

Dear Theo,

On Sundays I usually feel like writing you, and so I do today. The last few days I have been reading *Le Nabab* by Daudet, and I think it a masterpiece – for instance, that walk of *Le Nabab* and Heinerlingue, the banker, on Pére-Lachaise in the twilight, while the bust of Balzac, a dark silhouette against the sky, looks down on them ironically. That is exactly like a drawing by Daumier. You wrote me about Daumier that he had done “*La Revolution – Denis Dessoubs*.” When you wrote this, I didn’t know who Denis Dessoubs was; now I have read about him in *Histoire d’un Crime* by Victor Hugo. He is a noble figure, I wish I knew the drawing by Daumier. Of course, I can’t read any book about Paris without thinking at once of you. Nor can I read a book about Paris without finding in it something of The Hague, which is indeed much smaller than Paris, but is nevertheless a royal residence too, with its appropriate morals and manners.

When you say in your last letter, “What a mystery nature is,” I quite agree with you. Life in the abstract is already an enigma; reality makes it an enigma within an enigma. And who are we to solve it? However, we ourselves are an atom of that universe which makes us wonder: Where does it go, to the devil or to God ?

Pourtant le soleil se leve [yet the sun rises], says Victor Hugo. Long, long ago I read in *L’Ami Fritz* by Erckmann-Chatrian a saying of the old rabbi’s, which I have always remembered: “*Nous ne sommes pas dans la vie pour etre heureux, mais nous devons tacher de meriter le bonheur.*” [We are not in life to be happy, but we must try to deserve happiness.] Taken separately, there is something pedantic in this thought – at least, one might take it as such – but in the context in which the words occurred, that is, from the mouth of that sympathetic figure of the old rabbi, David Sechel, they touched me deeply, and I often think of them. Similarly in drawing, one must not count on selling one’s drawings, but it is one’s duty to make them so that they have a certain value and are serious; one must not become careless or indifferent even though disappointed by circumstances. In regard to my plan for the lithographs, I have often thought it over; if I hadn’t done more than that, I fear it wouldn’t have advanced me much, so why think about it? Therefore I have made a few drawings for it again, a woman with a bag of coals on her head, with a yard in the background – a silhouette of roofs and chimneys and a woman at the washtub.

You needn’t be afraid of my taking any other steps for the present apart from doing the drawings themselves. I must wait till I have some cash before I try any more experiments in lithography. But I think there is something in it.

At times I feel a great desire to be in London again. I should so much love to know more about printing and wood engravings.

I feel a power in me which I must develop, a fire that I may not quench, but must keep ablaze, though I do not know to what end it will lead me, and shouldn’t be surprised if it were a gloomy one. In times like these, what should one wish for?

What is relatively the happiest fate?

In some circumstances it is better to be the conquered than to be the conqueror – for instance, better to be Prometheus than Jupiter. Well, it is an old saying, “Let come what may.”

To change the subject, do you know whose work has impressed me deeply? I saw reproductions after Julien Dupré (is he a son of Jules Dupré?). One represented two mowers; the other, a beautiful large wood engraving from *Monde Illustré*, a peasant woman taking a cow into the meadow. It seemed to me excellent work, very energetic and faithfully done. It resembles, for instance, Pierre Billet perhaps, or Butin.

I also saw a number of figures by Dagnan Bouveret, a beggar, a wedding, “The Accident,” “The Garden of the Tuileries.”

I think these two are fellows who wrestle man to man with nature, fellows who do not weaken and who have an iron grip. You wrote me about “The Accident” some time ago; now I know it and think it very beautiful. Perhaps they do not possess Millet’s sublime, almost religious, emotion – at least not in the same degree as Millet himself – perhaps they do not feel the same full warm love as he, but still, how excellent they are! It is true I know them only from the reproductions, but I think there can be nothing in them that was not in the original work. By the way, it took a long time before I could admire Thomas Faed’s work, but now I do not hesitate about it any more; for instance, “Sunday in the Backwoods of Canada Home and the Homeless,” “Worn Out,” “The Poor Man’s Friend” – in short, you know the series published by Graves.

Today I have been working on old drawings from Etten, because in the fields I saw the pollard willows in the same leafless condition again, and it reminded me of what I saw last year. Sometimes I have such a longing to do landscape, just as I crave a long walk to refresh myself; and in all nature, for instance in trees, I see expression and soul, so to speak. A row of pollard willows sometimes resembles a procession of almshouse men. Young corn has

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something inexpressibly pure and tender about it, which awakens the same emotion as the expression of a sleeping baby, for instance. The trodden grass at the roadside looks tired and dusty like the people of the slums. A few days ago, when it had been snowing, I saw a group of Savoy cabbages standing frozen and benumbed, and it reminded me of a group of women in their thin petticoats and old shawls which I had seen standing in a little hot water-and-coal shop early in the morning.

In regard to those figures I have mentioned which I should like to lithograph, I think the greatest difficulty will be to find about thirty which will fit together to make a whole. One must draw a great many more than thirty to get them. If first I have those, reproduction is a second step, which I suppose will be easier than if one starts to reproduce before the whole is finished. Perhaps, or rather certainly, you will have been here before I have them all, and then we can talk about it some more.

Something like it has been done here for the primary schools, namely twenty-four lithographs by Schmidt Crans, which I saw recently. A few of them are good, but knowing the person who made them you will understand that the whole is rather insipid. It seems, however, that they are eagerly used at the schools, but what a pity that they content themselves with such things, particularly for educational purposes. Well, it's the same with that as it is with everything else.

But, boy, don't forget to read *Le Nabab*, it is splendid. One might call that figure a virtuous scoundrel. Do they really exist? I certainly think so. There is much heart in those books by Daudet - for instance, in *Les Rois en Exil*, that figure of the queen, "aux yeux d'aigue-marine" [with eyes of aquamarine].

Write again soon.

How much good walking out to the desolate seashore and gazing out at the grey-green sea with the long white crests on its waves can do for a man who is downcast and dejected! But if one should have a need for something great, something infinite, something one can perceive God in, there is no need to go far in quest; it seems to me that I have seen something deeper, more infinite, more eternal than the ocean in the expression in a small child's eyes when it awakens early in the morning and yells or laughs on finding the dear sun shining upon its cradle. If ever a "rayon d'en haut," [a beam shines down from above] that may be where it is to be found.

Adieu, boy, with a handshake in thought,

Yours sincerely,

Vincent