Christ of the Coal Yards

Christ of the Coal Yards:
A Critical Biography of Vincent van Gogh

By

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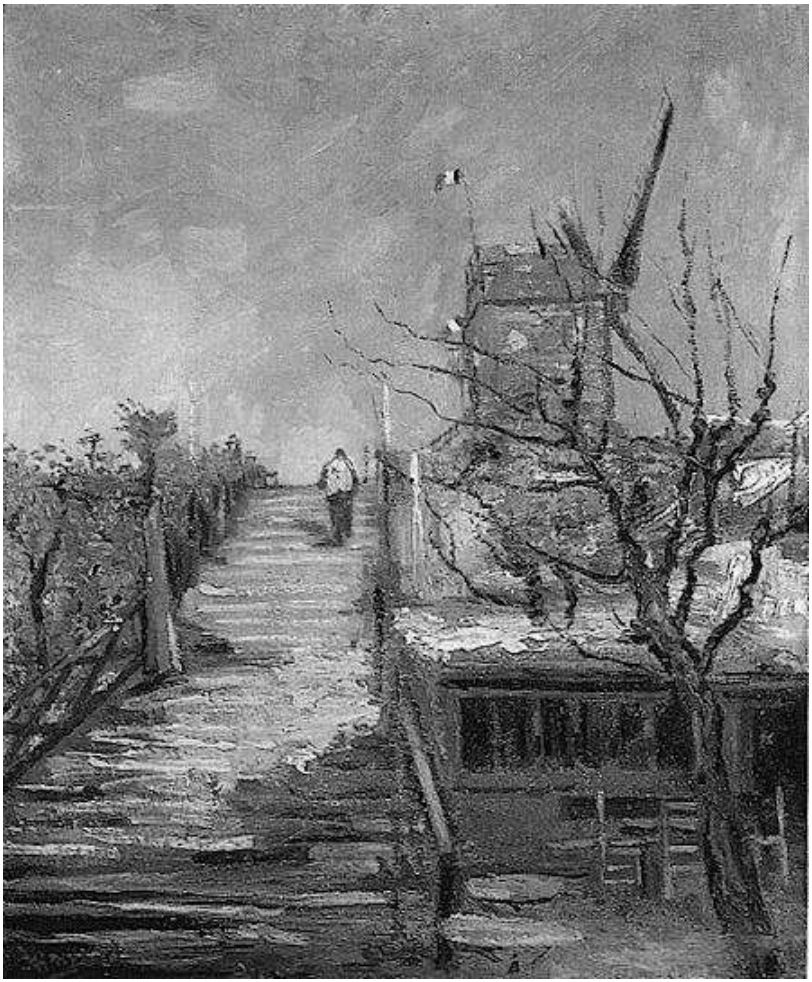
Dedicated to Noreen

I have tried to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green.

—Vincent Van Gogh, letter to Theo, September 8, 1888



Windmill at Montmartre, Vincent van Gogh, Oil on Canvas, 46.5 x 38.0 cm, Paris, Autumn 1886, Destroyed by fire, 1967

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PREFACE

No one heard the shot. No one ever found the gun.

It was Sunday, July 27, 1890. Vincent had recently finished *Wheatfield with Crows*, thought to be his final painting, one that he described as representing "vast fields of wheat beneath troubled skies," one where he said in a letter he meant to send to Theo "I did not need to go out of my way to try to express cheerlessness and extreme loneliness." The letter never got sent, but was found stuffed in his smock.

That morning, as usual, he walked out into the wheat fields with his easel, brushes, tubes of color and folding stool, perhaps hoping to reach his destination before the gang of local boys and girls were up and able to tease him and throw tomatoes. *Le Crau*, a wide plain of ripe grain, fields of citron, yellow, tan, and ochre, spread out beneath the bright Provencal sun. It's safe to assume he heard the cicadas singing loudly, the swiping swishes of the farmers' scythes already cutting through the rich wheat stalks, the gusts of wind whispering through the olive branches.

Driven and filled with energy for months, he had been quickly, with an assurance that overcame and perhaps even came from his doubts and struggles, putting his own dramatic visions on canvas after canvas. But today he did not go into the fields to paint, or, perhaps, in the beginning he did, perhaps in the morning that was his intention. No one will ever know.

He said he brought the revolver to frighten off the crows. Possibly that was his original intention when he included it with his lunch of bread and milk. In the end it's probably not relevant, except for the endless attempts to analyze him, to dig into his complex psyche, at once brilliant and yet impelled to self-destruction.

The Ravoux family were sitting on the terrace of their café when he returned, a bit concerned because he was late, but not overly so. When he finally appeared, his walk was more uneven than usual, and he held his hand over his stomach. "Monsieur Vincent," Mrs. Ravoux said, "we were worried, we are glad to see you come. Has anything bad happened?"

"No, but I . . ." he left his reply unfinished as he passed inside.

Mr. Ravoux followed him upstairs, where he found him sitting on his bed, facing the wall.

"I wanted to kill myself."

CHRIST OF THE COAL MINES

> There may be a great fire in our soul, yet no one ever comes to warm himself at it, and the passers-by see only a wisp of smoke coming through the chimney.
>
> —Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo, July, 1880

Ministers, preachers, evangelists, the entire hierarchy of a church, these are people who protect, support, spread the word, the administrators of a system of belief, a *religion*. On rare occasions they also enter the doors of perception and become the containers of *faith*, the sacred people upon whom a religion is based, the *shamans*, the *saviors*, in the Catholic religion the *saints* who have experienced that which is beyond explanation.

Two forms of understanding life are at work here, those that are *based on logic and reason*, and those that are based on the kinds of knowing *beyond logic and reason*.

