

Dear brother,

It is Sunday today and you are not out of my thoughts for a moment. I should think it is quite appropriate to apply to business the words “plus tu y resteras plus ça t’embêtera” [the more you stay in it the more it will bore you], and to painting, “plus ça t’amusera,” using “amusera” in the more serious sense of energy, cheerfulness, vitality.

Oh, I said I should give Tom, Dick and Harry their due – by all means – let’s do; but having done justice to those things, aren’t they absurd, those formalities and conventions – in fact, aren’t they really bad?

In order to maintain a certain rank, one is obliged to commit certain villainies, falsehoods – willingly and knowingly, premeditatedly. That’s what I call the fatal side, even of the rayon noir, let alone when there is no rayon at all.

Now take, for instance, the painters of Barbizon: not only do I understand them as men, but in my opinion everything – the smallest, the most intimate details – sparkles with humour and life. The “painter’s family life,” with its great and small miseries, with its calamities, its sorrows and griefs, has the advantage of having a certain good will, a certain sincerity, a certain real human feeling. Just because of that not maintaining a certain standing, not even thinking about it.

If you take “amusera” in the highly serious sense of “thinking it interesting,” then I say, it will amuse you.

And as to the safe position, there is “embêtera,” “abrutira” [(will) stupefy].

Do I say this because I despise culture? On the contrary, I say it because I look upon the real human feelings, life in harmony with, not against, nature, as the true civilization, which I respect as such. I ask, what will make me more completely human?

Zola says, “Moi artiste, je veux vivre tout haut – veux vivre” [I, as an artist, want to live as vigorously as possible – (I) want to live], without mental reservation – naive as a child, no, not as a child, as an artist – with good will, however life presents itself, I shall find something in it, I will try my best on it. Now look at all those studied little mannerisms, all that convention, how exceedingly conceited it really is, how absurd, a man thinking he knows everything and that things go according to his idea, as if there were not in all things of life a “je ne sais quoi” of great goodness, and also an element of evil, which we feel to be infinitely above us, infinitely greater, infinitely mightier than we are.

How fundamentally wrong is the man who doesn’t feel himself small, who doesn’t realize he is but an atom.

Is it a loss to drop some notions, impressed on us in childhood, that maintaining a certain rank or certain conventions is the most important thing? I myself do not even think about whether I lose by it or not. I know only by experience that those conventions and ideas do not hold true, and often are hopelessly, fatally wrong. I come to the conclusion that I do not know anything, but at the same time that this life is such a mystery that the system of “conventionality” is certainly too narrow. So that it has lost its credit with me.

What shall I do now? The common phrase is, “What is your aim, what are your aspirations?” Oh, I shall do as I think best – how? I can’t say that beforehand – you who ask me that pretentious question, do you know what your aim is, what your intentions are?

Now they tell me, “You are unprincipled when you have no aim, no aspirations.”

My answer is, I didn’t tell you I had no aim, no aspirations, I said it is the height of conceit to try to force one to define what is indefinable. These are my thoughts about certain vital questions. All that arguing about it is one of the things of which I say “embêtera.”

Live – do something – that is more amusing, that is more positive. In short – one must of course give Society its due, but at the same time feel absolutely free, believing not in one’s own judgment, but in “reason” (my judgment is human, reason is divine, but there is a link between the one and the other), and that my own conscience is the compass which shows me the way, although I know that it does not work quite accurately.

I should like to refer to the fact that, whenever I recall the past generation of painters, I remember an expression of yours, “they were surprisingly gay.” What I want to say is that, if you become a painter, you should do it with this same surprising gaiety. You will need this to offset the gloomy circumstances. It will be a greater help to you than anything else. What you want is a spark of genius; I know no other word for it, but what I mean is the exact opposite of “being ponderous,” as people call it. Please don’t tell me that neither you nor I could have this. I say this because I am of the opinion that we must do our best to become like that; I do not claim that either I myself or you have sufficiently captured it – but what I say is, Let’s do our best to get it. And I say this to show you – writing these things down, although I think you will be able to understand what is in my mind anyway – that you are not mistaken in my ideas. I believe the whole plan would be enhanced immeasurably if your remaining with the woman you are with now were combined with it.

