

Letter 357
Nuenen, c. 18 – 23 February 1884

Dear Theo,

Just a word to tell you – that partly as a result of your letter, in which you mention pen-and-ink drawings – I can send you 5 such drawings of weavers, which I drew after my painted studies, and which are a little different – and I think more vigorous of technique, than the pen drawings of mine you have seen up to now. I am working at them early and late, for except the painted studies, and the pen-and-ink drawings, I have also some new watercolours of them on the easel.

My thoughts have been with you often recently, partly owing to a little book which you sent originally and which I borrowed from L. – Poems by François Coppeé. I knew only very few of them, but they had already greatly struck me at the time.

He is one of the true artists – “que y mettent leur peau” – which is evident from more than one poignant confession. Artist the more because he finds his inspiration in so many very diverse things, and can paint a third-class waiting room full of emigrants who are spending the night there – everything grey and gloomy and melancholy – and in another mood he can draw a little marquise dancing a minuet, as elegant as a little figure by Watteau

That losing oneself in the present – that being quite carried away and inspired by the surroundings in which one chances to be – how can one help it? And even if one should resist it at will, of what use would it be, why shouldn't one yield to what is directly before one, this being après tout, the surest way to create something.

I was struck by the last poem in the book, called: “Désir dans le spleen,” which I copy to remind you of it:

Tout vit, tout aime, et moi, triste et seul, je me dresse
Ainsi qu'un arbre mort sur le ciel de printemps...

[All life, all love, and I, sad and alone, I am standing
like a dead tree against the sky of spring...]

and then this:

DOULEUR BERCEÉE

Toi que j'ai vu pareil au chêne foudroyé
Je te retrouve époux, je te retrouve père...

[SORROW ASSUAGED

You, who I have seen like a lightning-struck oak,
I find you again, a husband, I find you again, a father...]

And then this:

BLESSURE ROUVERTE

O mon coeur, es tu donc si débile et si lâche,
Et serais tu pareil au forçât qu'on relâche...

[REOPENED WOUND

Oh my heart, are you then so feeble and so cowardly,
And would you be like a convict whom they release...]

Sure this is poetry, and of the best.

“Désir dans le spleen” especially I think so true, it paints how, in those very souls that are exhausted and on the verge of dropping, there arises at moments that infinite renewal of desire, as if they had no past behind

them. I thought of Rembrandt's "Jewish Bride," and what Thoreau says of it. Thoreau in his prime, and Théophile Gautier and so many others – how things have changed since then – and how much duller everything has become. If one wants to keep some of the sacred fire alive nowadays, in short, one must show it as little as possible to others.

Did you receive the package I sent you last week? I must keep the pen-and-ink drawings here for another week, because I need them to finish other things which I started at the same time.

However, you will receive them soon, but please let me know if the package arrived all right, and if it had enough stamps.

Because drawings perhaps count as manuscripts, more may be due for them.

Goodbye, I hope you will be able to find some use for them.

Yours sincerely, Vincent

Father wrote you a few days ago about Mother; since then all is well, and today the doctor said that at first he had not dared to hope that all would go so favourably.