A brutal coal mining village located in the center of Borinage, Petit Wasmes fit the harsh environment Vincent wanted. Hadn't Christ walked among, lived with, shared the suffering, the harshest indignities of the most downtrodden people of his time. Even the most unclean, the lepers. Vincent had read in the gospel of Luke how Jesus had not turned away in disgust, but had healed them, had promised them acceptance into God's kingdom. Yes, Vincent thought, here, in the real world of poverty and want is where a true preacher, an honest servant of Christ must live.

His letter to Theo in April, 1879, three months after having accepted the position, expresses both the rough, hard existence of his new assignment and his embracement of it:

> Dear Theo,
>
> It is time you heard from me again. From home I heard you had been in Etten for a few days and you were on a business trip. I most certainly hope you had a good journey. I suppose you will be in the dunes some of these days and occasionally in Scheveningen. It is lovely here in spring, too; there are spots where one could almost believe oneself in the dunes, because of the hills.
>
> Not long ago I made an interesting expedition, spending six hours in a mine. It was Marcasse, one of the oldest and most dangerous mines in the

neighbourhood. It has a bad reputation because many perish in it, either going down or coming up, or through poisoned air, firedamp explosion, water seepage, cave-ins, etc. It is a gloomy spot, and at first everything around looks dreary and desolate.

Most of the miners are thin and pale from fever; they look tired and emaciated, weather-beaten and aged before their time. On the whole the women are faded and worn. Around the mine are poor miners' huts, a few dead trees black from smoke, thorn hedges, dunghills, ash dumps, heaps of useless coal, etc. Mans could make a wonderful picture of it.

I will try to make a little sketch of it presently to give you an idea of how it looks.

I had a good guide, a man who has already worked there for thirty-three years; kind and patient, he explained everything well and tried to make it clear to me.

So together we went down 700 meters and explored the most hidden corners of that underworld. The maintenages or gredins [cells where the miners work] which are situated farthest from the exit are called *des caches* [hiding places, places where men search].

This mine has five levels, but the three upper ones have been exhausted and abandoned; they are no longer worked because there is no more coal. A picture of the maintenages would be something new and unheard of - or rather, never before seen. Imagine a row of cells in a rather narrow, low passage, shored up with rough timber. In each of those cells a miner in a coarse linen suit, filthy and black as a chimney sweep, is busy hewing coal by the pale light of a small lamp. The miner can stand erect in some cells; in others, he lies on the ground (***** tailles à droit, *** tailles à plat). The arrangement is more or less like the cells in a beehive) or like a dark, gloomy passage in an underground prison, or like a row of small weaving looms, or rather more like a row of baking ovens such as the peasants have, or like the partitions in a crypt. The tunnels themselves are like the big chimneys of the Brabant farms.

The water leaks through in some, and the light of the miner's lamp makes a curious effect, reflected as in a stalactite cave. Some of the miners work in the maintenages, others load the cut coal into small carts that run on rails, like a street-car. This is mostly done by children, boys as well as girls. There is also a stable yard down there, 700 meters underground, with about seven old horses which pull a great many of those carts to the so-called accrochage, the place from which they are pulled up to the surface. Other miners repair the old galleries to prevent their collapse or make new galleries in the coal vein. As the mariners ashore are homesick for the sea, notwithstanding all the dangers and hardships which threaten them, so the miner would rather be under the ground than above it. The villages here look desolate and dead and forsaken; life goes on underground instead of above. One might live here for years and never know the real state of things unless one went down in the mines.

People here are very ignorant and untaught - most of them cannot read - but at the same time they are intelligent and quick at their difficult work; brave and frank, they are short but square-shouldered, with melancholy deep-set eyes. They are skillful at many things, and work terribly hard. They have a nervous temperament - I do not mean weak, but very sensitive. They have an innate, deep-rooted hatred and a strong mistrust of anyone who is domineering. With miners one must have a miner's character and temperament, and no pretentious pride or mastery, or one will never get along with them or gain their confidence.

Did I tell you at the time about the miner who was so badly hurt by a firedamp explosion? Thank God, he has recovered and is going out again, and is beginning to walk some distance just for exercise; his hands are still weak and it will be some time before he can use them for his work, but he is out of danger. Since that time there have been many cases of typhoid and malignant fever, of what they call la sotte fièvre, which gives them bad dreams like nightmares and makes them delirious. So again there are many sickly and bedridden people - emaciated, weak, and miserable.

In one house they are all ill with fever and have little or no help, so that the patients have to nurse the patients. “Ici c'est les malades qui soignent les malades” [here the sick tend the sick], said a woman, like, “Le pauvre est l'ami du pauvre.” [The poor man is the poor man's friend.]

Have you seen any beautiful pictures lately? I am eager for a letter from you. Has Israëls done much lately and Maris and Mauve?

A few days ago a colt was born here in the stable, a pretty little animal that soon stood firm on his legs. The miners keep many goats here, and there are kids in every house; rabbits are also very common here in the miners' houses.

I must go out to visit some patients, so I must finish. When you have time, let me have a word from you soon, as a sign of life. My compliments to the Roos family, and to Mauve when you meet him. Many good wishes, and believe me always, with a handshake in thought,

Your loving brother, Vincent

Going down into a mine is a very unpleasant sensation. One goes in a kind of basket or cage, like a bucket in a well, but in a well from 500 - 700 meters deep, so that when looking upward from the bottom, the daylight is about the size of a star in the sky.

It feels like being on a ship at sea for the first time, but it is worse; fortunately it does not last long. The miners get used to it, yet they keep an unconquerable feeling of horror and fear which reasonably and justifiably stays with them.

But once down, the worst is over, and one is richly rewarded for the trouble by what one sees.

