

My dear little sister,

Thank you very much for your letter, but for my part I hate writing these days. Still, there are some questions in your letter which I should like to answer.

To begin with, I must disagree with you when you say you thought Theo looked “so wretched” this summer.

Personally, I think that on the contrary Theo’s appearance has become a great deal more distinguished during the past year. One has to be strong to stand life in Paris for as many years as he has done.

But might it have been that Theo’s family and friends in Amsterdam and The Hague didn’t treat him, or even receive him, with the cordiality he deserved from them and was entitled to expect? On that score, I can tell you that he may have felt hurt but is otherwise not at all bothered; after all, he is doing business even in these particularly bad times for the picture trade, so may it not be that his Dutch friends were somewhat affected by *jalousie de métier*? [Professional jealousy]

Now, what shall I say about your little piece on the plants and the rain? You can see yourself that in nature many flowers are trampled underfoot, frozen or scorched, and for that matter not every grain of corn returns to the soil after ripening to germinate and grow into a blade of corn – indeed, that by far the greatest number of grains of corn do not develop fully but end up at the mill – isn’t this so? To compare human beings with grains of corn, now – in every human being who is healthy and natural there is a germinating force, just as there is in a grain of corn. And so natural life is germination. What the germinating force is to the grain, love is to us.

Now we tend to stand about pulling a long face and at a loss for words, I think, when, thwarted in our natural development, we find that germination has been foiled and we ourselves placed in circumstances as hopeless as they must be for a grain between the millstones.

When that happens to us and we are utterly bewildered by the loss of our natural life, there are some amongst us who, though ready to submit to the inevitable, are yet unwilling to relinquish their self-confidence, and determine to discover what is the matter with them and what is really happening.

And if, full of good intentions, we search in the books of which it is said that they illuminate the darkness, with the best will in the world we find precious little that is certain, and not always the satisfaction of personal consolation. And the diseases from which we civilized people suffer most are melancholy and pessimism. So I, for instance, who can count so many years of my life during which I lost any inclination to laugh – leaving aside whether or not this was my own fault – I, for one, feel the need for a really good laugh above all else. I’ve found it in Guy de Maupassant, and there are others – Rabelais among the older writers, Henri Rochefort among the present-day ones – who provide it as well – and Voltaire in Candide.

If, on the other hand, one wants the truth, life as it is, then there are, for instance, de Goncourt in *Germinie Lacerteux*, La Fille Eliza, Zola in *La Joie de Vivre* and *L’assommoire*, and so many other masterpieces, all portraying life as we feel it themselves, thus satisfying our need for being told the truth.

The work of the French naturalists, Zola, Flaubert, Guy de Maupassant, de Goncourt, Richepin, Daudet, Huysmans, is magnificent, and one can scarcely be said to belong to one’s time if one is not acquainted with them.

Maupassant’s masterpiece is *Bel Ami*. I hope to be able to get it for you.

Is the Bible enough for us? These days I think Jesus himself would say again to those who sit down in melancholy, “It is not here, it is risen. Why seek ye the living among the dead?” If the spoken or written word is to remain the light of the world, then we have the right and duty to acknowledge that we live in an age when it should be spoken and written in such a way that, if it is to be just as great and just as good and just as original and just as potent as ever to transform the whole of society, then its effect must be comparable to that of the revolution wrought by the old Kristians.¹

I, for my part, am always glad that I have read the Bible more carefully than many people do nowadays, just because it gives me some peace of mind to know that there used to be such lofty ideals.

But precisely because I find the old beautiful, I find the news beautiful à plus forte raison because we are able to take action in our own time while the past and the future concern us only indirectly.

My own adventures are confined chiefly to making swift progress toward growing into a little old man – you know, with wrinkles, a tough beard and a number of false teeth, and so on. But what does all that matter? I have a dirty and difficult trade – painting, and if I were not as I am, I should not paint; but being as I am, I often work with pleasure and can visualize the vague possibility of one day doing paintings with some youth and freshness in them, even though my own youth is one of the things I have lost.

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If I didn't have Theo, I should not be able to do justice to my work, but having him for a friend, I'm sure I shall make progress and things will fall into place. As soon as possible I plan to spend some time in the south, where there is even more colour and even more sun.

But what I really hope to do is to paint a good portrait. So there.

To get back to your little piece of literature, I have qualms about adopting for my own use, or about advising others to do so for theirs, the belief that there are powers above us that interfere personally in order to help or console us. Providence is such a strange thing, and I must confess that I haven't the slightest idea what to make of it. And well, there is still a degree of sentimentality in your little piece, and its form is reminiscent above all of tales about the above-mentioned providence, or let's say the providence in question. Tales that so often don't hold water, and to which a great many objections might be made.

