

Drenthe, probably Friday 16 November 1883

Dear brother,

I must just tell you about a trip to Zweeloo, the village where Liebermann stayed for a long time and did studies for his painting at the last Salon, the one with the washerwomen. Where Ter Meulen and Jules Bakhuyzen spent some time also.

Imagine a trip across the heath at 3 o'clock in the morning in a small open cart (I went with the man with whom I'm lodging, who had to go to Assen market), along a road, or "diek" as they call it here, which had been banked up with mud instead of sand. It was even better than the barge.

When it was just starting to get light, and the cocks were starting to crow everywhere round the huts scattered over the heath, everything, the few cottages we passed – surrounded by wispy poplars whose yellow leaves one could hear falling – a stumpy old tower in a little churchyard with an earth bank and a beech hedge, the flat scenery of heath or cornfields, everything was exactly like the most beautiful Corots. A stillness, a mystery, a peace as only he has painted it. When we arrived at Zweeloo at 6 o'clock in the morning it was still quite dark – I had seen the real Corots even earlier in the morning.

The ride into the village was so beautiful. Enormous mossy roofs of houses, stables, covered sheepfolds, barns. The very broad-fronted houses here are set among oak trees of a superb bronze. Tones in the moss of gold-green, in the ground of reddish or bluish or yellowish dark lilac-greys, tones of inexpressible purity in the green of the little cornfields, tones of black in the wet tree trunks, standing out against the golden rain of swirling, teeming autumn leaves, which hang in loose clumps – as if they had been blown there, loose and with the light filtering through them – from the poplars, the birches, the limes and the apple trees.

The sky smooth and bright, shining, not white but a barely detectable lilac, white vibrant with red, blue and yellow, reflecting everything and felt everywhere above one, hazy and merging with the thin mist below, fusing everything in a gamut of delicate greys.

I could not find a single painter in Zweeloo, however, and people said they never turn up in the winter. Whereas I, on the contrary, hope to be there this winter. Since there were no painters, I decided not to wait for my landlord's return, but to walk back instead and do some drawings on the way. So I began to make a sketch of the little apple orchard where Liebermann did his large painting. And then back along the road we had driven down early in the morning. Right now the whole area round Zweeloo is nothing but young corn, sometimes as far as the eye can see, the greenest of greens I know. With a sky above of a delicate lilac-white producing an effect I think cannot be painted, but which, as I see it, is the keynote one must understand in order to find the key to other effects.

A black stretch of earth, flat, unending, a clear sky of delicate lilac-white. The earth sprouts that young corn as if growing a mould of it. That's what the good, fertile lands of Drenthe really are – and all in a misty atmosphere.

Think of Brion's Le dernier jour de la création – well, yesterday it felt as if I understood the meaning of that painting. The poor soil of Drenthe is the same, except that the black earth is even blacker – like soot – not lilac-black like the furrows, and overgrown in a melancholy way with perpetually rotting heather and peat.

I notice it everywhere – chance effects on that infinite background: in the peat moors, the turf huts; in the fertile areas, those most primitive hulks of farmhouses and sheepfolds with low, very low little walls and enormous mossy roofs. Oak trees all round them. Journeying through these parts for hour after hour, one feels that there really is nothing but that infinite earth, that mould of corn or heather, that infinite sky. Horses and men seem as small as fleas. One is unaware of anything else, however large it may be in itself; one knows only that there is earth and sky. However, in one's capacity of a little speck watching other little specks – leaving the infinite aside – one discovers that every little speck is a Millet. I passed a little old church, exactly, but exactly like The Church at Gréville in Millet's little painting in the Luxembourg. Here, instead of the small peasant with his spade, though, there was here a shepherd with a flock of sheep walking along the hedge. In the background was a vista, not of the sea, but of a sea of young corn, a sea of furrows instead of waves. The effect produced was the same. Then I saw ploughmen, hard at work, a sand cart, shepherds, road menders, dung carts. In a small roadside inn, I drew a little old woman at her spinning wheel, a small dark silhouette out of a fairy tale – a small dark silhouette against a bright window through which one saw the bright sky and a little path through the delicate green, and a few geese pecking at the grass.

And then, when dusk fell, imagine the silence, the peace!

Imagine then a short avenue of tall poplars with autumn leaves, imagine a wide muddy road, all black mud, with heath stretching to infinity on the right, heath stretching to infinity on the left, a couple of black triangular silhouettes of sod-built huts, the red glow from small fires shining through the small windows, with a few pools of dirty, yellowish water reflecting the sky, in which fallen trees lie rotting into peat. Imagine that sea of mud at dusk with a whitish sky overhead, thus everything black against white. And in that sea of mud a shaggy figure – the

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shepherd – and a mass of oval shapes, half wool, half mud, jostling one another, pushing one another out of the way – the flock. You see them coming, you stand in their midst, you turn around and follow them. Laboriously and reluctantly they work their way up the muddy road. The farm beckons in the distance, a few mossy roofs and piles of straw and peat among the poplars. The sheepfold is again like the silhouette of a triangle, the entrance dark. The door stands wide open like a dark cave. The light of the sky glimmers once more through the chinks of the boards behind it. The whole caravan, masses of wool and mud, disappears into that cave – the shepherd and a little woman with a lantern shut the doors behind them.

That return of the flock in the dusk was the finale of the symphony I heard yesterday. The day passed like a dream, I had been so immersed in that heart-rending music all day that I had literally forgotten to eat and drink – I had had a slice of black bread and a cup of coffee in the little inn where I had drawn the spinning wheel. The day was over and from dawn till dusk, or rather from one night till the next, I had lost myself in that symphony. I came home and as I sat by the fire it occurred to me that I felt hungry, no, I realized I was ravenous.

But now you can see what it is like here. One feels just as if one were at, say, an exhibition des cent chef-d'œuvres. What does one bring back from such a day? Merely a number of rough sketches. Yet there is something else one brings back – a quiet delight in one's work.

Be sure to write soon. It is Friday today, but your letter has not yet arrived, I'm waiting for it eagerly. It takes time to get it [the money] changed, too, because it has to go back again to Hooegeveen and then here again. We're not sure how it's going to work out, otherwise I should tell you now: perhaps the simplest thing would be to send the money once a month. In any case, write again soon. With a handshake,

Ever yours, Vincent