My address is - Vincent van Gogh, c/o Jean Baptiste Denis,

Rue de petit Wasmes,

Wasmes (Borinage, Hainaut) (1)

Others would have thought this assignment a punishment, a rejection. Certainly Vincent had not impressed the church hierarchy with his studies. However, no one could doubt his sincerity, his faith. If anything, it was so strong it could be called fanatical! That, in fact, was the problem.

There could be no doubt it was genuine, not a momentary or shallow impulse, certainly not driven by practical or economic concerns. Rather, it was a desire that grew out of his childhood, as his correspondence to Theo indicates time and again. On March 22, 1877, some two years previous to this assignment here, he wrote:

> Father was unable to preach last Sunday and the Reverend Mr. Kam stood in for him. I know that his heart burns for something to happen that will allow me to follow in his footsteps, not just some of the way, but all the way. Father has always expected it of me, oh, may it come about and blessings be upon it.
>
> The print you gave, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away," and the portrait of the Reverend Mr. Heldring are already up in my little room, oh, how glad I am to have them, they fill me with hope.
>
> Writing to you about my plans helps me to clarify and settle my thoughts. To begin with, I think of the text, "It is my portion to keep Thy word." I have such a craving to make the treasures of the Bible's word my own, to become thoroughly and lovingly familiar with all those old stories, and above all with everything we know about Christ.
>
> In our family, which is a Christian family in the full sense of the term, there has always been, as far as one can tell, someone from generation to generation who was a preacher of the Gospel. Why should there not be a member of our family even now who feels called to that ministry, and who has some reason to suppose that he may, and must, declare himself and look for means of attaining that end? It is my prayer and fervent desire that the spirit of my Father and Grandfather may rest upon me, that it may be granted me to become a Christian and a Christian laborer, that my life may come to resemble, the more the better, those of the people I have mentioned above—for behold, the old wine is good and I do not desire new. Let their God be my God and their people my people, let it be my lot to come to know Christ in his full worth and to be impelled by his charity.
>
> It is so beautifully put in the text, "As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing," what that charity is, and in Cr. 13 she "beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth."
>
> My heart is filled today with the text about those on the way to Emmaus, when it was toward even and the sun was going down: "But they constrained him, saying, Abide with us."
>
> It is dear to you, too, that "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing," keep it in mind, for it is a good text and a good cloak to wear in the storm of life, keep it in mind at this time now that you have been going through so much.

> And be careful, for though what you have been through is no small thing, yet as far as I can see there is something still greater ahead and you too will be put in mind of the Lord's word. I have loved you with an everlasting Love, as one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you. I shall comfort you as one who comforteth his Mother. I shall give you another Comforter, even the Spirit of truth. I will make a new covenant with you. Depart, touch no unclean thing, and I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God. And I will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters. Hate the evil and the places where it is rife, it draws you with its false splendor and will tempt you as the devil tried to tempt Christ by showing Him "all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them"; and saying, "All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me." There is something better than the glory of the things of this world, namely the feeling when our heart burns within us upon hearing His word, faith in God, love of Christ, belief in immortality, in the life hereafter.
>
> Hold on to what you have, Theo, my boy, brother whom I love, I long so fervently for the goal you know of, but how can I attain it? If only everything were already behind me as it is behind Father, but it takes so much hard work to become a Christian laborer and a preacher of the Gospel and a sower of the Word. You see, Father can count his religious services and Bible readings and visits to the sick and the poor and his written sermons by the thousand, and yet he does not look back, but carries on doing good.
>
> Cast your eye up on high and ask that it be granted to me, as I ask if for you. May He grant your heart's desire, He who knows us better than we know ourselves, and is above prayer and above thought, since His ways are higher than our ways and his thoughts higher than our thoughts, as high as heaven is above earth. And may the thought of Christ as a Comforter and of God as a lofty dwelling be with you.

Vincent was driven to preach the gospel. But it was not to be. In May, 1877, he moved to Amsterdam to study theology, and with the full support of his family, who hired a tutor for him, he began to prepare in earnest for the theology entrance exams. However, his emotional, personal connection with God didn't match the more formal, dispassionate studies required of him. He did poorly in his studies and dropped out in July, 1878. Perhaps, he thought, a different program, a shorter program of study in Brussels to prepare him to be an *evangelical missionary* rather than a minister would suit him better.

A letter to his brother the following November 15 suggests he made the right move and indicates he was looking forward to his potential assignment:

Dear Theo,

On the evening of the day we spent together, which passed only too quickly for me, I want to write to you again. It was a great day for me to see you again and to talk with you, and it is a blessing that such a day that passes in a moment, and such a joy that is of so short duration, stays in our memory and will never be forgotten. We had taken leave I walked back, not along the shortest way but along the tow-path. Here are workshops of all kinds that look picturesque, especially in the evening with the lights, and to us who are also labourers and workmen, each in his sphere and in the work to which he is called, they speak in their own way, if we only listen to them, for they say: Work while it is day, the night cometh when no man can work.

It was just the moment when the street cleaners came home with their carts with the old white horses. A long row of these carts were standing at the so-called Ferme des Boues, at the beginning of the tow-path. Some of these old white horses resemble a certain old aquatint engraving, which you perhaps know an engraving that has no great art value, it is true, but which struck me, and made a deep impression upon me. I mean the last from that series of prints called “The Life of a Horse.” It represents an old white horse, lean and emaciated, and tired to death by a long life of heavy labour, of too much and too hard work. The poor animal is standing on a spot utterly lonely and desolate, a plain scantily covered with withered dry grass, and here and there a gnarled old tree broken and bent by the storm. On the ground lies a skull, and at a distance in the background a bleached skeleton of a horse, lying near a hut where lives a man who skins horses. Over the whole is a stormy sky, it is a cold, bleak day, gloomy and dark weather.

