

Letter B09
Arles, 24 June 1888

My dear Bernard,

I don't know what I stuffed into my letter of yesterday instead of the enclosed sheet bearing on your last sonnet. The fact is that I am so worn out by work that in the evening, though writing is restful for me, I am like a machine out of gear, so much, on the other hand, has a day spent in the full sun tired me out. That's why I stuffed another sheet into my letter instead of this one.

Reading over yesterday's sheet, my Lord, I'm sending it to you just as it is, it seems legible to me, and so I'm sending it to you.

A day of hard toil again today.

If you saw my canvases, what would you say of them? You won't find the almost timid, conscientious brush stroke of Cézanne in them. But as I am now painting the same landscape, la Crau and Camargue – though at a slightly different spot – there may well remain certain connections in it in the matter of colour. What do I know about it? I couldn't help thinking of Cézanne from time to time, at exactly those moments when I realized how clumsy his touch in certain studies is – excuse the word clumsy – seeing that he probably did these studies when the mistral was blowing. As half the time I am faced with the same difficulty, I get an idea of why Cézanne's touch is sometimes so sure, whereas at other times it appears awkward. It's his easel that's reeling.

I have sometimes worked excessively fast. Is it a fault? I can't help it. For instance, I painted a size 30 canvas, the "Summer Evening" at a single sitting [F 465, JH 1473]. Take it up again? – impossible; destroy it? – why should I! You see, I went out to do it expressly while the mistral was raging. Aren't we seeking intensity of thought rather than tranquillity of touch? But under the given conditions of working spontaneously, on the spot, and given the character of it, is a calm, well-regulated touch always possible? Goodness gracious – as little, it seems to me, as during an assault in a fencing match.

I have sent your drawing to my brother, and urgently begged him to buy something from you. If my brother can do it, he will, for he well knows how keen I must be on your selling something.

If you like, I will earmark for an exchange with you the head of the Zouave [F 423, JH 1486] which I have painted. Only I won't speak of it unless I can let you sell something at the same time. It would be in response to your sketch of a brothel. If we two did a picture of a brothel, I feel sure that we would take my study of the Zouave for character. Ah! if only several painters agreed to collaborate on important things!

The art of the future will show us examples of this perhaps. For the pictures that are necessary now, many would have to join hands in order to cope with the material difficulties. Alas! we haven't got as far as that yet; the art of painting doesn't move as fast as literature.

Just like yesterday, I am writing you now in a great hurry, greatly exhausted, and I am also unable to draw at the moment, my capacity to do so having been utterly exhausted by a morning in the fields.

How tired you get in the sun here! In the same way I am wholly unable to judge my own work. I cannot see whether the studies are good or bad. I have seven studies of wheat fields, all of them landscapes unfortunately, very much against my will. The landscapes yellow – old gold – done quickly, quickly, quickly and in a hurry, just like the harvester who is silent under the blazing sun, intent only on his reaping. I cannot help thinking that you may well be surprised to see how little I like the Bible, although I have often tried to study it a little. There is only that kernel, Christ, who seems superior to me from an artistic point of view, at any rate rather different from Greek, Indian, Egyptian, Persian antiquity, though they were so far advanced. But Christ, I repeat, is more of an artist than the artists; he works in the living spirit and the living flesh, he makes men instead of statues. And then... I feel only too well that I am an ox – being a painter – I, who admire the bull, the eagle, Man, with a veneration that will prevent me from being ambitious.

A handshake,

Yours sincerely, Vincent

P.S. As regards those sonnets, I add the explanation of what I mean by, their drawing is not very sure. At the end you produce morality. You tell Society that it is infamous, because the whore reminds us of meat in the market place. That's all right, the whore is like meat in a butcher's shop. I, though, having become a mere brute, I understand, I feel it, I rediscover a sensation in my own life; I say, That is well spoken – for the sonorous rhythm of the colourful words evoke for me with great intensity the brutal reality of the slums, but on me, the brute, the reproaches directed against society, such hollow words as "le bon

Dieu” – the good God – no longer make any impression. I say, That isn’t the real thing – and I sink back into my brutish state; I forget poetry, which was powerful enough at first to dispel my stupefaction. Is this true or not?

Establishing facts, as you do in the beginning, is cutting with the scalpel as the surgeon does when he explains anatomy. I listen, attentively and full of interest, but when the dissecting surgeon later starts moralizing at me like that, then I don’t think his final tirade has the same value as his demonstration.

Studying, analyzing society means more than moralizing any time.

Nothing would seem queerer to me than saying, for instance, Here is that meat from the market place; now observe how, in spite of everything, it may be electrified for a moment by the stimulus of a more refined and unexpected love.

Just like the sated caterpillar that doesn’t eat any more, that crawls on a wall instead of crawling on a cabbage leaf, so this sated female can no longer love, even if she does her best. She is seeking, seeking, seeking – does she herself know what? She is conscious, alive, sensitive, galvanized, rejuvenated for a moment – but impotent.

Yet she can still love, so she is alive – here no prevarication is possible – although she may be finished and dying the death of a terrestrial beast. Where will this butterfly emerge from the chrysalis? This butterfly that was a sated caterpillar, this cockchafer that was a white grub?

Well, this is where I have got to in my study of old whores. I too should like to know approximatively what I am the larva of myself, perhaps.