would much rather have stayed on – but it was impossible. I do not count Arnold and Trip; they were quite a different sort, with less inner life. But I am disposed to include Obach – he waited so long and went through so much strain that for a time he lost his reason.

But after all, it is not exactly about the condition of the business – about the negative side of things – that I want to speak; leaving all that aside, it is about one single positive matter that I have something to say.

A few things have happened to you which I don't think unimportant. You have read Zola's books in a different and better way than most people do – I consider them among the very best of the present time.

You once said to me, "I am like that man in Pot-Bouille"; I said, "No. If you were like that, you would do well to enter a new business; but you are deeper than he, and I do not know whether you are really a man of business; actually I see the artist in you at heart, the true artist."

You have undergone unsought, harrowing mental sufferings; now things are running their course. Why? Whither? To the renewed beginning of a similar career? My decided opinion is – no – there is something deeper than that. Change you must – but it must be a general renewal, not a repetition of the same thing. You were not wrong in the past, no, in the past you had to be as you were; that past was right. But does it follow that it was not simply a preparation, a basis, nothing but a schooling, and not a definite thing yet? Why shouldn't that follow? In my opinion it is exactly that.

I think things speak so much for themselves that it would be impossible for me to tell you anything that is not already quite evident, even to yourself. Besides, it strikes me as rather curious that there is a change in me of late.

That just now I find myself in surroundings which so entirely engross me, which so order, fix, regulate, renew, enlarge my thoughts, that I am quite wrapped up in them. And that I can write you, full of what those silent, desolate moors tell me. Just at this moment, I feel within me the beginning of a change for the better. It isn't there yet, but I see things in my work – which I didn't have a little while ago. Painting comes more easily to me. I am eager to try all kinds of things which I have left undone till now. I know that circumstances happen to be so unstable that it is far from certain I shall be able to remain here. Perhaps just because of your circumstances it might turn out differently. But I should be sorry for it, though I would take it quite calmly.

But I cannot help imagining the future, when I should no longer be alone, but you and I, painters, working together as comrades here in this moorland.

That idea presents itself to me in all its attractiveness, the thing ought to happen without the slightest fuss, without much disturbance like "une révolution qui est, puisqu'il faut qu'elle soit." [A revolution that is, because it must be.] That's all – so I only say that I should not be in the least astonished if, after some time, we were here together. I feel that it may happen, without making any more disturbance than a piece of peat rolling from one place to another. One moment, and it lies perfectly still again, and nobody takes the least notice of it.

But a human being has his roots, transplanting him is a painful thing, though the soil may be better in the place where he is transplanted.

But is that soil better??? What the Puritans were of old, such are the painters in the present society.

It is no foolish, artificial piety or bigotry; it is something simple and solid. I am speaking now more particularly of the Barbizon people, and that tendency to paint rural life. I see in you as a man something that is incompatible with Paris. I do not know how many years of Paris have passed over it – yes, part of your heart is rooted there – I admit it, but a something – a "je ne sais quoi" – is still untouched.

That's the artistic element. It seems to be weak now – but that new shoot will sprout and it will sprout quickly.

I am afraid the old trunk is split up too much, and I say, sprout in an entirely new direction, otherwise I am afraid the trunk will prove to lack the necessary vitality. So it seems to me – do you think differently? The more so because, if you became a painter, you would unintentionally have laid the foundation for it yourself, and for the first time you would have company, friendship, a certain footing. I also think it would cause an immediate change in my own work, for what I lack is companionship and encouragement in my work, a certain interchange of opinions with somebody who knows what a picture is. I have been quite without it so long that I think I need that stimulus.

I have so many plans that I hardly dare to undertake them alone – you would make out what they are, what they mean, soon enough. Though I wish it were not so, I am extremely sensitive about what is said of my work, about what impression I make personally. When I meet with distrust, when I am alone, I feel a certain void which cripples my initiative. Now you would be just the person to understand it – I don't want any flattery, or that people should say "I like it" if they do not; no, what I want is an intelligent sincerity, which is not vexed by failures. Which, if a thing has failed six times, would say just when I begin to lose courage, Now you must try again a seventh time. You see, that's the encouragement I need, and cannot do without. And I think you would understand it, and you would be an enormous help to me.