It is a sad and very melancholy scene, which must strike everyone who knows and feels that we also have to pass one day through the valley of the shadow of death, and “que la fin de la vie humaine, ce sont des larmes ou des cheveux blancs.” [the end of human life is tears or white hairs.] What lies beyond this is a great mystery that only God knows, but He has revealed absolutely through His word that there is a resurrection of the dead.

The poor horse, the old faithful servant, is standing there patiently and meekly, yet bravely and unflinchingly; like the old guard who said, “la garde meurt mais elle ne se rend pas,” [the guard dies, but never surrenders] it awaits its last hour. Involuntarily I was reminded of that engraving, when I saw tonight those horses of the ash carts.

As to the drivers themselves with their filthy dirty clothes, they seemed sunk and rooted still deeper in poverty than that long row or rather group of paupers, that Master de Groux has drawn in his “Bench of the Poor.” It always strikes me, and it is very peculiar, that when we see the image of indescribable and unutterable desolation - of loneliness, of poverty and misery, the end of all things, or their extreme, then rises in our mind the

thought of God. At least this is the case with me and does not Father also say: “There is no place where I like better to speak than in a churchyard, for there we are all on equal ground; not only that, there we always *realize* it.” I am glad that we had time to see the museum together and especially the work of de Groux and Leys, and so many other interesting pictures, like that landscape of Cooseman's for instance. I am very pleased with the two prints you gave me, but you ought to have accepted from me that small etching, “The Three Mills.” Now you have paid it all yourself, and not allowed me to pay half as I wished to do. But you must keep it for your collection, for it is remarkable, even though the reproduction is not so very good. In my ignorance, I should ascribe it rather to Peasant Breughel than to Velvet Breughel.

I enclose the little hasty sketch, “Au Charbonnage.” I should like to begin making rough sketches from some of the many things that I meet on my way, but as it would probably keep me from my real work, it is better not to begin. As soon as I came home I began a sermon about the “barren fig tree,” Luke xiii 6-9.

That little drawing “Au Charbonnage” is nothing specially remarkable, but the reason I made it is that one sees here so many people that work in the coal mines, and they are rather a characteristic kind of people. This little house stands not far from the road; it is a small inn attached to the big coal shed, and the workmen come there to eat their bread and drink their glass of beer during the lunch hour.

When I was in England I applied for a position as Evangelist among the miners in the coal mines, but they turned me down, stating that I had to be at least twenty-five years old. You know how one of the roots or foundations, not only of the Gospel, but of the whole Bible is, “Light that rises in the darkness,” *from darkness to light*. Well, who will need this most, who will be open to it? Experience has taught that those who walk in the darkness, in the centre of the earth, like the miners in the black coal mines for instance, are very much impressed by the words of the Gospel, and believe it too. Now there is in the south of Belgium, in Hainault, in the neighbourhood of Mons, up to the French frontiers, aye, even far across it, a district called the Borin-age, that has a special population of labourers who work in the numerous coal mines. In a little handbook of geography I found the following about them: “The Borins (inhabitants of the Borinage, situated west of Mons) find their work exclusively in the coal mines. These mines are an imposing sight, 300 metres underground, into which daily descend groups of working men, worthy of our respect and our sympathies. The miner is a special Borinage type, for him daylight does not exist, and except on Sunday he never sees the sunshine. He works laboriously by a lamp whose light is pale and dim, in a narrow tunnel, his body bent double and sometimes he is obliged to crawl along; he works to extract from the bowels of the earth that mineral substance of which we know the great utility; he works in the midst of thousands of ever-recurring dangers; but the Belgium miner has a happy disposition, he is used to that kind of life,

and when he descends the shaft, carrying on his hat a little lamp that is destined to guide him in the darkness, he trusts himself to God, Who sees his labour and Who protects him, his wife and his children."

So the Borinage is situated south of Lessines, where one finds the stone quarries.

I should very much like to go there as an Evangelist. The three months' trial demanded of me by the Rev. de Jong and the Rev. Pietersen is almost over. St. Paul was three years in Arabia before he began to preach, and before he started on his great missionary journeys and his real work among the heathen. If I could work quietly for about three years in such a district, always learning and observing, then I should not come back from there without having something to say that was really worth hearing. I say so in all humility and yet with confidence. If God wills, and if He spares my life, I would be ready about my thirtieth year, starting out with a peculiar training and experience, being able to master my work better, and riper for it than now.

I write you this again although we have already spoken about it many a time.

There are already in the Borinage many little Protestant communities and certainly schools also. I wish I could get a position there as Evangelist in the way we spoke about, preaching the Gospel to the poor, that means those who need it most and for whom it is so well suited, and then during the week devoting myself to teaching.

You have certainly visited St. Gilles? I too made a trip there, in the direction of the Ancienne Barrière. Where the road to Mont St. Jean begins there is another hill, the Alsemberg. To the right is the cemetery of St. Gilles, full of cedars and evergreen, from where one has a view over the whole city.

