

Amice Rappard,

I want to write you another letter while you are travelling.¹ Thanks for the package of books. I should like to apply Zola's own words about Hugo to Zola's *Mes Haines*: "Je voudrais démontrer qu'étant donné un tel homme sur un tel sujet le résultat ne pourrait être un autre livre qu'il n'est." [I wanted to demonstrate that given such a man writing on such a subject, the result could only be such a book.] And moreover Zola's own words on the same occasion: "Je ne cesserai de répéter: la critique de ce livre, telle qu'elle s'est exercée, me paraît une monstrueuse injustice." [I won't stop repeating: the criticism of this book, as it is exercised, seems to me a monstrous injustice.]

I'll very gladly begin in this matter by saying that I consequently do not belong to those who think ill of Zola for writing such a book. Through it I come to know Zola, I come to know Zola's weak point – deficient ideas on the art of painting – préjugés instead of judgement juste in this special matter. But, my dear friend, shall I feel offended by a friend of mine because of a fault in his character? – far be it from me. On the contrary, I love him all the more for his fault. So I read the articles on the Salon with a very peculiar feeling; I thought him enormously mistaken, his ideas entirely wrong, except partly his appreciation of Manet – I think Manet clever too – but it is very interesting to read Zola's ideas about art, as interesting, so to speak, as a landscape by a figure painter, for instance. It isn't his genre, it's superficial – incorrect, but what a conception – not carried through – never mind – not quite clear – never mind – it makes one think and is original and at least sparkling with life. But for all that, it's wrong and most inaccurate and unjustified. It is very interesting to hear what he has to say about Erckmann-Chatrion. Here he doesn't shoot so wildly at random as when he talks about pictures, and his criticism hits the mark damned accurately at times. I take the greatest pleasure in permitting him to reproach Erckmann-Chatrion for mixing a certain amount of egoism with his [*sic*, their] morality. He is furthermore right in saying that when Erckmann-Chatrion starts [*sic*] describing Parisian life he [*sic*] gets too insipid because he is not at home with the subject. As for this criticism, however, there is the question by way of contrast, Is Zola at home with the subject of the Alsace? – and if he were, wouldn't he be more interested in Erckmann's figures, which are as beautiful as those of Knaus and Vautier?

As regards the "little mustard seed" of egoism in most of the characters – and Erckmann seems to side with them – Old Rabbi David and Wagner and Thérèse – I think here the somewhat egoistic Erckmann-Chatrion approach the sublime, and he [*sic*] is hors ligne because of this.

Zola has this much in common with Balzac, that he knows little about painting. Two types of painters in Zola's works – Claude Lantier in *Le Ventre de Paris* and another one in *Thérèse Raquin* – vague shadows of Manet, I think – a kind of impressionist. So much for that.

Well, Balzac's painters are enormously tedious, very boring.

Now, here I should like to go on talking about myself, but I am no critic. But I want to add this: I am glad he lands Taine one in the eye; Taine deserves it, for at times he is irritating with his mathematical analysis. But despite that he (Taine) arrives through it at some curiously profound statements. So I read one of his pronouncements – about Dickens and Carlyle – "Le fond du caractère anglais, c'est l'absence du bonheur." [the foundation of the English character is the absence of happiness.] Now I won't insist on the greater or lesser correctness of these words, but will point out that such words are proofs of very deep reflection, of forcing the eyes to penetrate into the darkness until one has finally seen something in it, whereas anybody else would see nothing. I think those words beautiful, damned beautiful, and they mean more to me than a thousand other words on the same problem, and so in this case I have the greatest respect for Taine.

Now I am delighted to be able to look through the Boughtons and Abbeys at my leisure. I think "In the Potato Field" the most beautiful of all, and the "Bell Ringers" by Abbey. Text somewhat dry, somewhat cluttered with stories about hotels and antique dealers – I enjoy reading it. Why so? – for the same reason that I read that book by Zola – because of the personality of the man who wrote it.

Have you noticed that Zola doesn't mention Millet at all? And yet I have read descriptions by Zola of a village churchyard and a deathbed and the funeral of a poor old peasant which were as beautiful as if they were Millets. Consequently this omission is probably due to his not being acquainted with Millet's work.