And above all I find it alarming that you believe you must study in order to write. No, my dear little sister, learn how to dance, or fall in love with one or more of the notary's clerks, officers, in short, any who are within your reach – rather, much rather commit any number of follies than study in Holland. It serves absolutely no other purpose than to make people slow-witted, and I won't hear of it.

For my part, I still continue to have the most impossible and highly unsuitable love affairs, from which as a rule I come away with little more than shame and disgrace. And in my own opinion I am absolutely right to do this, since, as I keep telling myself, in years gone by, when I ought to have been in love, I gave myself up to religious and socialist affairs, and considered art holier than I do now.

Why are religion or justice or art so sacred? People who do nothing but fall in love are perhaps more serious and saintly than those who sacrifice their love and their hearts to an idea. Be that as it may, in order to write a book, do a deed, paint a picture with some life in it, one has to be alive oneself. And so, unless you never want to progress, study is a matter of very secondary importance for you. Enjoy yourself as much as you can, have as many diversions as you can, and remember that what people demand in art nowadays is something very much alive, with strong colour and great intensity. So intensify your own health and strength and life a little; that is the best study.

I should be most obliged if you could let me know how Margot Begemann is and how things are with the De Groots, how did that business turn out? Did Sien de Groot marry her cousin? And did her child live?

Of my own work I think that the picture of peasants eating potatoes I did in Nuenen is après tout the best I've done. But since then I've had no chance of getting models, though on the other hand I did have the chance to study the colour question. And if I should find models again for my figures later, then I would hope to be able to show that I am after something other than little green landscapes or flowers.

Last year I painted almost nothing but flowers so as to get used to colours other than grey, vis. pink, soft or bright green, light blue, violet, yellow, orange, glorious red.

And when I was painting landscapes at Asnières this summer, I saw more colour in them than I did before. Now I'm going to try it with a portrait. And I must say that I'm not painting any the worse for it, perhaps because I could tell you of a very great deal that's wrong with both painters and paintings if I wanted to, quite as easily as I could tell you something that's good about them.

I don't want to be included among the melancholy or those who turn sour and bitter or ill-tempered. "Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner" [to understand everything is to forgive everything], and I believe that if we knew everything we should attain some serenity. Now, having as much of that serenity as possible, even when one knows little or nothing for certain, is perhaps a better remedy for all ills than what is sold in the pharmacy. Much of it comes by itself, one grows and develops of one's own accord.

So don't study and grind away too much, for that makes one sterile. Enjoy yourself too much rather than too little, and don't take art and love too seriously – there is very little one can do about it, it is mainly a question of temperament.

If I were living near you, I should try to make you understand that it might perhaps be more practical for you to paint with me than to write, and that you might be able to express your feelings more easily that way. In any case I can do something personally about your painting, but I am not in the writing profession.

Anyway, it's not a bad idea for you to become an artist, for when one has fire within oneself and a soul, one cannot keep bottling them up – better to burn than to burst, what is in will out. For me, for instance, it is a relief to do a painting, and without that I should be more miserable than I am.

Give Mother much love from me,

Vincent

I was deeply moved by *A la recherche du bonheur*. I have just finished *Mont-Oriol* by Guy de Maupassant.

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Art often seems very exalted and, as you say, sacred. But the same can be said of love. And the only problem is that not everybody thinks about it in this way, and that those who do feel something of it, and let themselves be carried away by it, have to suffer so much, firstly because they are misunderstood, but quite as often because their inspiration is so often inadequate, or their work is frustrated by circumstances. One ought to be able to do two or even more things at once. And there are certainly times when it is far from clear to us that art should be something sacred or good.

Anyway, do weigh up carefully if those with a feeling for art, and trying to work at it, wouldn't do better to declare that they are doing it because they were born with that feeling, cannot help themselves and are following their nature, than make out they are doing it for some noble purpose. Doesn't it say in *A la recherche du bonheur* that evil lies in our own nature – which we have not created ourselves? I think it so admirable of the moderns that they do not moralize like the old ones. Thus many people are appalled and scandalized by “Le vice et la vertu sont des produits chimiques, comme le sucre et le vitriol.” [Vice and virtue are chemical products, like sugar and vitriol.]

1. Vincent uses the unusual spelling “Kristenen” here instead of “Christenen,” thereby expressing his aversion to all religious conventionalism