Proceeding further one arrives at Forest. The neighbourhood is very picturesque there, on the slope of the hills are old houses, like those huts in the dunes that Bosboom has sometimes painted. One sees all kinds of field labour performed there, the sowing of corn, the digging of potatoes, the washing of turnips, and everything is picturesque, even the gathering of wood, and it looks much like Montmartre. There are old houses covered with evergreen or vines, and pretty little inns; among the houses I noticed one was that of a mustard manufacturer, a certain Verkisten, his place was just like a picture by Thijs Mans for instance. Here and there are places where stone is found, so they have small quarries, through which hollowed out roads pass, with deeply cut wagon ruts, where one sees the little white horses with red tassels, and the drivers with blue blouses; shepherds are to be found there too, and women in black with white caps, that remind one of those of de Groux. There are some places here, thank God one finds them everywhere, where one feels more at home than anywhere else, where one gets a peculiar pristine feeling like that of homesickness, in which bitter melancholy plays some part; but yet its stimulation strengthens and cheers the mind, and gives us, we do not know how or

why, new strength and ardour for our work. That day I walked on past Forest and took a side path leading to a little old ivy-grown church. I saw many linden trees there, still more interwoven, and more Gothic so to say, than those we saw in the Park, and at the side of the hollowed road that leads to the churchyard there were twisted and gnarled stamps and tree roots, fantastical like those Albert Dürer etched in “Ritter, Tod and Teufel.”

Have you ever seen a picture or rather a photograph of Carlo Dolci's work “The Garden of Olives”? There is something Rembrandt-esque in it; I saw it the other day. I suppose you know that large rough etching on the same theme after Rembrandt, it is the pendant of that other, “The Bible Reading,” with those two women and a cradle? Since you told me that you had seen the picture by Father Corot on that same subject, I remembered it again; I saw it at the exhibition of his works shortly after his death and it deeply appealed to me.

How rich art is, if one can only remember what one has seen, one is never empty of thoughts or truly lonely, never alone.

A Dieu, Theo, I heartily shake hands with you in thought. Have a good time, have success in your work, and meet many good things on your road, such as stay in our memory and enrich us, though apparently we possess little. When you see Mauve greet him for me and believe me,
Your loving brother, Vincent

I kept this letter for a few days; the 15th of November is passed, so the three months have elapsed. I spoke with the Rev, de Jong and Master Bokma, they tell me that I cannot attend the school on the same conditions as they allow to the native Flemish pupils; I can follow the lessons free of charge if necessary - but this is the only privilege, - so in order to stay here longer I ought to have more financial means than I have at my disposal, for they are nil. So I shall perhaps soon try that plan involving the Borinage. Once I am in the country I shall not soon go back to a large city.

It would not be easy to live without the Faith in Him and the old confidence in Him; without it one would lose one's courage.

A letter from his father to Theo supports a belief that the anticipated move is going well.

20 December 1878

Eight days ago we received a rather nice letter from Vincent; nice in so far as he seems to have found a good boarding house with farmers in Pâturages for thirty francs a month, the reason that it is not much being that he teaches the children in the evening. He was soon accepted with goodwill by many people, and working with these people seems to give him satisfaction. Furthermore, the Reverend Péron has promised him his cooperation. In the middle of January there will be another meeting of the

committee of with Mr. Péron is the secretary, and he promised him that he would try to do something for him.

In the meantime, he spends his free moments drawing big maps of Palestine which can be used for talks and catechism, and with which he tries to make some money. I received one and ordered him to make four more copies for which I gave him ten francs each.

On December 26, Vincent's letter to Theo suggests a good beginning:

My dear Theo,

It is time I wrote to you again, to wish you, firstly, all the best at the start of the New Year. May many good things be your lot and may God's blessing rest on your work in the year on which we are now embarking.

I very much long for a letter from you, to hear how things are going and how you are, and also if you have *seen anything beautiful and remarkable of late*. As far as I am concerned, you'll be aware that there are no paintings here in the Borinage, that by and large they do not even know what a painting is, so obviously I have not seen anything in the way of art since my departure from Brussels. But that does not alter the fact that the country here is very special and very picturesque, everything *speaks*, as it were, and is full of character. Lately, during the dark days before Christmas, snow was lying on the ground. Everything reminded one then of the medieval paintings by, say, Peasant Brueghel, and by so many others who have known how to depict the singular effect of red and green, black and white so strikingly. And often the sights here have made me think of the work of, for example, Thijs Mans or Albrecht Dürer. There are sunken roads here, overgrown with thornbushes and gnarled old trees with their freakish roots, which resemble perfectly that road on Dürer's etching, "Death and the Knight."

Thus, a few days ago, the miners returning home in the evening towards dusk in the white snow were a singular sight. These people are quite black when they emerge into the daylight from the dark mines, looking jut like chimney sweeps. Their dwellings are usually small and should really be called huts; they lie scattered along the sunken roads, in the woods and on the slopes of the hills. Here and there one can still see moss-covered roofs, and in the evening a friendly light shines through the small-paned windows.

Much as we have coppices and shrubby oaks in Brabant and pollard willows in Holland, so one sees blackthorn hedges around the gardens, fields and meadows here. Lately, with the snow, the effect is that of black lettering on white paper, like pages of the Gospel.

I have already spoken several times here, both in a fairly large room especially designed for religious meetings and also at the meetings they usually hold in the evenings in the workmen's cottages, and which may

best be called Bible classes. Among other things, I have spoken on the parable of the mustard seed, the barren fig tree and the man born blind. On Christmas, of course, on the stable in Bethlehem and Peace on earth. If, with God's blessing, I were to get a permanent position here, I should welcome that with all my heart.

Everywhere round here one sees the large chimneys and the tremendous mountains of coal at the entrance to the mines, the so-called charbonnages. You know that large drawing by Bosboom, “Chaudfontaine” - it gives a good impression of the countryside in these parts, except that here everything is coal while to the north of Hainaut there are stone quarries and in Chaudfontaine they have iron.

I still keep thinking of the day you came to Brussels and of our visit to the Museum. And I often wish you were a bit nearer and we could be together more often. Do reply soon, I keep looking at that etching of “A Young Citizen” over and over again.

