

Dear Theo,

My hearty congratulations for Father's birthday, and thanks for your letter, which I was very glad to receive just now. I congratulate you especially on the operation being over. ¹ Such things as you describe make one shudder! May the worst be over now, at least the crisis is past! Poor woman! If women do not always show in their thoughts the energy and elasticity of men, who are disposed towards reflection and analysis, we cannot blame them, at least in my opinion, because in general they have to spend so much more strength than we in suffering pain. They suffer more and are more sensitive.

And though they do not always understand our thoughts, they are sometimes truly capable of understanding when one is good to them. Not always, though, but "the spirit is willing," and there is in women sometimes a curious kind of goodness.

There must be a great load off your mind now that the operation is over.

What a mystery life is, and love is a mystery within a mystery. It certainly never remains the same in a literal sense, but the changes are like the ebb and flow of the tide and leave the sea unchanged.

Since I wrote to you last, I have given my eyes some rest and it has done me good, though they still ache now and then.

Do you know what has come into my mind, that in the first period of a painter's life one unconsciously makes it very hard for oneself – a feeling of not being able to master the work – by an uncertainty as to whether one will ever master it – by a great ambition to make progress, by a lack of self-confidence – one cannot banish a certain feeling of agitation, and one hurries oneself though one doesn't like to be hurried. This cannot be helped, and it is a time which one must go through, and which in my opinion cannot and should not be otherwise.

In the studies, too, one is conscious of a nervousness and a certain dryness which is the exact opposite of the calm, broad touch one strives for, and yet it doesn't work well if one applies oneself too much to acquiring that broadness of touch.

This gives one a feeling of nervous unrest and agitation, and one feels an oppression as on summer days before a thunderstorm. I had that feeling again just now, and when I have it, I change my work, just to make a new start.

That trouble one has at the beginning sometimes gives an awkwardness to the studies.

But I do not take this as a discouragement, because I have noticed it in myself as well as in others, who afterwards just slowly got rid of it.

And I believe that sometimes one keeps that painful way of working one's whole life, but not always with so little result as in the beginning. What you write about Lhermitte is quite in keeping with the review of the exhibition of Black and White. They, too, speak about the bold touch which can almost be compared only to Rembrandt's. I should like to know such an artist's conception of Judas; you write of his having drawn Judas before the scribes, and I think that Victor Hugo could describe that in detail, so that one would see it, but to paint those expressions would be more difficult still.

I found a page by Daumier: "ceux qui ont vu un drame" [those who have seen a Drama] and "ceux qui ont vu une vaudeville." [those who have seen a vaudeville show] I have developed a growing longing to see more of Daumier's work. There is pith and a sober depth in him, he is witty and yet full of sentimental passion; sometimes, for instance in "The Drunkards," and possibly also in "The Barricade," which I do not know, I find a passion which can be compared to the white heat of iron.

The same thing occurs in certain heads by Frans Hals, for instance, it is so sober that it seems cold; but when you look at it for a short while you are astonished to see how someone working apparently with so much emotion and so completely wrapped up in nature had at the same time the presence of mind to put it down with such a firm hand. I found the same thing in studies and drawings by de Groux; perhaps Lhermitte operates also at that white heat. And Menzel too.

There are sometimes passages in Balzac or Zola, for instance in Père Goriot, where words reach a degree of passion that is white-hot.

I sometimes think I will make an experiment, and try to work in quite a different way, that is, to dare more and to risk more, but I am not sure that I should not first do more by way of studying the figure directly from the model.

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I am also looking for a way to shut off the light in the studio, or to let it in as I please. It doesn't fall enough from above, I think, and there is too much of it. For the time being I shut it off with cardboard now and then, but I must try and get the landlord to produce some shutters.

What was in the letter I told you I had torn up was quite in keeping with what you say.

