Letter 237
The Hague, 22 October 1882

Sunday afternoon
My dear Theo,
I don't need to tell you how delighted I was with your letter and the enclosure, it comes just in time and will be of tremendous help to me.
We are having autumn weather here, rainy and chilly, but full of atmosphere, especially splendid for figures, which stand out in tone against the wet streets and roads reflecting the sky. It is what Mauve, in particular, does so beautifully time and again. So I have been able to do some work on the large watercolour of the crowd of people in front of the lottery office [F 970, JH 222], and I have also started another one of the beach, of which this is the composition [F 982, JH 247].
I entirely agree with what you say about those times now and then when one feels dull-witted in the face of nature or when nature seems to have stopped speaking to us.
I get the same feeling quite often and it sometimes helps if I then tackle something quite different. When I feel jaded with landscape or light effects, I tackle figures, and vice versa. Sometimes there is nothing for it but to wait for it to pass, but many a time I manage to do away with the numbness by changing my subject matter.
However, I am becoming more and more fascinated by the figure. I remember there used to be a time when my feeling for landscape was very strong and I was much more impressed by a painting or drawing which captured a light effect or the atmosphere of a landscape than I was by the figure. Indeed, figure painters in general filled me with a kind of cool respect rather than with warm sympathy
However, I remember very well being most impressed by a drawing of Daumier's: an old man under the chestnut trees in the Champs Elysées (an illustration for Balzac), though the drawing was not all that important. What impressed me so much at the time was something so stout and manly in Daumier's conception, something that made me think It must be good to think and to feel like that and to overlook or ignore a multitude of things and to concentrate on what makes us sit up and think and what touches us as human beings more directly and personally than meadows or clouds.
That is also why I always feel attracted to the figures of both the English draughtsmen and of the English writers, whose Monday-morning-like soberness and studied restraint and prose and analysis is something solid and substantial to which one can hang on in days when one feels weak. Among French writers the same is true of Balzac and Zola.
I don't know the books by Murger you mention, but I hope to become acquainted with them soon.
Did I tell you that I was reading Daudet's Les Rois en Exil? I thought it rather good.
The titles of those books greatly appeal to me, for instance, La Bohème [he is referring to Scènes de la vie Bohème, by Henry Murger]. How far we have strayed nowadays from la bohème of Gavarni's time! It seems to me that there was definitely something warmer and more light-hearted and alive about those days than there is today. But I cannot be certain, and there is much good nowadays, or there could be much more than in fact there is if there were greater solidarity.
At the moment I can see a splendid effect out of my studio window. The city, with its towers and roofs and smoking chimneys, is outlined as a dark, sombre silhouette against a horizon of light. This light is, however, no more than a broad streak over which hangs a heavy raincloud, more concentrated below, torn above by the autumn wind into large shreds and lumps that are being chased away. But that streak of light is making the wet roofs glisten here and there in the dark mass of the city (on a drawing one would achieve this with a stroke of body colour), so that although the mass has a single tone one can still distinguish between red tiles and slates. The Schenkweg runs through the foreground like a glistening streak through the wetness; the poplars have yellow leaves, the banks of the ditches and the meadows are a deep green; the little figures are black. I would have drawn it, or rather tried to draw it, if I hadn't been working hard all afternoon on figures of peat-carriers, which are still too much on my mind to allow room for anything new, and should be allowed to linger.
I long for you so often and think of you so much. What you tell me about the character of some artists in Paris, who live with women, and are less narrow minded than others, perhaps trying desperately to preserve something youthful, I think is shrewdly observed indeed. Such people can be found here as well. It may be even more difficult over there than it is here to preserve some freshness in one's daily life, because to do so there means swimming even more against the tide. How many have not become

desperate in Paris – calmly, rationally, logically and rightly desperate. I have been reading something of that sort about Tassaert, whom I like very much, and I feel sorry that this was what happened to him. All the more, all the more do I consider every effort in that direction worthy of respect. I also think it is possible to achieve success without having to start out with despair. Even though one loses out here and there, and even though one sometimes feels a kind of exhaustion; one must rally and take courage again, even though things should turn out differently from what one originally intended.
Please don't think that I look with contempt on such persons as you describe, just because their lives are not based on serious and well-considered principles. My opinion on the matter is this: what matters is deeds, not some abstract idea. I only approve of principles and think them worth the trouble if they turn into deeds, and I think it is good to reflect and to try to be conscientious, because this concentrates a man's energies and combines his various actions into a whole. The people you describe would, I believe, be more resolute if they thought more clearly about what they were going to do, but for the rest I greatly prefer the likes of them to people who parade their principles without taking the slightest trouble or even thinking about putting them into practice. For the latter gain nothing from the most beautiful principles and the former are precisely the people who, if they come round to living with resolve and thoughtfulness, might do something great. For great things do not done just happen by impulse but are a succession of small things linked together.
What is drawing? How does one learn it? It is working through an invisible iron wall that seems to stand between what one feels and what one can do. How is one to get through that wall – since pounding at it is of no use? In my opinion one has to undermine that wall, filing through it steadily and patiently. And there you are – how can one continue such work assiduously without being distracted or diverted, unless one reflects and orders one's life according to principles? And as it is with art so it is with other things. And great things are not something accidental, they must be distinctly willed.
Whether a man's deeds originate in his principles or his principles in his deeds is something that seems to me as indeterminable (and as little worthy of determination) as the question of which came first, the chicken or the egg. But I consider that trying to develop one's power of thought and will is something positive and of much moment.
I am very curious to know what you will make of the figures I am doing these days, when you eventually see them. That poses another chicken and egg question: must one do figures for a previously planned composition, or combine figures that one has done separately so that they give rise to a composition? It seems to me that it probably comes down to the same thing, provided only that one keeps working.
I conclude with the same thing you said at the end of your letter, that we share a liking for peering behind the scenes, or, in other words, we have a tendency to analyze things. Now I believe that this is precisely the quality one has to have in order to paint – the strength one must exert in painting or drawing. It may be that nature has favoured us to some extent (in any case you and I certainly have it – perhaps we owe it to our boyhood in Brabant and to surroundings that taught us to think more than is usual), but it is really and truly not until later that the artistic sensibility develops and ripens through work. I cannot tell you how you might become a very good painter, but that you have it in you and can bring it out is something I really do believe. Goodbye, my dear fellow, thank you for what you sent me and an affectionate handshake,
Ever yours, Vincent

I have already lit my little stove. My dear fellow, how I wish we could just spend an evening together looking at drawings and sketches and woodcuts, I have some splendid new ones. I hope to get some boys from the orphanage to pose for me this week, I might yet be able to save that drawing of orphans.