The miner's talk is not very easy to make out, but they understand ordinary French well, provided it is spoken quickly and fluently enough, for then it automatically sounds like their patois, which comes out with amazing speed. At a meeting this week, my text was Acts 16 9, “And a vision appeared to Paul in the night; There stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him, saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us.” And they listened attentively when I tried to describe what the Macedonian was like who needed and longed for the comfort of the Gospel and for knowledge of the Only True God. That we should think of him as a workman, with lines of sorrow and suffering and fatigue on his countenance, without pomp or glory but with an immortal soul and needing the food that does not perish, namely God's word, because man liveth not by bread alone, but by all the words that flow from God's mouth. How Jesus Christ is the Master who can strengthen and comfort and enlighten one like the Macedonian, a workman and labourer whose life is hard. Because He Himself is the great Man of Sorrows who knows our ills, Who was called the son of a carpenter, though He was the Son of God and the great Healer of sick souls. Who laboured for thirty years in a humble carpenter's shop to fulfill God's will. And God wills that in imitation of Christ, man should live and walk humbly on earth, not reaching for the sky, but bowing to humble things, learning from the Gospel to be meek and humble of heart.

I have already had occasion to visit some of the sick, since there are so many of them here. Wrote today to the President of the Committee of Evangelization asking him if my case could be dealt with at the next meeting of the committee.

It is thawing tonight. I can't tell you how picturesque the hilly country looks in the thaw, with the snow melting and now that the black fields with the green of the winter wheat can be seen again.

For a stranger, the villages here are real rabbit warrens with the countless narrow streets and alleyways of small worker's houses, at the foot of the hills as well as on the slopes and the top. The nearest comparison is a

village like Scheveningen, especially the back streets, or villages in Brittany as we know them from pictures. But you have travelled through these parts by train on your way to Paris and may have fleeting memories of them. The Protestant churches are small, like the one at De Hoeve though a little larger, but the place where I spoke was just a large bare room which could hold a hundred people at most. I also attended a religious service in a stable or shed, so everything it is simple and original enough.

Write soon if you can find the time, and know that you are again and again, indeed constantly, in my thoughts. Wishing once more that God's blessing be yours in the New Year, and shaking your hand in my thoughts, believe me, always,

Your very loving brother, Vincent

My regards to everyone at the Roos's, and wish them all the very best for the New Year, as well as anyone who may ask after me.

When you write, please address your letter care of M. van der Haegen, Colporteur, à Pâturages, près de Mons, Borinage, Hainaut.

I have just visited a little old woman in a charcoal-burner's home. She is terribly ill, but full of faith and patience. I read a chapter with her and prayed with them all. The people here have something unique and attractive about them thanks to their simplicity and good nature, not unlike the Brabant people in Zundert and Etten.

Note the key beliefs he expresses here in the portion of the sermon he shares with his brother. They emphasize how Christ is “the great Man of Sorrow” . . . “who laboured for thirty years in a humble carpenter’s shop to fulfill God’s will, and God wills that in imitation of Christ, man should live and walk humbly on earth, not reaching for the sky, but bowing to humble things, learning from the Gospel to be meek and humble of heart.” The stress is to be *like* Christ, to be Christ*like*.

However, the letters from Vincent’s parents to Theo during this time quickly shift from simple, positive support for a son to reveal parents concerned about a son struggling to maintain his sanity, a son fully committed to his mission, to his relationship to God, but also a son unable to take care of himself, much less administer to others.

They begin upbeat. On January 20, 1879, Vincent’s father writes:

We are glad to be able to tell you that Vincent has been accepted for the evangelization in the Borinage - provisionally for six months. He gets fifty francs a month - surely not much, but his boarding house costs him thirty francs. It seems he works there with success and ambition, and his letters are really interesting. He devotes himself to that job with all his heart and

> an eye for the needs of those people. It is certainly remarkable what he writes; he went down, for instance, in a mine, 635 meters.

However, suggestions of the underlying fears already appear in his next letter, dated February 12, 1879:

> We are beginning to worry about him again. I am afraid he is wholly absorbed by the care for the sick and the wounded and by sitting up with them.
>
> […] He also spoke about a plan of renting a workman's house and living there alone. We have tried to dissuade him from it. We are afraid he would not keep it in good shape and it would again lead to eccentricities.

The single word “again” indicates the problems are long standing. *Eccentricities* also sounds like a euphemism, something that might better be, or more honestly be, stated as suggesting possible *insanity* or at least a psychological unbalance, at the very least a troubling past.

Letters from his mother to Theo continue to reveal fears he is not taking care of himself, is ignoring his own well being to the point of harming himself. On February 27, 1879, she writes:

> Verhaegen, a colporteur, to whom Pa also sent his letters in the beginning, where Vincent had been lovingly received during the first eight days; he was the one who had found that good boarding house at Denis.
>
> […] And now I have to tell you that Pa has gone to Vincent this week. We were worried about all the bad weather he had, and especially because while I was away, there had been a very unpleasant letter from him, confirming what we had already suspected, that he had no bed, and that there was nobody to watch his things but far from complaining he said that that was nobody's concern, etc. We were preparing a parcel for him, but we both thought that it would be so much better if Pa himself would take it to him.

On July 2, 1879, her letter to Theo is more ominous:

> This week a letter from Vincent; we are always thinking about him with anxiety; poor boy, shortly after my visit to him he wrote that he had such a melancholy feeling when we said goodbye, as if it could have been for the first, but also for the last time. But now there has been a meeting, but that they hadn't said anything to him; before, they had always found fault with him. We have the idea they still want to wait and see for some time, but if he doesn't suit himself to their wishes and adopt the behaviour they

demand of him, they can't accept him. He could still achieve so much, if only he knew how to control himself. Poor boy, what a difficult, unrewarding, much missing young life, and what is he going to do next?