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And if it is in your nature as well as hers to feel even a certain pleasure – a surprising gaiety – in the face of circumstances – a *je ne sais quoi* of surprising youthfulness – and I do not count this among the impossibilities, for you said she is intelligent – well then, you will be able to do more together than alone. And in this case, if persons of the same sentiment, persons who have the same pretty serious misery, combine to see things through, what I say is, the more the merrier.

And what I say is – if this had come about or should come about, this combining to carve your own way in the world means infinitely more than any standing on form, and rises above all gossip, all *qu'en dira-t-on*.

I know all these things have a perilous money side, but what I say is, let's weaken this perilous money side as much as possible, in the first place by not being under its sway too long, and then by feeling that if one will only set about things with love, with a certain understanding of each other and cooperation and mutual helpfulness, many things which would otherwise be insupportable would be softened – yes, even totally changed.

As for me, if I could find some people whom I could talk to about art, who felt for it and wanted to feel for it – I should gain an enormous advantage in my work – I should feel more myself, be more myself. If there is enough money to keep us going in the very first period, by the time it is gone I shall be earning money. The more I think it over, the more it appears to me in the way I felt it in the beginning.

Your heart is partly with the firm of Goupil & Co., but in their presumption G. & Co. demand unreasonable things. In the first place, they are doing you a great wrong, which causes you much grief. This is not only a question of money, your heart is in it, for you it means heartache. You would start on a new career with the same heartache, and possibly with a similar result. Look, is this possible?

What I say is, I doubt it.

It seems to me that you, who are very young, do not act recklessly when you argue, I have had enough of the art-dealing business but not of art; I'll drop the business, and aim at the very heart of the profession.

That is what I ought to have done at the time. My making a mistake was perhaps a natural error of judgment, because then I did not know anything about teaching or about the Church – did not know anything about it, and cherished ideals about it.

You will say, Doesn't one sometimes have ideals about art that are incompatible with existing conditions?

Well, answer that question for yourself. I also answer it for myself by asking, Is Barbizon, is the Dutch school of painters a fact or not?

Whatever may be said of the art world, it is not rotten. On the contrary, it has improved and improved, and perhaps the summit has already been reached; but at all events we are still quite near it, and as long as you and I live, though we might reach the age of a hundred, there will be a certain real vitality. So he who wants to paint – must put his shoulder to the wheel. If the woman came, of course she would have to paint too.

Everybody would have to paint here – the wife of one of the Van Eycks also had to do it. And I tell you that the people don't seem disagreeable or intriguing. There is a kind of benevolence in this place, and I think you can do exactly what you think best. There is a surprisingly youthful atmosphere in existence here.

One should begin by saying with all possible courage, gaiety, enthusiasm, I know none of us can do a thing, but for all that, we are painters. Our wanting in itself means action. This is what I believe should be the main idea. We are alive – if we do not work “*comme plusieurs nègres*,” we shall die of want, and we shall cut a most ridiculous figure. However, we happen to abhor this mightily – because of that same thing which I call surprising youthfulness – and in addition, a seriousness that is damned serious.

That...y mettre sa peau.

Well, if this were mere speculation, I should not want to think of it – but in this case it means a fight to free ourselves from the world of conventions and speculation. It is something good, something peaceful, an honest enterprise. Most certainly it will be our intention to try to earn our bread, but only in the literal sense of the word. Money, as far as it is not used for the absolute necessities of life, leaves us cold. We shall do nothing we need be ashamed of; with what Carlyle calls “quite a royal feeling,” we shall be able to roam about in nature freely, and to work – we shall be able to work, because we are honest. We shall say, when we were children we made a mistake, or rather, We had to obey, and do certain things to earn our bread. Later such and such things happened, and then we thought it advisable to turn handicraftsmen. Because certain things were too puffed up. If you should talk this over with other people, they would advise against it unanimously, I think, except perhaps the woman you are with. If you have come to a decision for yourself, avoid other people, because they can only weaken your energy. Just at the very moment when one has not yet lost one's outer clumsiness, when one is still green, a “*ni fait ni a faire*” [neither done nor to be done] is enough to cause discouragement for half a year, after which one at last sees that one ought not to have let oneself be led astray.