I also want to tell you that I have found an uncommonly beautiful sheet by T. Green, a brother or something of C. Green. It is a "feast" in a London foundling hospital, orphan girls of some kind sitting at the table. Oh, you'll be crazy about it.

By the same, a smaller one besides, "A City Congregation," drawn as delicately, as exquisitely as "Braemar" by our friend J.M.L.R.

I have found two more sheets by this sphinx J.M.L.R. – whose name we have not been able to decipher so far, but whom I suppose to be a brother, or at least a relation, of W. M. Ridley – one "The Ascent of Mount Vesuvius" and the other "A Game of Football," both of them good, but not so excellent as the "Braemar

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Coach.” I know a “Salmon Fishers” by him too and also “Volunteers in Camp”; the latter sheet gave me a clue to his name.

And further, by A. Hunt, “A Procession of Monks in the Snow,” as beautiful as a Legros; by W. M. Ridley, “London Bridge” and “Emigrants”; by Buckmann, two “Markets” drawn particularly broadly and boldly and in a wholehearted manner.

By Barnard, “Hampstead Heath” – “First to Come, Last to Go” – “How the Poor Live.”

By Hopkins, “Children on the Sea Beach,” very delicate of tone. By Millets [? – probably Millais] himself, a beautiful sheet, “Christmas Stories.”

By Birken Forster, “Winter Landscapes” and “Christmas Time,” very cozy.

Two important Gavarnis, first rates, “Forts de la Halle” [Porters of the Vegetable Market], “Dames de la Halle” [Women of the Vegetable Market] and “Les Étrennes” [The Gifts].

Then Régameys – beautiful Japanese motifs and a very large sheet, a masterpiece, “The Diamond Field,” and another large composition, “Le Boeuf gras” [The Fat Ox].

And by M. F. a sheet of medium size representing the treadmill in a prison, as beautiful as a Régamey.

By I don’t know whom, a marvellous thing of the steelworks in Sheffield; it is called “The Fork Grinders.” It is in the style of Edmond Morin, that is to say, his most compact and concise style.

You see, it isn’t so very much, but they are beautiful things, every one of them, and I consider them an important acquisition.

By Howard Pyle, a very fine “Figure of a Woman,” and also beautiful landscapes by I. Reud.

Perhaps there are more, but these are the most important.

If you have already gone away on your trip, then tell me how your drawing is getting on.

I am working on the “Potato Diggers”; I also have a single figure of an old man and then a series of rough studies done during the potato harvest – a man burning weeds, a fellow with a sack, another one with a wheelbarrow, etc.

When you have returned from your trip I hope you will take measures to pay me an early visit.

I have also done another “Sower,” perhaps the seventh or eighth study of that subject. This time I have put him in the open air on a large field with little clods of earth and a sky above it. I want very much to ask Zola a question that I should like to put to others too – “Just tell me, is it really true that there is no difference between a red earthenware dish with a cod in it, for instance, and, say, the figure of a digger or a sower? Is there or isn’t there a difference between Rembrandt and Van Beyeren (technically equally clever), between Volton and Millet?”

Have you paid attention to that new magazine, Pictorial News? There are good things in it now and then, but most of them aren’t worth much.

My dear friend, I wish we could meet more often, but qu’y faire! Do write again, if you have time and feel so inclined. I don’t think the summer numbers of the Graphic and the London News particularly good. The Graphic has a beautiful Caldecott, however, which is the best one. And some things by Reinhardt, not of the best.

London News, Caton Woodvilles again.

I suppose you will think the sheets I wrote about more interesting. “Diamond Field” by Régamey isn’t striking at all at first sight, but the more you look at it the more you admire it. The T. Greens are masterpieces.

My brother wrote me a letter about an exceptionally fine exhibition in Paris, etc., “Les Cent Chefs-d’Oeuvre” [The Hundred Masterpieces].

Adieu, my dear friend, a pleasant journey, remember to write to me, i.e. if there is time for it. With a handshake,
Ever yours, Vincent

1. See letter 298 to Theo.