

My dear comrade Bernard,

Many thanks for the sonnets you sent me; I very much like the form and the sonorous melody of the first one:

Sous les dômes dormeurs des arbres gigantesques.
[Beneath the sleeping domes of the gigantic trees.]

However, with regard to idea and sentiment it may be that I prefer the last one:

Car J'espoir dans mon sein a versé sa névrose.
[For hope has poured into my breast its neurosis.]

But it seems to me that you do not say clearly enough what you want to make felt – the certainty that one seems to have, and which one can in any case prove, of the nothingness, the emptiness, the betrayal of the desirable good and beautiful things; and that, despite this knowledge, one lets oneself be eternally fooled by the charm which external life, the things outside ourselves, exercises on our six senses, as if one did not know anything, and especially not the difference between objectivity and subjectivity. Fortunately for us we remain stupid and hopeful in this way.

Now I also like:

L'hiver, n'avoir ni sou, ni fleurs –
[Winter, having neither a sou nor flowers –]

and “Mépris.” [Contempt.]

I think “Coin de chapelle” [Corner of a Chapel] and “Dessin d'Albrecht Dürer” less clear; for instance, which exactly is the drawing by Albrecht Dürer? But nevertheless there are excellent passages in it:

Venus des plaines bleues
Blemis par la longueur des lieues.
[Come from the blue plains,
Paled by the length of the leagues.]

renders very smartly the landscapes bristling with blue rocks, between which the roads meander, as in the backgrounds of Cranach and Van Eyck.

Tordu sur sa croix en spirale
[Twisted on his spiralled cross]

conveys very well the exaggerated leanness of the mystic Christs. But why not add that the anguished look of the martyr is, like the eye of a cab horse, infinitely sad; that would make it more Parisian of Paris, where one sees such looks in the eyes of the superannuated nags of the little carriages as well as in those of the poets, artists.

In short it is not as good as your painting yet; never mind, it will come; you must certainly continue your sonnets. There are so many people, especially among our comrades, who imagine that words are nothing – on the contrary, isn't it true that saying a thing well is as interesting and as difficult as painting it? There is the art of lines and colours, but the art of words is there nonetheless, and will remain.

Here is another orchard, rather simple as a composition: a white tree, a small green tree, a square patch of green, lilac soil, an orange roof, a large blue sky [F 406, JH 1399]. I am working on nine orchards: one white; one pink, almost red; one white-blue; one grayish pink; one green and pink. Yesterday I overdid one [canvas] of a cherry tree against a blue sky; the young leaf shoots were orange and gold, the clusters of flowers white, and that against the green-blue of the sky was wonderfully glorious. Unfortunately there is rain today which prevents my returning to the charge.

I saw a brothel here last Sunday – not counting the other days – a large room, the walls covered with blued whitewash – like a village school. Fifty or more military men in red and civilians in black their faces a magnificent yellow or orange (what hues there are in the faces here), the women in sky blue, in vermilion, as unqualified and garish as possible. The whole in a yellow light. A good deal less lugubrious than the same kind of offices in Paris.

There is no “spleen”¹ in the air here.

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For the moment I am still lying low and keeping very quiet, for first of all I must recover from a stomach disorder of which I am the happy owner, but after that I shall have to make a lot of noise, as I aspire to share the glory of the immortal Tartarin de Tarascon.

I was enormously interested to hear that you intend to spend your time [as a soldier] in Algeria. That is perfect, and quite far from being a misfortune. Really, I congratulate you on it; at any rate we shall see each other in Marseilles.

You will see how delighted you will be with seeing the blue here and with feeling the sun. At present I have a terrace for a studio.

I certainly intend to go do seascapes at Marseilles too; I don't yearn for the grey sea of the North. If you see Gauguin, remember me most kindly to him. I must write to him right now.

My dear comrade Bernard, don't despair and above all don't have spleen, old fellow, for with your talent and with your stay in Algeria you will turn out a wonderfully good and true artist. You too will belong to the South. If I have any advice to give you it is to fortify yourself to eat healthy things, yes, a full year in advance – from now on – for it won't do to come here with a damaged stomach and deteriorated blood.

This was the case with me, and although I am recovering, I am recovering slowly, and I regret not having been a bit more careful beforehand. But not such a damnable winter as the past one – what was there to be done? – for it was a superhuman winter.

So get your blood in good condition in advance; here, with the bad food, it is difficult to pull through, but once one is in good health again it is less difficult to remain so than in Paris. Write to me soon, always the same address: "Restaurant Carrel, Arles."

A handshake,

Sincerely yours,

Vincent

1. Vincent uses this word in the French sense, i.e. weariness of life coupled with eccentricity of behavior.