

Dear Brother,

Perhaps you were rather astonished when I told you briefly that I intended to go home for a while, and that I should write you from here. But first I have to thank you for your letter of December 1, which I just now received here at Nuenen.

For the last three weeks already I have not felt quite well – all kinds of little troubles arising from having caught a cold, and also from nervousness.

One must try to conquer such a thing, and I felt it would get worse if I did not get a change.

So for several reasons I made up my mind to go home for a while. A thing which, however, I was very loath to do. My journey began with a good six-hour walk across the heath – to Hooegeveen. On a stormy afternoon in rain and snow.

That walk cheered me greatly, or rather my feelings were so in sympathy with nature that it calmed me more than anything. I thought that perhaps my going back home might give me a clearer insight into questions of how to act. Drenthe is splendid, but one's being able to stay there depends on many things, depends on whether one is able to stand the loneliness. I believe Father would consider that question settled by a conclusion drawn from an ordinary conversation, but for my part I am in no hurry to decide it, and, for instance, I want to see what I think of it after having been here about a week or so. But for the present I am quite in the dark as to how to act in that respect.

One by no means arrives at a satisfactory conclusion by thinking or speaking about the question, that's what I see more and more. At one moment it seems more possible than at another.

And I for my part do not drop problems suddenly, but keep turning them over in my mind, sometimes long after other people consider them settled. But, boy, it is so difficult for me, it becomes so much a matter of conscience that I should be too great a burden to you, that I should perhaps abuse your friendship when I accept money for an enterprise which perhaps will not pay.

You write again about Moniteur Universel.

Do you think my opinion too pessimistic when I declare it possible that within relatively few years a number of great art enterprises, like the Moniteur Universel for instance – and others still more overexpanded – will dwindle down – will fall into decadence as quickly as they came up? All art business that remained in touch with real art began to flourish within a relatively few years. But it became too much a money speculation, and is so even now – I do not say quite – I simply say too much so; and being a speculation, why shouldn't it go, as with the bulb trade? You will say that a picture is no tulip. Of course there is the widest difference, and of course I who love pictures, and tulips not at all, am perfectly well aware of this.

But I am sure that many rich people who buy expensive pictures, for some reason or other, do not do so because of the art value they find in them – the difference which you and I see between a tulip and a picture is invisible to such people. They, the speculators and “pochards blasés” and many others, would buy tulips now just as before – if only it were fashionable.

There are real, serious connoisseurs, yes, but it is perhaps only a tenth of all the business that is transacted, perhaps even a much smaller part of it, of which it can be said that it was really done for the love of art. Of course I could go on enlarging on this theme forever, but without insisting on it further, I think you will agree with me that in the art-dealing business there is much that in the future might prove to be empty air.

The price of pictures, now raised enormously, may go down. If you ask me, Can Millet and Corot go down? I say, In price, Yes.

From an artistic point of view of course, Millet is Millet, Corot, Corot, fixed like the sun itself – in my opinion at least.

Five years ago I thought differently, I thought that, for instance, Millet would remain stable even in price; but since then – just because I see how generally Millet is completely misunderstood since he has become less obscure and more widely reproduced, for instance, than when he was ignored – I have feared he will never be appreciated by the public at large, and – it is not sure that those who understand him best will have to pay so much money for his pictures later on as they must now. Rembrandt's work also went down in price during the periwig-and-pigtail period. I should like to ask you frankly, Do you believe that the present prices will hold? I tell you frankly, I do not think so. But at the same time, for me Millet is Millet, Rembrandt is Rembrandt, Israëls is Israëls, etc., whether their pictures cost twopence or a hundred thousand guilders. Consequently, I do not give much thought to the art-dealing business. I do so only when I think of you, and when I want to ask you if you really can like it, if you will not see, especially later on, many things that are too distasteful for you to stand. You will say, “One gets used to everything”; or rather

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you will say, "We must live on until our hearts break within us." Maybe so, I agree with you in this – but if our hearts needs must break within us, we are still free to act in one way or another. And as to you or me, we are what we are, and as we have enthusiasm for art within us, we should, each in his own way, stick to our opinion about Millet, for instance, even if the most absurd things happened.

But I ask you, In case of a gradual decline in the enormous prices for pictures, how can the great houses make up for it, which yearly spend formidable sums on advances, etc., which have to be deducted from their profit – they will soon have to be contented with great deficits. Such trees do not fall at the first stroke, but they can molder away inside and fall at last, without one stroke of the axe, only by the wind; when? I have no idea of the exact date. just write me on this question in general, for instance, what you think of the stability – in the long run – of an establishment such as you say Moniteur Universel is – or Petit – or Arnold & Tripp. I tell you frankly, I do not see how they can keep it up in the long run. I think such things must collapse.

