

Dear Theo,

Thanks for your letter – Mother is doing well – at first the doctor said it would take half a year for the leg to heal – now he speaks of a good 3 months – and he told Mother, “But we have your daughter to thank for that, for I have rarely, very rarely, come across care as good as she gives.” What Wil does is exemplary, exemplary, I shan’t easily forget it.

Almost everything fell on her shoulders from the beginning and she has spared Mother a great deal of misery. To give just one example, it is undoubtedly thanks to her that Mother has so few bedsores (which had been absolutely dreadful in the beginning and in quite an advanced condition). And I assure you that the chores she has to do are not always pleasant.

Now look, when I read your letter about the drawings I immediately sent you a new watercolour of a weaver and five pen drawings. I must also tell you frankly that for my part I’m sure you’re right to say that my work must improve a great deal, but at the same time I also think that your efforts to do something with it could become a bit more determined. You have never yet sold a single thing I have done – whether for a lot or a little – in fact, you haven’t even tried.

Look, I’m not angry about it, but we need to speak our minds now for once. I could certainly not put up with it in the long run. You, for your part, can also continue to speak frankly.

As far as saleability or unsaleability is concerned, that’s a dead horse I don’t intend to go on flogging. Anyway, as you can see, my answer is to send you some new ones – and I shall be very happy to go on doing so – I should like nothing better. Only be unsparing for once with your candour – which is what I much prefer – about whether you intend to bother with them or whether your dignity will not allow you. Leaving the past aside, I have to face the future, and regardless of what you think about them I shall definitely try to do something with them.

The other day you told me yourself that you are a dealer – all right – one does not indulge in sentimentality with a dealer, one says, “Sir, if I give you some drawings on commission, may I then count on your showing them?” The dealer must know for himself whether his answer will be yes, no, or something in between. But the painter would be mad to send them on commission if he could tell that the dealer looked on his work as something that ought not to see the light of day.

Well, my dear fellow, we both live in the real world, and precisely because we do not want to put a spoke in each other’s wheel we must speak candidly. If you say, “I can’t be bothered with them” – all right, I won’t be angry, but I’m not obliged to take you for an infallible oracle either, am I? You say the public will take offense at this little smudge or that, etc., etc. Now listen, that may well be true, but you, the dealer, are even more upset by that sort of thing than the public in question, as I have observed so often, and you set out with that idea.

I, too, must make my way somehow or other, Theo, and with you I am still in precisely – precisely – the same position I was a few years ago. What you say about my current work – “it is almost saleable, but – ” is literally the same thing you wrote to me when I sent you my first Brabant sketches from Etten.

That’s why I tell you – it’s a dead horse. And I have to conclude that you’ll go on saying the same thing for ever – and that I, who have been consistently chary of going to the dealers up to now, am going to have to change my tactics and try my very best to get my work sold.

It’s become very clear to me by this time that you couldn’t care less about my doings, but while you couldn’t care less, I cannot help thinking it is rather wretched of you, and I dread certain things that are bound to occur – namely that people will say, how strange, don’t you do any business with your brother or with Goupil? Well, what I’ll say then, is – it is beneath the dignity of Ces Messieurs G. & Co., Van Gogh & Co. That may well give them a bad impression of me – for which I am quite prepared by now – but I also foresee that I shall grow cooler and cooler towards you.

I have now painted the little old church, and another weaver. Are those studies from Drenthe as bad as all that? I don’t feel disposed to send you the painted studies I have done here, no, we won’t start with them – you can see them if you come here in the spring.

What you write about Marie is quite understandable – if a woman isn’t all milk-and-water, I can well imagine her not showing much enthusiasm for moping about in the company of cantankerous fathers as well as spiritual sisters. In any event, a woman no less than a man would feel sorely tempted to end the stagnation quand même [at all costs] – stagnation which may start out as splendid resignation, but which, alas, one will generally be made to regret as soon as one feels one is going freeze solid in the end. Once I read a passage by Daudet about spiritual women. “Ces deux visages se regardèrent – elles échangèrent un regard méchant froid fermé – qu’a-t-il? Toujours la même chose – elle.” [Those two faces looked at each other – they exchanged a spiteful, cold, secretive glance – what’s the matter

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with her? Always the same thing – she is.] There you have it, that singular look of Pharisees and devout ladies. Yes, and as for us, too, is – la même chose.

So, what am I to make of what you say about my work – say, the studies from Drenthe. Some of them are very superficial, and I said as much myself. But why do I get chided for those painted out of doors, quietly, calmly and simply, in which I was trying to express nothing but what I saw? What I get is: aren't you too obsessed with Michel?

