

Sunday

Dear Theo,

Yesterday I happened to read a book by Murger, namely, *Les Buveurs d'Eau* [The Water Drinkers]. I find something in it of the same charm there is, for instance, in the drawings by Nanteuil, Baron, Roqueplan, Tony Johannot, something witty, something bright.

Still, it is very conventional, at least this book is, I think. I haven't read other books of his as yet, and I think there is the same difference between him and, for instance, Alphonse Karr and Souvestre as there is between a Henri Monnier and a Comte-Calix and the above-mentioned artists. I try to choose the persons I compare all from the same period. It has a fragrance of the era of the Bohemian (though the reality of that time is suppressed in the book), and for that reason it interests me, but in my opinion it lacks originality and sincerity of sentiment. However, perhaps his books in which no artist types occur are better than this one; authors seem to be always unlucky with their types of painters. Balzac, among others (his painters are rather uninteresting), Zola, even though his Claude Lantier is real – there certainly are Claude Lantiers, but, after all, one would like to see another kind of painter depicted by Zola than Lantier, who seems to be drawn from life after somebody who certainly was not the worst example of that school, which I think is called impressionist. And it is not they who form the nucleus of the artistic corps.

On the other hand, I know very few well-drawn or well-painted types of authors; painters on that point generally fall into the conventional and make of an author a man who sits before a table full of papers, that's all, or they do not even go as far as that, and the result is a gentleman with a collar and a face devoid of expression.

There is a painting by Meissonier which I think beautiful, it is a figure seen from behind, stooping over, with his feet I think on the rung of the easel; one sees nothing but a pair of up-drawn knees, a back, a neck, and the back of a head, and just the glimpse of a fist holding a pencil or something similar. But the fellow is there, and one feels the action of strained attention just as in a certain figure by Rembrandt, a little fellow shown reading, who also stoops with his head leaning on his fist, and one feels at once that he is absolutely lost in his book.

Take Bonnat's Victor Hugo, fine, very fine, but I still prefer the Victor Hugo described in words by Victor Hugo himself, nothing but this: "Et moi je me taisais, tel que l'on voit se taire un coq sur la bruyère." [And as for me, I was silent, like a cock seen keeping silence on the heath.] Isn't it splendid, that little figure on the heath? Isn't it just as vivid as a little general of '93 by Meissonier – of about the size of one centimetre.

There is a portrait of Millet by Millet himself which I love, nothing but a head with a kind of shepherd's cap, but the look-from half-closed eyes, the intense look of a painter – how beautiful it is – also that piercing gleam as in a cock's eye, if I may call it so.

It is Sunday again. This morning I took a walk on the Rijswijk road, the meadows are partly flooded, so that there was an effect of tonal green and silver with the rough black and grey and green trunks and branches of the old trees distorted by the wind in the foreground, a silhouette of the little village with its pointed spire against the clear sky in the background there and there a gate or a dunghheap on which a flock of crows sat pecking. How you would like such a thing, how well you would paint it if you tried.

It was extraordinarily beautiful this morning, and it did me good to take a long walk, for what with drawing and the lithography I had scarcely been outdoors this week.

As to the lithography, I hope to get a proof tomorrow of a little old man. I hope it will turn out well. I made it with a kind of chalk especially patterned for this process, but I am afraid that after all the common lithographic crayon will prove to be the best, and that I shall be sorry I did not use it.

Well, we must see how it turns out.

Tomorrow I hope I shall learn several things about printing which the printer will show me. I should love to learn the printer's craft itself. I think it quite possible that this new method will bring new life into the art of lithography. I think there might be a way of combining the advantages of the new with the old way, one cannot tell for certain, but perhaps it may be the cause of new magazines being published.

Monday

I wrote this far last night, this morning I had to go to the printing office with my little old man, now I have witnessed everything, the transfer on to the stone, the preparation of the stone and the printing itself. And I have a better idea now of what changes I can still make by retouching. Enclosed you will find the first print, not counting one spoiled proof. After a time I hope to do better, this doesn't satisfy me at all, but well, the progress must come by work and trying. It seems to me the duty of a painter to try to put an idea into his work. In this print I have tried to express (but I cannot do it well, or so strikingly as it is in reality, of which this is but a weak reflection in a dark mirror) what

© Copyright 2001 R. G. Harrison

seems to me one of the strongest proofs of the existence of “quelque chose là-haut” [something on high] in which Millet believed, namely, the existence of God and eternity – certainly in the infinitely touching expression of such a little old man, of which he himself is perhaps unconscious, when he is sitting quietly in his corner by the fire. At the same time there is something noble, something great that cannot be destined for the worms. Israëls has painted it so beautifully. In Uncle Tom’s Cabin, the most beautiful passage is perhaps the one in which the poor slave, knowing that he must die, and sitting for the last time with his wife, remembers the words,

Let cares like a wild deluge come,
And storms of sorrow fall,
May I but safely reach my home,
My God, my Heaven, my all.