And it is something you would be able to do, especially if you were obliged to do the same yourself. We should help each other, for I, on my part, would be the same to you, and that is of some importance. Two persons must believe in each other, and feel that it can and must be done – that way they are enormously strong. They must keep each other's courage up. Well, I think you and I would understand each other.

I am not sure you could do it if you weren't a painter. The only obstacle is the doubt which people generally try to raise: Tersteeg, for instance, who is sceptical by nature, who doesn't know what it is to believe.

Millet, however, is the archetype of a believer. He often used the expression "foi de charbonnier," and that expression was already a very old one. One must not be a City man, but a Country man, however civilized one may be. I cannot express it exactly. There must be a "je ne sais quoi" in a man which keeps his mouth shut and makes him active – a certain aloofness even when he speaks – I repeat, an inner silence which leads to action. In that way one achieves great things – why? Because one has a certain feeling of let come what may. One works – what next? I do not know –

I am not hurrying you, I only want to say, Don't thwart nature. What I wish is not foolish, but I have a faint hope that one might begin it in a reasonable way, not absolutely without, but with only a very little money, just what is necessary for board and lodging. And I say now – not with the intention of causing an absolute calamity, but in case there is the slightest possibility: "Follow that little point, that very slight possibility, there lies the road – follow it – drop everything else. I do not mean drop all external relations – you must keep them if you can – but stick to your conviction in saying, I will become a painter; so that what Tom, Dick and Harry say is like water on a duck's back."

I don't think you would feel like a fish out of water then, but that it would be like a coming home to your fatherland, that you would feel a great serenity at once – that you would feel surer about becoming a painter than about a new situation, surer of yourself even than at Goupil's.

And, boy, there is something else – you are provided with a nervous system like other people's – from my own experience I must now warn you against something. Take care that your nerves do not play a dirty trick on you. You have gone through a period of terrible mental strain: in fact, you are right in the midst of it. You are not the man to break down – if such were the case, there would be no danger. If you should have to go through the shock of leaving Goupil & co., then calm down before you attempt anything new, boy, for if you don't, you will probably live to spoil your own constitution and energy, and your affairs too.

For a month now I have been breathing the air of the heath; I needed it absolutely – I have sat down by a peasant's fire with a cradle beside it. Now I speak calmly – I think calmly – It is excellent that you have written about it to me – go on confiding in me – go on trusting me a little bit more, or rather not me, but put your trust in the same thing I put my trust in, namely that one ought to risk leaving the world in order to look for "It" in a more quiet life with a handicraft. You should do this, not because I tell you to, but because you believe in it yourself. Well, in that case I need not tell you that you may trust me, seeing that you will understand that my endeavour is honest.

I cannot tell how things would go for me if you did not decide to become a painter. If there were a place for me in Paris, I should have to take it of course, and otherwise I should have to compromise with Father so that I could live at home and work in Brabant for a time. But oh, I can tell you that I do not think much about it now for the moment. I think only of my work, and about that plan for you. You are a man with a

will, and a good, intelligent, clear head, with an honest heart. I think you may safely become a painter if you can hold out for a while. And I repeat, it would decidedly be a stimulus for my work.

Today I have been walking behind the ploughers who were ploughing a potato field, with women trudging to pick up a few potatoes that were left.

This is quite a different field from the one I scratched for you yesterday, but it is curious here – always exactly the same, and yet with just enough variation, the same subjects, like the pictures of artists who work in the same genre and yet are different. Oh, it is so curious here, and so quiet, so peaceful. I can find no other word for it but peace. Say much about it, say little about it, it is all the same, it does not matter at all. It is a question of wanting an entirely new thing, of undertaking a kind of renovation of yourself, in all simplicity, with the fixed idea: *ça ira*.

I don't mean to say that you will have no cares – things don't run so smoothly – but you must feel, "I am doing what seems simplest to me – I am finished with all that is not simple; I don't want the city any longer, I want the country; I don't want an office, I want to paint." That's it. But it must be treated as a business matter, though it is deeper, aye, infinitely deeper; but every thought must be entirely concentrated on it.

In the future you must consider yourself and me painters. There may be worries, there may be obstacles, but always consider us so – see your own work before you. Look at a bit of nature and think, I will paint that. Give yourself up to the fixed idea: to become a painter.