(I am referring here to the study of the cottage in the twilight [F 1097, JH 418], and to the largest of the sod huts, namely the one with the small green field in the foreground.) [F 022, JH 421]

You would no doubt say exactly the same thing about the old churchyard. And yet, faced neither by the churchyard nor by the sod huts did I think or Michel, I was thinking of the subject I had before me. A subject that I believe would indeed have stopped Michel short, and touched him, had he passed by.

As far as I am concerned, in no way do I put myself on a par with Master Michel – and I most certainly do not imitate Michel either.

Well, perhaps I shall try to sell something in Antwerp, and I'm going to put a few of those very same Drenthe studies in a black wooden frame – I'm approaching a carpenter here about it – I prefer to see my work in a deep black frame, and he makes them cheaply enough.

Don't take offense at my mentioning it, brother. I am trying to put something quiet and calm into my work. You see, I approve just as little of it lying about unseen as I would of seeing it displayed in fluted frames in the leading galleries.

Now is the time to start taking that middle course, in my view, so I must know fairly definitely how I stand with you, or rather, I must tell you again that, although you are still evading the question, I'm sure that you are not, in fact, going to show the work, and I don't think you'll be changing your mind for the time being either. I won't enter into whether or not you are right about this.

You will tell me that other dealers will treat me in just the same way, except that you, although you cannot be bothered yourself with my work, nevertheless provide me with money, and other dealers will certainly not do that, and that without money I shall be completely stuck. I shall reply that things are not as cut and dried as that in real life, and that I shall try to get by, living from day to day.

I told you beforehand that I wanted to settle matters this month, and so I must. Anyway, seeing that you may already be planning to come here in the spring, I am not going to insist that you make a final decision immediately, but I must tell you that as far as I am concerned, I cannot leave matters as they are. Everywhere I go, and especially at home, a constant watch is being kept on what I do with my work, whether I get anything for it, etc. In our society virtually everybody looks out all the time for that sort of thing, trying to find out everything about it. And that is quite understandable. But being permanently in a false position is a wretched business for me. Allons – things cannot be allowed to remain as they are. Why not? Because they can't, that's why.

Seeing that I am as cool as can be towards Father, towards C. M. – why should I act any differently towards you, once I've noticed that you use the same tactics of never speaking your mind? Do I consider myself better than Father or you? Most probably not, most probably I distinguish less and less between good and bad – but I do know that this tactic does not behove a painter, and as a painter one should speak one's mind and cut some Gordian knots. Well, I believe qu'une porte doit être ouverte ou fermée [that a door must be either open or closed].

Anyway, I'm sure you do understand that a dealer cannot be neutral toward painters – that it makes absolutely no difference whether you say no with or without beating about the bush, and that it's probably even more annoying when you dress it all up in compliments.

This may be something you'll understand better later on than you do at the moment. I pity dealers when they grow old – though they may feather their own nest, that isn't any cure-all, at least it won't be by then. Tout se paye [everything has its price], and things can often turn out to be an icy-cold wasteland then.

But you may perhaps have different ideas about this. You may point out that it's a bit sad as well when a painter dies miserably in a hospital and is buried alongside the whores in the fosse commune [common grave], where many lie, after all – especially when one bears in mind that dying is perhaps not as difficult as living.

Anyway, a dealer cannot be blamed for not always having the money to help out, but in my opinion a certain worthy dealer can indeed be blamed if he's all kind words but is ashamed of me in his heart and ignores my work altogether. So, frankly, I shall not blame you for telling me candidly that you don't think my work is good enough, or perhaps that there are other reasons why you cannot be bothered with it, but if you put it away in a dark corner somewhere and do not show it, it isn't kind to couple that with the assurance – which is not accepted – that you yourself see something in it.

I don't believe it – you mean hardly one word of it. And from the very fact that you yourself say that you know my work better than anyone else, I am entitled to conclude that you must have a very poor opinion of it indeed if you

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won't soil your hands with it. Why should I force myself upon you? Well, regards,  
Ever yours, Vincent

Apart from a few years which I can scarcely comprehend myself, when I was confused by religious ideas, by some kind of mysticism – that period aside, I have always lived with a certain warmth. Now everything is getting grimmer and colder and more dreary around me. And when I tell you that in the first place I will not stand it, quite apart from the question of whether or not I can, I am referring to what I told you at the very beginning of our relationship. What I have had against you this past year is a kind of relapse into cold respectability which seems to me sterile and futile – the diametrical opposite of everything that is active, and of everything that is artistic in particular.

I am putting this to you bluntly, not in order to make you miserable, but so that you can see, and if possible feel, what has gone wrong, why I can no longer think of you as a brother and a friend with the same pleasure as before. There needs to be more gusto in my life if I am to get more brio into my brush – exercising patience will not get me a hair's breadth further. If you, for your part, do relapse into the above-mentioned state, don't blame me for not being the same towards you as I was during, say, the first year.