His father's letter to Theo on July 19 indicates that what began as a promising new start has already collapsed:

You know, don't you? that Vincent's situation in Wasmes does not become any clearer. They have given him three months to look for something else. He does not comply with the wishes of the Committee and it seems that nothing can be done about it. It is a bitter trial for us. We literally don't know what to do. There is so much good in him, but he simply doesn't want to cooperate.

The 1879-1880 report from the Synodal Board of Evangelization of the Union of Protestant Churches of Belgium gives the official view:

"The experiment of accepting the services of a young Dutchman, Mr. Vincent van Gogh, who felt himself called to be an evangelist in the Borinage, has not produced the anticipated results. If a talent for speaking, indispensable to anyone placed at the head of a congregation, had been added to the admirable qualities he displayed in aiding the sick and wounded, to his devotion to the spirit of self-sacrifice, of which he gave many proofs by consecrating his night's rest to them, and by stripping himself of most of his clothes and linen in their behalf, Mr. Van Gogh would certainly have been an accomplished evangelist.

"Undoubtedly it would be unreasonable to demand extraordinary talents. But it is evident that the absence of certain qualities may render the exercise of an evangelist's principal function wholly impossible.

"Unfortunately this is the case with Mr. Van Gogh. Therefore, the probationary period—some months—having expired, it has been necessary to abandon the idea of retaining him any longer."

On August 7 his father writes Theo:

Last Friday [25 July], Vincent writes, he started on a trip to Maria Hoorebeeke in Flanders; he arrived there—on foot—on Sunday afternoon, intending to meet the Reverend Pietersen, who was in Brussels. Thereupon he went to that city, and he met him on Monday morning. After consultation with him, he is now in Cuesmes again, where he has found shelter; he hopes to find a small room there to stay for the time being. At present his address is: Chez M. Frank, Evangéliste Ã Cuesmes (prés de Mons) au Marais. In Brussels, he visited the families he had met there earlier - what impression will he have made?

On August 19, his mother writes Theo:

> But now I must tell you something new, which is that Vincent, after much pressure from our side to visit us at home because we were worrying so much about him and he had nothing to do there, suddenly stood before us last Friday [August 15th]. The girls were boating with the Gezink family, and all at once we hear, "Hello father, hello mother," and there he was. We were glad; although seeing him again we found he looked thin; that is over now; it must have been the walking and bad food etc. - things, by the way, he does not talk about, but he looks well, except for his clothes. Pa immediately gave him his cherished new jacket. We bought him a pair of boots, and he now wears the little summer coat that I made for Pa's birthday every day. Some of your old underwear came in useful too, and as far as stockings, etc., are concerned, I had prepared them in advance, so that now he is quite well taken care of. He is reading books by Dickens all day long, and does not speak apart from giving answers - sometimes correct, sometimes strange ones; if only he adopted the good things from these books. For the rest, about his work, about the past or the future, not a word…Tomorrow, he and Pa will go to Prinsenhage, where CM's boys will come to see the paintings; they are going by train. Pa and Vincent will go on foot, maybe he will talk a little bit then.

The letters are sparse over the next year, and reveal that Vincent was simply lost. He continued to work in Wasmes without official position or pay, living in poverty, nursing the victims of a mining disaster, giving away whatever food and clothing came his way. The Decrugs, a family he stayed with, reported that they felt powerless to help him, that they could hear him weeping alone at night. (2)

The following March 11, his father writes Theo:

> Vincent is still here - but alas! it is nothing but worry. Now he is talking about going to London in order to speak with the Reverend Jones. If he sticks to that plan, I'll enable him to go, but it is hopeless.

On July 5 he writes:

> Indeed that letter Vincent wrote to you gave me some pleasure. But oh! What will become of him, and isn't it insane to choose a life of poverty and let time pass by without looking for an occasion of earning one's own bread - yes, that really is insane. But we have to put up with it. None of all the things we tried has helped in any way. Maybe you should write back to him; in the last days of June I sent him 60 francs, which he acknowledged;

some time later we sent him some clothes. Thinking of him always hurts, and we do think so continuously of him.

[Lines added by Mrs. Van Gogh] We can agree with what you write about Vincent, but if reading books gives such practical results, can it then be called right? And for the rest, what kind of ideas his reading gives him. He sent us a book by Victor Hugo, but that man takes the side of the criminals and doesn't call bad what really is bad. What would the world look like if one calls the evil good? Even with the best of intentions that cannot be accepted. Did you answer him? If not, do so in any case; we were so glad that he thought of you, and we were so sad that he didn't want to have anything to do with anybody when he was here. We haven't heard from him for a long time now and shall write to him again.

Books indeed were important to Vincent, and one in particular had become his guide. On September 4, 1877, some two years before he began pushing to work as an evangelist at Wasmes, he wrote Theo:

. . . . I am also copying the whole of the *Imitation of Christ* from a French edition which I borrowed from Uncle Cor; the book is sublime, and he who wrote it must have been a man after God's own heart. A few days ago such an irresistible longing for that book came over me - perhaps because I so often look at the lithograph after Ruyperez - that I asked Uncle Cor to lend it to me; now I am copying it in the evening: it means much work, but I have finished most of it, and I know no better way to study it. I also bought Bossuet's Oraisons Funebres once more, for 40 cents. I feel it is necessary to work as hard as I can. I often think of that phrase, “The days are full of evil”; one must arm oneself and try to be filled with as much goodness as possible in order to be prepared and be able to resist. As you know, it is no small undertaking, and we do not know the result; but at all events I will try to fight the good fight.