All at once, people, even your best friends, become more or less like strangers. You are preoccupied with other things, exactly. All at once you feel, damn it, am I dreaming? I am on the wrong road – where is my studio, where is my brush? Thoughts like these are very deep; of course one says little or nothing about it, it would be a mistake to ask for advice about it, it wouldn't give you any light.

It means deciding not to go against it; on the contrary, one has the will and the courage to go through with it. I do not say one should expect the "quelque chose en Haut" to be precisely this, no, but after all the "Something on High" is there, at least Millet believed in it, and of course you have enough confidence in him not to think he was woolgathering when he knew it was there. You may well think of this – what I say is, life is serious; an honest decision may not remove the difficulties attached to its execution, but life is serious after all, and therefore one should take it seriously, and try to raise one's life to the height of something sound; and so in case there is the inevitable necessity of a change, then what is right should be of greater weight than what people say.

What was said about it in the past will not be noticed later on; it will be of no importance.

Now art dealers have certain prejudices, which I think you may not have shaken off yet, particularly the idea that painting is inborn – all right, inborn, but not the way it is supposed; one must put out one's hands and grasp it – that grasping is a difficult thing – one must not wait till it reveals itself. There is something, but not at all what people pretend. Practice makes perfect: one becomes a painter by painting. If one wants to become a painter, if one delights in it, if one feels what you feel, one can do it; but it is accompanied by troubles, cares, disappointments, times of melancholy, of helplessness and all that, that's what I think of it. I think it all such a nuisance that I just had to make a little scratch to forget it. Forgive me, I won't say anything more about it, it is not worth while.

But what I wanted to point out again is that in many respects this is the right moment, provided bread can be procured, nature being so extraordinarily interesting that you would set to work eagerly – there would be no bungling, but a direct attack on things, as direct and refreshing a struggle as can be.

We should have to show the world so much courage, so much energy, so much serenity, not taking things too ponderously, you know; in spite of serious cares, we should have to be gay, like those Swedes whom you mentioned, like the masters of Barbizon. We should have to take things literally, energetically, thoroughly – not doubting, dreaming or hesitating. That is a plan I should like, I could not care so much for any other plan. Therefore I do not doubt for a moment that you would be of the same opinion, and that if it should come to that, it should be undertaken with all possible coolness. And the reason why I write about it is that I want to show you that I am of the same opinion. Personally, I believe in you as a painter, as an artist, and I respect you as such.

I know than in the beginning, at least, I was as little capable of making a thing, but now I no longer doubt that practice will improve my work; I may be a good comrade if you should get bogged down in the beginning just because I have seen this absolute clumsiness in myself.

I should not be at all surprised at this, and I should be able to help you in those things which took me a long time to master because then I was alone.

Of course I don't know exactly how things are, but that does not matter in the least; it would be something so new that the attendant circumstances would be of relatively little importance.

What I say is this, In all probability you will be obliged to make a change, therefore I think it would be excellent if you were to make a thorough change of it – taking the bull by the horns. The bull called fatality, which would make us all miserable and melancholy if he were to get the upper hand; from which we shall not be delivered without a struggle. Whatever you want – peace – order – a handicraft – art – all right – get out of this art-dealing gamble – become a painter. This might be foolhardy if Goupil & Co. were now what Goupil & Co. was in the past. Now it is too much of a gamble – I am not at all curious to know how this will turn out and where it will end, no more than you are actually, I think.

And now another thing – yes, if it must be, if it should be utterly impossible to ensure us a period of quiet working here...If you should be forced to attack the other thing, have it your own way; then I shall submit and resign myself to whatever circumstances result from it for me, either by going to Paris or perhaps by going home for a time, until things look up a bit. If it must be, I hope I shall be able to accept one or the other reasonably.

I only said a few things about a project in which I feel at home; I do not feel at home with the things I say about the other possibility.

It's a great risk, but neither you nor I are afraid to venture something. Just think it over, and at all events, write soon. Goodbye, boy, with a handshake in thought,

Yours sincerely, Vincent

What you ought to do?

Mais toi tu te tairas,

Tel que l'on voit se taire un coq sur la bruyère.

[But you will be silent,

Just as one sees a cock being silent on the heather.]

You cannot act more coolly than that.