

My dear Theo,

I think what you say in your letter is quite right, that Rousseau and artists such as Bodmer are in any case men, and that one would want the world to be peopled with men like them – indeed, yes, that’s how I feel as well. And that J. H. Weissenbruch knows & does the muddy towpaths, the stunted willows, the foreshortenings & the skilful & strange perspectives of the canals, as Daumier does the lawyers, I think that’s perfect. Tersteeg has done well to buy some of his work. The reason people like that don’t sell is, I think, because there are too many dealers trying to sell other things with which they deceive & mislead the public.

Do you know that even today, when I chance upon the story of some energetic industrialist, or even more of some publisher, I still feel the same indignation, the same rage as I used to when I was with G. & Cie.

Life passes in this way, time does not return, but I am working furiously for the very reason that I know that opportunities for work do not recur.

Especially in my case, where a more violent attack could destroy my ability to paint for good.

During the attacks I feel cowardly in the face of the pain and suffering – more cowardly than is justified – and perhaps it is this moral cowardice itself, which previously I had no desire to cure, that now makes me eat for two, work hard, and limit my relations with the other patients for fear of falling ill again – in short, I am trying to recover, like someone who has meant to commit suicide, but then makes for the bank because he finds the water too cold.

My dear brother, you know that I came to the south and threw myself into work for a thousand reasons – looking for a different light, believing that observing nature under a brighter sky might give one a more accurate idea of the way the Japanese feel and draw. Wanting, finally, to see this stronger sun, because one has the feeling that unless one knows it one would not be able to understand the pictures of Delacroix, as far as execution and technique are concerned, and because one feels that the colours of the prism are veiled in the mists of the north.

All this remains more or less true. Then if one adds that heartfelt leaning towards the south Daudet described in Tartarin, and the fact that from time to time I have also found friends and things to love here, then you will understand that however horrible I find my illness, I have the feeling that I have formed ties here that are a little too strong – ties which could later make me long to come back and work here again. Despite all this it could be that I shall be returning to the north fairly soon.

Yes, for I shall not conceal from you that in the same way that I am at present eating ravenously, so I have a terrible craving to see my friends again and the countryside of the north.

Work is going very well, I am discovering things I have sought in vain for years, and, aware of that, I am constantly reminded of that saying of Delacroix’s you know, that he discovered painting when he had neither breath nor teeth left. Oh well, with my mental illness, I think of so many other artists suffering mentally, and tell myself that it doesn’t stop one from carrying on one’s trade as painter as if nothing had gone wrong.

When I see that here the attacks tend to take an absurdly religious turn, I might almost believe that this actually necessitates a return to the north. Don’t say too much about it to the doctor when you see him – but I don’t know whether it comes from living so many months both at the hospital in Arles and here in these old cloisters.

In fact, I really shouldn’t live in such surroundings, the street would be better. I am not indifferent, and even as I suffer, religious thoughts sometimes give me great consolation. I had a piece of bad luck this last time during my illness – that lithograph of Delacroix’s, La Pietà, along with some other sheets, fell into some oil and paint and was ruined.

I was very sad about it – so I have been busy painting it and you will see it one day on a size 5 or 6 canvas [F 630, JH 1775]. I have made a copy of it which I think has some feeling [F 757, JH 1776]. Besides, having seen Daniel and Les Odalisques and the portrait of Bruyas and La mulâtresse in Montpellier not long ago, I am still under the impression they made on me.

That is what uplifts me, and also reading a fine book such as one by Beecher Stowe or by Dickens. But what disturbs me is the constant sight of these good women, who both believe in the Virgin of Lourdes and make up that sort of thing, and realizing that one is a prisoner of an administration that is only too willing to cultivate these unhealthy religious aberrations when it should be concerned with curing them. So I say again, better to go, if not into penal servitude, at least into the army.

I reproach myself with my cowardice, I ought to have defended my studio better, even if it meant coming to blows with the gendarmes & the neighbours. Others would have used a revolver in my place, and had one killed gawking idiots like that, as an artist one would certainly have been acquitted. It would have been better had I done that, but I was cowardly and drunk – ill too, but I wasn’t brave.

I’m also very frightened in the face of the suffering brought on by these attacks, and so I don’t know if my zeal is anything other than what I said, it is like that of someone who means to commit suicide, but then struggles for the shore because he finds the water too cold.

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But listen, to be in board and lodgings as Braat was when I saw him that time – happily long ago – no, and no again.

It would be different if old Pissarro or Vignon, for instance, would care to take me in. Well, I'm a painter myself – it could be arranged, and it would be better if the money went to feed painters than to the excellent nuns.