But while finding more and more that one is not perfect oneself, and makes mistakes, and that other people do likewise, so that difficulties continually arise which are the opposite of illusions, I think that those who do not lose courage and who do not become indifferent, ripen through it, and one must bear hardships in order to ripen.

Sometimes I cannot believe that I am only thirty years old, I feel so much older.

I feel older only when I think that most people who know me consider me a failure, and how it really might be so, if some things do not change for the better; and when I think it might be so, I feel it so vividly that it quite depresses me and makes me as downhearted as if it were really so. In a calmer and more normal mood I am sometimes glad that thirty years have passed, and not without teaching me something for the future, and I feel strength and energy for the next thirty years, if I should live that long. And in my imagination I see years of serious work before me, and happier ones than the first thirty. How it will be in reality doesn't depend only on myself, the world and circumstances must also contribute to it.

What concerns me and is a source of responsibility is that I should make the most of the circumstances and try my best to make progress.

The age of thirty is, for the working man, just the beginning of a period of some stability, and as such one feels young and full of energy.

But, at the same time, a phase of life is past. This makes one melancholy, thinking some things will never come back. And it is no silly sentimentalism to feel a certain regret. Well, many things really begin at the age of thirty, and certainly all is not over then. But one doesn't expect out of life what one has already learned that it cannot give, but rather one begins to see more and more clearly that life is only a kind of sowing time, and the harvest is not here.

Perhaps that's the reason that one sometimes feels indifferent toward the opinion of the world, and if that opinion depresses us all too strongly, one may throw it off.

Perhaps I had better tear up this letter as well.

I understand perfectly that you are quite absorbed by the condition of the woman; that is one of the things which are necessary for her rescue, and also for her recovery.

For one must throw oneself headlong into it, and the English saying is true: "If you want it well done, you must do it yourself, you mustn't leave it to others." That means that one must keep in hand the care in general and the management of the whole.

We had a few real spring days, for instance last Monday, which I enjoyed very much.

The cycle of the seasons is a thing which is strongly felt by the people. For instance, in a neighbourhood like the Geest and in those courts of almshouses or "homes of charity," the winter is always a difficult, anxious and oppressive time, and spring is a deliverance. If one pays attention, one sees that such a first spring day is a kind of Gospel message.

And it is pathetic to see so many grey, withered faces come out of doors on such a day, not to do something special, but as if to convince themselves that spring is there. So, for instance, all kinds of people, of whom one would not expect it, throng the market around the spot where a man sells crocuses, snowdrops, bluebells and other bulbs. Sometimes a dried-up government clerk, apparently a kind of Jusserand in a threadbare black coat with greasy collar – that he should be beside the snowdrops is a pretty picture! I think the poor people and the painters have in common that feeling for the weather and the cycle of the seasons. Of course everybody feels it, but for the well-to-do middle-class it is not so important, and it doesn't affect much their frame of mind in general. I thought it a characteristic saying for a navy: "In winter I suffer as much from the cold as the winter corn does."

Now for your patient too spring will be welcome, may it do her good! How terrible that operation was, at least I was frightened by the description.

Rappard is recovering, did I tell you he had brain fever? It will be some time before he can go to work again, but he is starting to take a walk now and then.

If my eyes do not improve, I'll follow your advice and bathe them with tea. As it is they are getting better, so for the present I'll leave them alone. For they never troubled me before, except once this winter when I had toothache, so I believe it is nothing but strain and overwork.

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On the contrary, lately my eyes can stand the fatigue of drawing better than previously.

Write soon again if you can, and believe me, with a handshake,

Yours, Vincent

I do not know whether you know those little almshouses on the Brouwersgracht opposite the hospital. I should like to draw there when the weather permits. This week I made a few scratches there already.

They are a few rows of small houses with little gardens which I think belong to the charity board.

1. A young woman whom Theo had befriended when she was sick and alone in Paris – to Vincent's great pleasure, since this paralleled his own behaviour towards Sien – had had to be operated on for a tumour of the foot.