Thomas a Kempis' book is peculiar; in it are words so profound and serious that one cannot read them without emotion, almost fear - at least if one reads with a sincere desire for light and truth - the language has an eloquence which wins the heart because it comes from the heart. You have a copy, haven't you?

Brief references to the book appear in Vincent’s letters as early as 1875, and according to biographers Lawrence and Elisabeth Hanson, he was so taken by it he destroyed books by Michelet, Renan, and Heine, books he had previously held up to Theo as favorites, and even suggested to Theo that he also should burn all books except for the *Bible* and *The Imitation of Christ.* (3)

December 2, 1910, *Het Algemeen Handelsblad* (an important newspaper in Amsterdam) included the following memoir written by Dr. M. B. Mendes

da Costa describing his time as Vincent's tutor, both foreshadowing Vincent's inability to work for the established church and indicating how attracted Vincent was to Thomas a Kempis' book:

> It was probably in the year 1877, or thereabouts, that the Reverend Mr. J. P. Stricker, a preacher universally respected in Amsterdam, asked me whether I was willing to give lessons in Latin and Greek to his cousin Vincent, son of the Reverend Mr. T. van Gogh, clergyman at Etten and De Hoeven, to prepare him for his matriculation. I was warned that I would not be dealing with any ordinary boy, and was apprised of his ways, so different from ordinary human behavior. However, this did not discourage me in the least, particularly as the Reverend Mr. Stricker spoke with much love of Vincent himself as well as of his parents.
>
> Our first meeting, of so much importance to the relationship between master and pupil, was very pleasant indeed. The seemingly reticent young man - our ages differed but little, for I was twenty-six then, and he was undoubtedly over twenty - immediately felt at home, and notwithstanding his lank reddish hair and his many freckles, his appearance was far from unattractive to me. In passing, let me say that it is not very clear to me why his sister speaks of his "more or less rough exterior"; it is possible that, since the time when I knew him, because of his untidiness and his growing a beard, his outward appearance lost something of its charming quaintness; but most decidedly it can never have been rough, neither his nervous hands, nor his countenance, which might have been considered homely, but which expressed so much and hid so much more.
>
> I succeeded in winning his confidence and friendship very soon, which was so essential in this case; and as his studies were prompted by the best of intentions, we made comparatively good progress in the beginning - I was soon able to let him translate an easy Latin author. Needless to say, he, who was so fanatically devout in those days, at once started using this little bit of Latin knowledge to read Thomas a Kempis in the original.
>
> So far everything went well, including mathematics, which he had begun studying with another master in the meantime; but after a short time the Greek verbs became too much for him. However I might set about it, whatever trick I might invent to enliven the lessons, it was no use. "Mendes," he would say - we did not mister each other any more - "Mendes, do you seriously believe that such horrors are indispensable to a man who wants to do what I want to do: give peace to poor creatures and reconcile them to their existence here on earth?"
>
> And I, who as his master naturally could not agree, but who felt in my heart of hearts that he - mind, I say *he*, Vincent van Gogh! - was quite right, I put up the most formidable defense I was capable of; but it was no use.
>
> "John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is of much more use to me, and Thomas a Kempis and a translation of the Bible; and I don't want anything more." I really do not know how many times he told me this, nor how

many times I went to the Reverend Mr. Stricker to discuss the matter, after which it was decided again and again that Vincent ought to have another try.

But before long the trouble would start afresh, and then he would come to me in the morning with an announcement I knew so well, “Mendes, last night I used the cudgel again,” or, “Mendes, last night I got myself locked out again.” It should be observed that this was some sort of self-chastisement resorted to whenever he thought he had neglected a duty. In fact, during those days he lived in his uncle's house, Rear Admiral J. van Gogh, director and commander of the naval base at Amsterdam; the house was a big building inside the naval dockyard. Well, whenever Vincent felt that his thoughts had strayed further than they should have, he took a cudgel to bed with him and belabored his back with it; and whenever he was convinced he had forfeited the privilege of passing the night in his bed, he slunk out of the house unobserved at night, and then, when he came back and found the door double-locked, was forced to go and lie on the floor of a little wooden shed, without bed or blanket. He preferred to do this in winter, so that the punishment, which I am disposed to think arose from mental masochism, might be more severe.

He knew quite well that I was displeased by such announcements on his part, and therefore, to appease me as much as possible, he would, either before his confession or the day after, go to the park which was then the Oosterbegraaf-plaats [East Cemetery], his favorite walk, in the early morning, and pick some snowdrops for me there, preferably from under the snow. At the time I was living in Jonas Daniel Meyer Square and had my study on the third floor. In my mind's eye I can still see him come stepping across the square from the Nieuwe Herengracht Bridge, without an overcoat as additional self-chastisement; his books under his right arm, pressed firmly against his body, and his left hand clasping the bunch of snowdrops to his breast; his head thrust forward a little to the right, and on his face, because of the way his mouth drooped at the corners, a pervading expression of indescribable sadness and despair. And when he had come upstairs, there would sound again that singular, profoundly melancholy, deep voice: “Don't be mad at me, Mendes; I have brought you some little flowers again because you are so good to me.”

As far as I can see, to be angry under such circumstances would have been impossible for anybody, not just for me, who had soon discovered that in those days he was consumed by a desire to help the unfortunate. I had noticed it even in my own home, for not only did he show great interest in my deaf and dumb brother, but at the same time he always spoke kindly to and about an aunt of ours whom we had taken in, an impecunious, slightly deformed woman who was slow-witted, and spoke with difficulty, thus provoking the mockery of many people. This aunt tried to make herself useful by “minding the bell,” and as soon as she saw Vincent approach, she would run as quickly as her short old legs would