I think it must be rather uncomfortable to assist at such a thing – I prefer to sit and paint by a peat fire.

Then one feels only a certain "qu'est ce que ca me fait" [what do I care] for the whole art-dealing business – except – except – that I personally think it very unpleasant to be too short of money.

You always remained your own calm self in Paris, very simple, and certainly cooler than a man like Tripp, for instance.

You care to see things only as they are; you, as well as I, cannot help analyzing. And yet even you do not use your knowledge of a situation primarily to profit by it in spite of difficulties.

I mean, fishing in troubled water is not in your character.

But I ask you frankly, how is it? do you really believe Moniteur Universel will ask anything else of its employees than G. & Co. does? Moniteur, G. & Co., Tripp, Petit – they are all alike to me. I myself believe that having been thrown out of one, I should be thrown out of all. If old Mr. Goupil says, You are not the man for us, I believe other managers would think the same.

Now as for you, I think what is happening to you at Goupil's would happen to you in any other firm – and setting up in business for oneself at a time when a cooling off and decline in the market is to be expected is something which in my opinion one would not undertake enthusiastically.

Do you have confidence in the present times, do you believe trade will remain at this high pitch?

If you believed it, I should respect your opinion and hold my tongue, but I do not know if you are aware that I do not exactly believe that the very big business will prove reliable.

Do write me about this, then it will be so much easier for me to speak about it. I feel a little embarrassed with you just now, and I want you to know my possibly nervous opinion that, in the first place, I do not believe those inflated affairs will last, and in the second place, though they might last, I should not like to take part in them either directly or indirectly.

Another question is, If I can provide for myself by doing anything here or there, I will not look such a gift horse in the mouth.

If it proves to be my duty to do something or other, very well, I will not refuse the work, even unpleasant work.

I thought of you, brother, during that long walk across the heath, in the evening, in the storm. I thought of a passage, I don't know from what book: "Deux yeux éclaircies par de vraies larmes veillaient;" [two eyes were awake, brightened by genuine tears]. I thought, I am disillusioned. I thought, I have believed in many things which I now know are really sorry fallacies – I thought, Those eyes of mine, here on this gloomy evening, wide awake in this deserted region – if they have been full of tears at times, why shouldn't these have been wrung from me by a sorrow that disenchant – yes – and disturbs illusions – but at the same time – makes one wide awake.

I thought, It's impossible that Theo is satisfied with many things that worry me?

Is it possible that it is only my own melancholy when I cannot enjoy some things as I used to do?

In short, I thought, Is it possible that I take gold for tinsel? Do I call withered a thing that is in full bloom? I could not find an answer, can you? Are you sure that there isn't a far-advanced, inexorable decadence everywhere? Give me courage, if you have courage yourself, but I ask you in my turn, "Do not flatter me."

As to myself, I declare I believe that even if I became very clever (which I am not as yet) I believe – firmly believe – that I shall always be very poor, that it will be more than I expect if I succeed in keeping out of debt.

Those who are the coming men in Holland now, the mastodons, Mesdag, Israëls, Blommers, Maris, and so on, will under no circumstances earn more than was earned in the past, namely during the past twenty years, for instance.

Not even in the case of cleverness – especially not then. One of the drawbacks of a period like the one which is approaching is that a time in which the prices are run up so high can be said to put a lien on the future, which makes the future dark for posterity.

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You who are as clever as Uncle Vincent, for instance, will not be able to do what Uncle Vincent did. Why not? – because there are too many Arnolds and Tripps in the world. Insatiable money-wolves, compared to whom you are but a sheep. Please do not take my making this comparison as an insult, brother, it is better to be a sheep than a wolf, better to be slain than to slay – better to be Abel than Cain. And, and – I hope, or rather I am sure, that I am not a wolf either.

Suppose that it's not just in our imagination, but that you and I are really like sheep among our fellow creatures. All right – granting the existence of rather hungry and false wolves, it would not be impossible that we should be devoured someday. Well, this may not be so very pleasant, but I tell myself: It is, after all, better to be ruined than to do the ruining. I mean, there is no reason to lose one's serenity if one should realize that one might have to lead a life of poverty, even if one possesses all the qualities, the knowledge, the capacities, which make other people rich. I am not indifferent to money, but I do not understand the wolves. Well, with a warm handshake,
Yours sincerely, Vincent

If you like, give me an answer to some of these questions while I am here at home; I am here to get some rest and to arrive at some decision.