This is far from theology, simply the fact that the poorest little wood-cutter or peasant on the heath or miner can have moments of emotion and inspiration which give him a feeling of an eternal home to which he is near. Returning from the printing office, I find your letter; I think your Montmartre splendid, and I certainly would have shared your emotion, in fact I think that Jules Dupré and Daubigny have often tried to conjure up these thoughts by their work. There is at times something indescribable in those aspects, all nature seems to speak, and on going home one has a feeling of the same sort as when one has finished a book by Victor Hugo, for instance. As for me, I cannot understand that not everybody sees it and feels it, nature or God does it for everyone who has eyes and ears and a heart to understand. For this reason I think a painter is happy because he is in harmony with nature as soon as he can express a little of what he sees.

And that’s a great thing, one knows what one has to do, there are subjects in abundance, as Carlyle rightly says, “Blessed is he who has found his work.”

If that work like that of Millet, Dupré, Israëls, etc., strives to bring peace, sursum corda, lift up your heart to Heaven, then it is doubly stimulating – one is then less alone also, because one thinks. It’s true I’m sitting here lonely, but whilst I am sitting here in silence, my work perhaps speaks to my friend, and whoever sees it will not suspect me of being heartless.

But I tell you that dissatisfaction about bad work, the failure of things, the difficulties of technique can make one dreadfully melancholy. I can assure you that I am sometimes terribly discouraged when I think of Millet, Israëls, Breton, de Groux, so many others, Herkomer for instance; one only knows what these fellows are worth when one is oneself at work. And then to swallow that despair and that melancholy, to hear with oneself as one is, not in order to sit down and rest but to struggle on notwithstanding thousands of shortcomings and faults and the doubtfulness of conquering them, all these things are the reason why a painter is not happy either.

The struggle with oneself, the trying to better oneself, the renewal of one’s energy, all this is complicated by material difficulties.

That picture by Daumier must be beautiful. It is a mystery why a thing that speaks as clearly as that picture, for instance, is not understood, at least that the situation is such that you are not sure of finding a buyer for it even at a low price.

This is for many a painter also something unbearable, or at least almost unbearable. One wants to be an honest man, one is so, one works as hard as a slave, but still one cannot make both ends meet; one must give up the work, there is no chance of carrying it out without spending more on it than one gets back for it, one gets a feeling of guilt, of shortcoming, of not keeping one’s promises, one is not honest as one would be if the work were paid for at its natural reasonable price. One is afraid of making friends, one is afraid of moving, like one of the old lepers, one would like to call from afar to the people: Don’t come too near me, for intercourse with me brings you sorrow and loss; with all that great load of care on one’s heart, one must set to work with a calm, everyday face, without moving a muscle, live one’s ordinary life, get along with the models, with the man who comes for the rent, with everybody in fact. With a cool head, one must keep one hand on the rudder to continue the work, and with the other hand try to do no harm to others.

And then storms arise, things one had not foreseen, one doesn’t know what to do, and one has a feeling that one may strike a rock at any moment.

One cannot present oneself as somebody who comes to propose a good business transaction or who has a plan which will bring great profit. On the contrary, it is clear that it will end with a deficit, and still one feels a power surging within, one has work to do and it must be done.

One would like to speak like the people of ‘93: this and that must be done, first these have to die, then those, then the last ones, it is duty, so it is unarguable, and nothing more need be said.

But is it the time to combine and to speak out?

© Copyright 2001 R. G. Harrison

Or is it better, as so many have fallen asleep and do not like to be aroused, to try to stick to things one can do alone, for which one is alone liable and responsible, so that those who sleep may go on sleeping and resting.

Well, you see that for this once I express more intimate thoughts than usual, you yourself are responsible for it as you did the same.

About you I think this, you are certainly one of the watchers, not one of the sleepers – wouldn't you rather watch while painting than while selling pictures? I say this in all coolness without adding what in my opinion would be preferable, and with full confidence in your own insight into things. That there is a great chance of going under in the struggle, that a painter is something like a "lost sentinel," these and other things need no saying. You must not think of me as so readily scared – for instance, to paint the Borinage would be something so difficult, so relatively dangerous as to make life a thing far removed from any rest or pleasure. Yet I would undertake it if I could, that is, if I didn't know sure, as I do now, that the expenses would surpass my means. If I could find people who would interest themselves in such an enterprise, I would risk it. But just because you are really the only one for the moment who has a concern over what I do, the thing has to be put on the shelf for the present and must remain there, and meanwhile I will find other things to do. But I do not give it up to spare myself.

I hope you will be able to send the money not later than the 1st of December. Well, boy, hearty thanks for your letter and a warm handshake in thought, believe me,

Yours, Vincent