Yesterday I asked M. Peyron point-blank, since you are going to Paris, what would you say if I suggested that you be kind enough to take me with you? His reply was evasive – that it was too sudden, that he would have to write to you beforehand.

But he is very kind and very indulgent towards me, and while he doesn't have the final say here, far from it, I have him to thank for many liberties.

After all, one shouldn't only make pictures, one should see people too, and every now and then, by associating with others, recuperate a little and stock up on new ideas.

I've abandoned any hope that it won't come back – on the contrary, we must face the fact that I will have an attack from time to time. But at those times I could go into an asylum or even into the town prison where they usually have an isolation cell.

Don't be anxious, in any case – the work is going well, and look, I don't need to tell you that I've still got a lot of things to do, wheat fields, &c.

I've done the portrait of the attendant [Lost painting] and have got a copy of it for you [F 629, JH 1774]. It makes a fairly curious contrast with the portrait I've done of myself, in which the look is vague and veiled, whereas he has a military air and small, lively, black eyes.

I have given it to him, and I'll do his wife as well, if she wants to pose. She is a woman whose looks have faded, a poor soul, resigned to her fate, nothing out of the ordinary and so insignificant that I simply long to paint that dusty blade of grass. I talked to her sometimes when I was doing some olive trees behind their little house, and she told me then that she didn't believe I was ill – in fact, you would now say the same if you saw me working, my mind clear and my fingers so sure that I drew that Pietà by Delacroix without taking a single measurement, though there are those four hands and arms in the foreground – gestures and postures that are not exactly easy or simple.

Please send me the canvas soon, if at all possible, and I think I'm also going to need 10 more tubes of zinc white.

All the same, I'm sure that if one is brave then recovery comes from within, through the complete acceptance of suffering and death, and through the surrender of one's will and love of self. But that's no good to me, I like to paint, to see people and things and everything that makes our life – artificial, if you like. Yes, real life would be something else, but I don't think I belong to that category of souls who are ready to live, and also ready to suffer, at any moment.

What an odd thing the touch, the stroke of the brush, is.

In the open air, exposed to the wind, to the sun, to people's curiosity, one works as best one can, one fills one's canvas regardless. Yet that is how one captures the true and the essential – the most difficult part. But when, after some time, one resumes the study and alters the brushstrokes in keeping with the objects – the result is without doubt more harmonious and pleasant to look at, and one can add whatever serenity and happiness one feels.

Ah, I shall never be able to convey my impressions of some of the figures I have seen here. Certainly, this is the new road, this road to the south, but men from the north find it difficult to follow. And I can already see myself one day in the future enjoying some small success, and missing the solitude and the anguish as I watched the reaper in the field below through the iron bars of my cell. It's an ill wind...

To succeed, to enjoy lasting good fortune, one must have a different temperament from mine. I shall never do what I could have done and ought to have wanted and pursued.

But, having these dizzy spells so often, I can never be more than fourth or fifth rate. Although I am well aware of the worth and originality and superiority of Delacroix or Millet, for example, I can still say, yes, I too am something, I too can achieve something. But I must take these artists as my starting point, and then produce the little I am capable of in the same way.

So old Pissarro has been dealt two cruel blows all at once.<sup>1</sup> As soon as I read about it, I thought of asking you if there would be any way of going and staying with him. If you paid him the same as here, he would find it worth his while, for I don't need much – except for work. So ask him straight out, and if he doesn't like the idea, I could easily go and stay with Vignon.

I am a little afraid of Pont-Aven, there are so many people there. But what you say about Gauguin interests me very much. And I still tell myself that Gauguin and I will perhaps work together again. I know that G. can do even better things than he has done, but how to reassure him! I still hope to do his portrait. Have you seen that portrait he did of me painting sunflowers? My face has certainly brightened up since then, but it was really me, extremely tired and charged with electricity as I was then.

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Yet to see the country, one must live with the ordinary folk and in the cottages, the inns, etc. And I said that to Boch, who complained he had seen nothing that had tempted him or made an impression on him.

I walked around with him for two days, and I showed him how to do thirty pictures as different from the north as Morocco would be. I'd be curious to know what he's doing at the moment.

And then, do you know why Eug. Delacroix's pictures – the religious and historical pictures, La barque du Christ, La Pietà, Les croisés, have this allure? Because Eug. Delacroix, when he did a Gethsemane, had been beforehand to see what an olive grove was like on the spot, and the same for the sea whipped up by a strong mistral, and because he must have said to himself, these people we know from history, doges of Venice, crusaders, apostles, holy women, were of the same type as, and lived in a similar way to, their present-day descendants.