As to my drawings – at this moment it seems to me that the watercolours, the pen-and-ink drawings of weavers, the latest pen-and-ink drawings on which I am working now, are not on the whole so boring as to be utterly worthless. But if I should come to the conclusion myself that they are no good and Theo is right not to show them to anybody – then, then, it will be one proof more to me that I am right to object to our present false position, and I shall try all the harder to make a change quand même, for better or for worse, just as long as things don't remain the same...

Now supposing I realized that you, in the belief that I had not yet made enough progress, were trying to do something to further that progress – for instance, Mauve having fallen by the wayside, to put me in touch with some other able painter – or, anyway, something, some sign or bother that would prove to me that you really believed in my progress or had it to heart. But instead there is – the money, yes – but for the rest nothing but “just carry on working,” “have patience,” as cold, as dead, as arid and as insufferable as if Father, for instance, had said it. I cannot live on that, it is getting too lonely, too cold, too empty and too dull for me.

I am no better than the next man, inasmuch as I have my needs and desires as everybody else, and it is perfectly natural to kick when one knows for certain that one is being kept dangling, being kept in the dark. If one goes from bad to worse – which is not impossible in my case – what difference does that make? If one is badly off, one simply must take the chance to better one's lot.

Brother, let me remind you once more how things stood with us when we first worked together. I even felt free to draw your attention to the problem of women. I still remember taking you to Roosendaal station that first year and telling you then that I was so set against being alone that I would sooner be with a bad whore than be alone. You may perhaps remember that.

At first the idea that our relationship might not last was all but intolerable to me. And I would have been tremendously pleased if it had been a simple matter to change things. But I cannot keep flying in the face of the evidence and fooling myself that it is. The resulting depression was one of the causes for my writing from Drenthe and urging you so strongly to become a painter. And it subsided the moment I saw that your dissatisfaction with business had disappeared, that you were once again on a better footing with Goupil. At first I thought less than sincere of you – then later, and even now, I find it entirely understandable and consider it more a mistake on my part to have written, “become a painter,” than a mistake on your part to have resumed your business with gusto once things had become more acceptable and the machinations to make things impossible for you had ended.

It remains a fact, however, that I do feel depressed about the falseness of the position between us. At the moment it is of greater importance to me to sell for 5 guilders than to receive 10 guilders by way of patronage.

Now you have repeatedly written, very firmly, that neither in the first place as a dealer (I shall leave it at that for the moment and do not at any rate hold it against you), nor in the second place in your private capacity (which I do hold against you a little), have you taken, are you taking, or do you think you will be able to take for some time to come, the very slightest, smallest possible, step to further my work.

I mustn't be supine or spineless about this, so, to be blunt: if you do nothing with my work, I do not want your patronage. I state the reason plainly, the more so as I can hardly avoid giving you some explanation for it. So it is not that I am overlooking the help you have given me since the beginning or wish to belittle it. The fact is that I see more good in the most miserable, most wretched drudgery than in patronage, into which matters are degenerating. In the very, very beginning one cannot do without it, but for heaven's sake, it is time for me to try and muddle along, God knows how, rather than acquiesce in something that, after all, will get us no further.

Whether brotherly or otherwise, if you can do absolutely nothing except give financial assistance, you might as well keep that to yourself too. As matters are now, and have been during the past year, they have, if I may say so, been

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exclusively confined to money. And although you say you leave me completely free, it seems to me that ultimately, for example, if I keep company with a woman of whom you and others do not approve, perhaps rightly, though sometimes I don't give a damn about that, there is a small tug at the purse strings to make me feel that it is "in my own interests" to defer to your opinion.

When it came to that business with the woman, you also had your way, and it came to an end, but...I'm damned if I'll practice morality in order to get a little bit of money. Yet in itself I do not think it was absurd of you to disapprove when I wanted to go through with it last summer. But I can foresee the following in the future: I shall again have a relationship with someone from what you people call the lower orders – and, should I still have a relationship with you, meet with the same opposition. Opposition from all of you that might have some semblance of justification if I were given enough money to live differently. Which is what you do not, cannot or will not give, après tout – neither you nor Father nor C. M. nor any of the others who are in the forefront when it comes to disapproving of this or that, and which I don't want from you, après tout, seeing that I do not give a great deal of thought to the question of lower or upper orders.

Do you see why I wasn't being foolhardy, and wouldn't be if I tried the same thing again? Firstly, because I have no pretensions, do not feel the slightest urge to maintain any sort of position in society or whatever you call it, and secondly because, as I do not receive the necessary means from anyone, nor do I earn them, I consider myself absolutely free to consort with the so-called lower orders if the opportunity should arise.