I know the soul's struggle of two people: Am I a painter or not? Of Rappard and of myself – a struggle, hard

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sometimes, a struggle which accurately marks the difference between us and certain other people who take things less seriously; as for us, we feel wretched at times; but each bit of melancholy brings a little light, a little progress; certain other people have less trouble, work more easily perhaps, but then their personal character develops less. You, too, would have that struggle, and I tell you, don't forget that you are in danger of being upset by people who undoubtedly have the very best intentions.

If you hear a voice within you saying, "You are not a painter," then by all means paint, boy, and that voice will be silenced, but only by working. He who goes to trends and tells his troubles when he feels like that loses part of his manliness, part of the best that's in him; your friends can only be those who themselves struggle against it, who raise your activity by their own example of action. One must undertake it with confidence, with a certain assurance that one is doing a reasonable thing, like the farmer drives his plough, or like our friend in the scratch below, who is harrowing, and even drags the harrow himself. If one hasn't a horse, one is one's own horse – many people do so here.

There is a saying of Gustave Dore's which I have always admired, "J'ai la patience d'un bœuf," I find a certain goodness in it, a certain resolute honesty – in short, that saying has a deep meaning, it is the word of a real artist. When one thinks of the man from whose heart such a saying sprang, all those oft-repeated art dealer's arguments about "natural gifts" seem to become an abominably discordant raven's croaking. "J'ai la patience" – how quiet it sounds, how dignified; they wouldn't even say it except for that very raven's croaking. I am not an artist – how coarse it sounds – even to think so of oneself – oughtn't one to have patience, oughtn't one to learn patience from nature, learn patience from seeing the corn slowly ripen, seeing things grow – should one think oneself so absolutely dead as to imagine that one would not grow any more? Should one thwart one's own development on purpose? I say this to explain why I think it so foolish to speak about natural gifts and no natural gifts.

But in order to grow, one must be rooted in the earth. So I tell you, take root in the soil of Drenthe – you will germinate there – don't wither on the sidewalk. You will say there are plants that grow in the city – that may be, but you are corn, and your place is in the cornfield.

Well, I too suppose that for financial reasons now may not be the right moment, but at the same time I suppose that circumstances may just make it possible. If there were only half a possibility, I believe you would do well to risk the venture. I do not think you would ever regret it. You would be able to develop the best that is in you, and have a more peaceful life altogether. Neither of us would be alone, our work would merge. In the beginning we should have to live through anxious moments, we should have to prepare ourselves for them, and take measures to overcome them; we should not be able to go back, we should not look back nor be able to look back; on the contrary, we should force ourselves to look ahead. But it's in this period that we shall be far removed from all our friends and acquaintances, we shall fight this fight without anybody seeing us, and this will be the best thing that can happen, for then nobody will hinder us. We shall look forward to victory – we feel it in our very bones. We shall be so busy working that we shall be absolutely unable to think of anything else but our work.

I don't suppose I'm telling you anything at all new, I only ask, Don't thwart your own best thoughts. Think that idea over with a certain good-humored optimism instead of looking at things gloomily and pessimistically. I see that even Millet, just because he was so serious, couldn't help keeping good courage. This is something peculiar, not to all styles of painting, but to Millet, Israëls, Breton, Boughton, Herkomer and others.

Those who seek real simplicity are themselves so simple, and their view of life is so full of willingness and courage, even in hard times.

Think these things over, write me about them. It must be "une revolution qui est, puisqu'il faut qu'elle soit." [A revolution that is, because it must be.] With a handshake,

Yours sincerely, Vincent