

Letter 247
The Hague, 24 November 1882

Dear Theo,

I received your registered letter of November 20 in good order and thank you very much for sending it; from my letter, which must have crossed yours, you will already have gathered how welcome it was. But you wrote that you sent Buhot's paper at the same time as your letter; however, it did not come then, and up till today, Friday, I have not received it. Have they made a mistake at the post office again, or did you perhaps forget to send it?

I waited until today to answer your letter in order to see whether the postman had delayed delivering it. I hope you have also received the roll containing the "Digger."

Today and yesterday I drew two figures of an old man sitting with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands [F 997, JH 267; F 1662, JH 268]. Long ago Schuitemaker sat for me, and I kept the drawing [see Letter 150] because I wanted to make a better one someday. Perhaps I will also make a lithograph of it. How beautiful such an old workman is, with his patched fustian clothes and his bald head.

I finished Zola's *Pot-Bouille*, the strongest passage I think is the confinement of Adèle, the cook (*Bretonne pouilleuse*), in the dark attic. Jossierand is also drawn confoundedly well and with sentiment, like the rest of the figures; but those two sombre ones, Jossierand writing his addresses in the nighttime and that servant's attic, impressed me most.

How well constructed the book is, and how bitter the words it closes with: "Aujourd'hui toutes les maisons se valent, l'une ou l'autre c'est le même chose, c'est partout Cochon et Cie." [Nowadays all firms are worth the same, the one is equal to the other, everywhere it is Swine and Co.] Don't you think Octave Mouret, really the principal figure, can be considered typical of those persons whom you recently wrote about, if you remember? In many respects he is much better than most of them; however, he will satisfy neither you nor me, and I feel a shallowness in him. Could he have done otherwise? – perhaps not, but you and I can and must act differently, I think. For we have our roots in a different kind of family life than Mouret, and besides, I hope there will always remain in us something of the Brabant fields and heath, which years of city life will not be able to wipe out, especially as it is renewed and strengthened by art.

He – Octave Mouret – is satisfied when he can readily sell his bales of "nouveau-tés" (*déballer des ballots de marchandises sur les trottoirs de Paris*) [unloading his bales of goods on the sidewalks of Paris]; he doesn't seem to have any other aspiration except the conquest of women, and yet he does not really love them, for Zola perceives correctly, I think, when he says, "où percait son mépris pour la femme" [where his contempt for women broke through].

Well, I do not know what to think of him. He seems to be a product of his time – in reality more passive than active, notwithstanding his activity.

But after Zola's book, I at last read *Quatre-Vingt-Treize* [1893] by Victor Hugo. Here we are in quite a different field. It is painted – I mean written – like Decamps or Jules Dupré, with expressions like the ones in the old pictures by Ary Scheffer, for instance "Le Larmoyeur" [The Mute] and "Le Coupeur de Nappe" [The Man Who Cut the Tablecloth]¹ – or the figures in the background of the "Christus Consolator." I would strongly advise you to read it if you haven't already, for the sentiment in which this book is written becomes more and more rare, and among the new things, I really have not found anything nobler.

It is easier to say, as Mesdag did of a certain picture by Heyerdahl, painted with the same sentiment as that of Murillo or Rembrandt, which he didn't want to buy from you, "Oh, that's the old style – we don't need that any more," than it is to replace that old style by something as good, let alone something superior. And as many people these days argue the same way as Mesdag, without thinking much about it, it can do no harm if others reflect whether we are in this world to tear down instead of build up. The expression "We don't need that any more" – how readily it is used, and what a stupid and ugly phrase it is. In one of his fairy tales Andersen puts it, I think, not in a human being's mouth, but in an old pig's. People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.

This week I saw with great pleasure a picture by De Bock in Goupil's show window; it seemed to me much, much better than the one he was working on this spring. It represents a cottage in the dunes with an avenue of trees in front, the background sombre and full of tone, with a beautiful light sky over it. There was something grand and cheerful in it.

I said just now that he who lives in a glass house shouldn't throw stones. I'm afraid, Theo, that many who have sacrificed the old for the sake of the new will be very sorry for it in the end. Especially in the realm of art.

In short, there used to be a body of painters, authors, artists, who were united, notwithstanding their differences, and they were a force. They did not walk in the dark but were enlightened: they certainly knew what they wanted, and they did not waver. I'm talking about the time when Corot, Millet, Daubigny, Jacque, Breton, were young; in Holland, Israëls, Mauve, Maris, etc.

One supported the other, there was something strong and noble in it. The art galleries were smaller then; in the studios there was perhaps a greater abundance than now – as the beautiful things are soon snapped up. Those crammed studios, those smaller show windows, but above all, la foi de charbonnier of the artists – their warmth, their fire, their enthusiasm – how sublime they were. Neither you nor I witnessed it exactly, but our love for that period brings us nearer to it. Let's not forget it, it may be of use, especially if one continues to say so readily, "We don't need that any more."

Adieu, with a handshake,

Yours sincerely, Vincent

1. Ary Scheffer's picture shows Eberhart cutting the tablecloth to signify that he had irrevocably disowned his son.