We should be perpetually coming back to the same problem. Now, just ask yourself if I am alone among those in my trade who most decidedly refuse the kind of patronage that entails being obliged to keep up some sort of position while the money is below the requisite level, so that they incur debts instead of making progress. Could it be done on the money, I might perhaps knuckle under like so many others. But we have certainly not reached that point yet – as you said yourself, I still have a good many years to get through during which my work will have precious little commercial value. All right – then I would rather end up having to eke out a living and manger de la vache enragée [go through hard times] than fall into the hands of Messrs. Van Gogh.

My only regret about quarrelling with Father at the time is that I didn't do it 10 years earlier. If you continue to follow in the footsteps of Father, etc., you will find yourself gradually getting bored – and becoming a bore to certain people. But those are "mauvais coucheurs" [awkward customers] you will say, people who carry no weight. Just think it over, my dear fellow – I do not hide my innermost thoughts from you – I weigh the pros and cons on both sides. A wife you cannot give me, a child you cannot give me, work you cannot give me.

Money, yes – but what good is it to me? If I have to forgo the rest, your money remains sterile, because it is not used in the way I have always told you it should be – a working man's household if needs be, but if one doesn't make sure of having a home of one's own, then art cannot flourish.

And as for me – I told you plainly enough, to be sure, in my younger days: if I cannot get a good woman, I shall take a bad one, better a bad one than none at all. I know enough people who profess the exact opposite and who are as frightened of "children" as I am of "no children."

And as for me – just because something often goes wrong – I do not give a principle up lightly. And the reason why I have few fears for the future is because I know how and why I have acted in the past. And because I know that there are others who feel the way I do.

You say that you are suspicious – but why, of what, and what good will it do you or me? Do you grow wiser by being suspicious? I hope you realize the contrary is true – but again, it is loyal of you to admit that you are suspicious – and that is why I reply, something that would otherwise have been beneath me. And my reply is very short: I mean neither you, nor Father nor anyone else any harm, but I am very seriously thinking of deciding to part company with you and of seeking a new relationship, precisely with a view to preventing further harm. Sooner or later we would clash as Father and I have clashed and then I could not allow myself to yield. Voilà tout [that's all], on the one hand my duty commands me to love my father and my brother – which I do – but we are living in an age of renewal and reform and many things have become completely outmoded, and consequently I see, I feel, I believe differently from Father, differently from you. And because I try to distinguish between the good as an abstract ideal and my own imperfect self, I do not come out with big words, but simply say, the way to stay good friends is – to part company. It is a hard thing for me to say, but I am reconciled to it.

You will probably gather that though I may be unclear about the future, I am not afraid. And am even in a very tranquil frame of mind. And yet, there is a great deal going on inside me, in part from a keen sense of obligation, which is sure to persist – and on the other hand from a feeling of disappointment, seeing that the reasons why my career must be broken off as it began, namely with your help and support, strike me as being utterly absurd.

Still, it would be wrong to carry on, since – if we did – we should most probably have a violent quarrel in a few years' time, and it might end in hatred. Now I still have time to look around – and if I should be forced to do battle

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elsewhere, then at least it will not be with my brother. And – isn't that looking at things coolly and weighing up the pros and cons?

I shan't be depressed as a result, believe me, but neither am I being reckless. I have found peace of mind now that I have resolved on a separation, because I am convinced that if we went on as before, we should later become of a hindrance to each other rather than a help.

Rappard said, don't go to Antwerp before you are sure of finding something there – but how can one tell in advance what one may come across? And if I keep my studio here as a refuge, then now is the time to make a start. It will always be there, so it is certainly not my immediate intention to turn my back on these parts completely.

You probably realize, Theo, that on my long walks I have thought things over at length and often. I do not want to get embroiled in a second series of quarrels, of the kind I had with Father I, with Father II – Father II being yourself. One is enough. That phrase is planted fair and square at the center of my thoughts – draw your own conclusions.

What's more, let me also tell you that I never behaved towards Father, nor do I want to be aggressive towards you, my brother. I have often restrained myself – when with strangers I would have fought quite differently and more fiercely.

But this is just what ties my hands in the circumstances. There is a new field over there for me and one where I can do as I please, as a stranger among strangers – over there, I shall have neither rights nor duties. And I shall be able to be more offhand – *bonne volonté d'être inoffensif, certitude de résister* [willingness not to cause offense, confidence to stand firm], that is my goal and I am in search of it with all there is in me.

But taking everything lying down has to be paid for later – so – one has to act. Working here and looking for new contacts is the way forward. Unfortunately money is needed for both and the prospects for making a breakthrough are poor. And – time is money, too – and by carrying on as I am now I shall not get any richer.

But now you know my motives – if I should go on, you would become Father II in my life, and although I know that you mean well – you don't understand me at all, and so no headway can be made.