And I must tell you, and you can see it in La Berceuse, however unsuccessful and feeble that attempt may be, if I had had the strength to continue, then I should have done portraits of saints and holy women from life which would have seemed to belong to another age, and they would have been drawn from the bourgeoisie of today and yet would have had something in common with the very earliest Christians.

The emotions that are aroused are, however, too strong, so I'll leave it at that – but later, later, I don't promise not to return to the charge.

What a great man Fromentin was – he will always be the guide for any who wish to see the east. He, the first to establish a link between Rembrandt and the south, between Potter and what he himself saw.

You are right a thousand times over – I mustn't think about all that – to calm down I must do things – even if they're only studies of cabbages and lettuces, and after calming down, then – whatever I am capable of.

When I see them again, I'll do some copies of those studies of the Diligence of Tarascon, the Vineyard, the Harvest, and above all of the Red Tavern, that Night Café which is the most characteristic of all as far as colour is concerned. But the white figure in the middle must be done all over again for the colour, and better composed. Still, I'd go so far as to say that this is the real south, and a calculated combination of greens and reds.

My strength has been all too quickly exhausted, but in the distance I can see the possibility of others doing an infinite number of fine things. And again and again there is truth in the idea that to make the journey easier for others it would have been a good thing to set up a studio somewhere in this area.

To make the journey in one go from the north to Spain, for example, is not a good thing, you will not see what you should see – you must get your eyes accustomed gradually to the different light.

I really don't need to see the Titians and Velásquez in the galleries, I've seen so many types in the flesh that have given me a better picture of the south now than before my journey.

My God, my God, those good people among artists who say that Delacroix is not of the true east. Now look, is the true east what Parisians like Gérôme make of it? Because you paint a bit of sunny wall from nature, well and truly according to our northern way of seeing things, does that prove that you have seen the people of the east? That was what Delacroix was searching for, and it in no way prevented him from painting walls in La noce juive and Les odalisques.

Isn't that true? – and then Degas says that it costs too much to drink in the taverns and paint pictures at the same time. I don't deny it, but would he rather I went into the cloisters or the churches? It is there that I myself get frightened. That's why I make a bid to escape with this letter.

With many handshakes for you and Jo,

Ever yours, Vincent

I still have to congratulate you on the occasion of Mother's birthday. I wrote to them yesterday, but the letter has not yet gone because I have not had the presence of mind to finish it. It is queer that already, two or three times before, I had had the idea of going to Pissarro's; this time, after your telling me of his recent misfortunes, I do not hesitate to ask you this.

Yes, we must finish with this place, I cannot do the two things at once, work and take no end of pains to live with these queer patients here – it is upsetting.

In vain I tried to force myself to go downstairs. And yet it is nearly two months since I have been out in the open air.

In the long run I shall lose the faculty for work here, and that is where I begin to call a halt, and I shall send them then – if you agree – about their business.

And then to go on paying for it, no, then one or other of the artists who is hard up will agree to keep house with me. It is fortunate that you can write saying you are well, and Jo too, and that her sister is with you.

I very much wish that, when your child comes, I might be back – not with you, certainly not, that is impossible, but in the neighbourhood of Paris with another painter. I could mention a third alternative, my going to the Jouves, who have a lot of children and quite a household.

You understand that I have tried to compare the second attack with the first, and I only tell you this, it seemed to me to stem from some influence or other from outside, rather than from within myself. I may be mistaken, but

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however it may be, I think you will feel it quite right that I have rather a horror of all religious exaggeration. The good M. Peyron will tell you heaps of things, probabilities and possibilities, and involuntary acts. Very good, but if he is more precise than that I shall believe none of it. And we shall see then what he will be precise about, if he is precise. The treatment of patients in this hospital is certainly easy, one could follow it even while travelling, for they do absolutely nothing; they leave them to vegetate in idleness and feed them with stale and slightly spoiled food. And I will tell you now that from the first day I refused to take this food, and until my attack I ate only bread and a little soup, and as long as I remain here I shall continue this way. It is true that after this attack M. Peyron gave me some wine and meat, which I accepted willingly the first days, but I wouldn't want to be an exception to the rule for long, and it is right to respect the regular rules of the establishment. I must also say that M. Peyron does not give me much hope for the future, and this I think right, he makes me realize properly that everything is doubtful, that one can be sure of nothing beforehand. I myself expect it to return, but it is just that work takes up my mind so thoroughly, that I think that with the physique I have, things may continue for a long time in this way.

The idleness in which these poor unfortunates vegetate is a pest, but there, it is a general evil in the towns and countryside under this stronger sunshine, and having learnt a different way of life, certainly it is my duty to resist it. I finish this letter by thanking you again for yours and begging you to write to me again soon, and with many handshakes in thought.

1. Pissarro's mother had recently died and he had also had an eye operation.