

**POLISH
LETTERS. VOL. II**

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Polish letters. Vol. II by Jean Paul Marat

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By

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POLISH LETTERS

(From Kamia to his Friend Shava at Cracow.)

SIX weeks ago I embarked for Holland, and after a passage of thirty-six hours I arrived.

Although the inhabitants of this country seem to have a very marked character, I was little impressed with the difference of national peculiarities in passing from England into Holland. I should have been incomparably more so had I traveled thither through France.

The Dutchman has a repulsive manner. His behavior toward you is stern and disagreeable. His demeanor is rustic; his manners are awkward. He knows nothing of the amenities or the conventions of society. He cannot even make a bow.

I was much amused at the embarrassment of one of the great men of Amsterdam. This man, who is a multi-millionaire, actually did not know how to salute his hostess, and when his health was drunk did not know whether to acknowledge the compliment sitting or stand-

ing. I should be much surprised indeed to learn, though, that he was the *most* amusing buffoon in the company.

To his embarrassed exterior, to his repulsive demeanor, the Dutchman adds a cold and stern look. He is serious, but his seriousness is something akin to stupid imbecility. Without mental vivacity, without the least warmth of heart, the Dutchman seems possessed of a measure of good sense. In him the man seems borne down under the weight of matter.

The Hollander is industrious, but without ardor. His work over, he ceases to live; he vegetates. A tranquil spectator of what happens around him, he seems to be in the world, but not of it, and to enjoy to its fullest extent *il dolce far niente*.

In the senate reigns an absolute silence. It would seem that their sole object in meeting was to see each other and to smoke together. They never speak but in monosyllables.

Many among them never open their mouths, except to drink to the health of their companions. To look at them you would swear that they were pieces of furniture placed there to fill up vacancies.

The Dutch women make pretty good wives, but without physical or other culture. Blond

and fat to excess, their figures are quite devoid of grace. They have no graces, no little coquetries; they carry their arms awkwardly; their eyes serve them only to see with; and they can only speak with their tongues, and only express exactly what they think.

Chaste, faithful, pious, they seem to place their whole happiness in the insipid pleasure of making their husbands happy and of bringing up their children.

The inhabitants of these marshes may be happy, but the pleasures of this life were evidently not meant for them.

Written at Amsterdam, —

(From Kamia to his Friend Shava at Cracow.)

HERE the fine arts and the sciences are but little cultivated. The sole profession of the Dutch is commerce. These people think only of money, speak only of money, love only money, and spend their whole lives in amassing it. In a word money is the God in whom the Dutchman lives and moves and has his being.

The only virtue of the Dutch is economy. Their hearts are possessed by greed and avarice, and these passions are of course inimical to expenditure and show. Now when, by dint of their cleverness in commerce and their

uninterrupted labor, the Dutch have scraped to themselves all the gold in the world, how will they enjoy their immense fortune? I think it would be as good as a comedy to see these heavy mechanisms setting the example of display and elegance to the world.

A multitude of diverse causes, moral and physical, concur in forming the character of other nationalities: only physical causes seem to be responsible for that of the Dutch.

The Dutchman's food renders him cold, dull, and phlegmatic. A dull, humid atmosphere makes him sad and taciturn, and neither legislation nor religion nor public opinion is strong enough to counterbalance these qualities. The Dutchman's hunger for gold comes from the physical position of his country. A marshy and very thankless soil compels the inhabitants to draw their subsistence from their industry; to obtain what his own poor country cannot supply, the Dutchman engages with all his soul in avaricious and industrious commerce.

The Dutch are altogether too insensible, too cold to have any passion for display. For if they ever have such a thing as innate imagination, it is speedily exterminated by their habit of calculation; and they thus become brutal-

ized. Their only passions are low and sensual. Generosity, humanity, magnanimity, are not in the Dutchman's vocabulary. If indeed they ever existed rudimentarily within him, they have long since perished from want of cultivation. All the gentler, sweeter sentiments of the heart are to him utterly unknown.

Money having become the means of supplying their needs, — the medium of exchange, — with men of no imagination soon became the substitute for pleasure, became, in short, the first, the supreme good.

Thus, gold usurping the place of everything, they stick at nothing to amass it. The thirst for gold enters all hearts and becomes the general passion; to it they sacrifice everything.

Thus we find that in purely commercial countries there are scarcely any men of talent, men distinguished for high moral character or geniuses or heroes. Such men can exist only in countries where they are appreciated.

Not only are mercantile countries an unfavorable soil for the cultivation of talent, virtue, and genius, but it is their very nature to be so. In consequence of seeing wisdom and merit humiliated before the ostentation of riches and the pomp of lucre, the people learn