

The Hague, c. 15 February 1883

Dear Theo,

Many warm thanks for your letter; the enclosure was very welcome, it helps me a great deal. I begin by telling you that it takes a load off my mind to know that the past of the woman whom you write about is quite different from what I first supposed. Namely that she has known other things beside poverty and narrow-mindedness, so that I suppose she can fully appreciate you with regard to culture and broad-mindedness too, more than a woman who has been crushed by misery from childhood on and knows no better. From what you say about her reading, for instance, I see she has a sentiment which many other women completely lack.

Social standing and her experience contribute to the formation of her character, and, I think, make her entirely suitable for you. Certainly you will be doubly, doubly happy when she recovers. And I wish from the bottom of my heart that she might become your wife, for a woman turns life into something so very different.

And what is a woman like her without a man to appreciate and understand her? Something pathetic, yes, you termed it correctly, something like a spirit or a shadow. Look, I am afraid she would return to such a state (even if her circumstances and her health were different) if you left her.

And in my opinion an infinite and profound happiness – for you as well as for her – would be within reach because of the consciousness of not being alone any more. For it is sometimes bitterly hard for us men, too, that being alone.

But Israël's poetry without there being anybody to understand it – that is something so awful that it is beyond one's comprehension, and one cannot keep hold of the idea.

Only this being alone and wandering ... How deep Michelet's saying is, "Pourquoi y a-t-il une femme seule sur la terre?" [Why is there a lone woman on earth?]

You once said, or rather wrote, "Earnestness is better than the most delicate raillery." It is the same thing here, mustn't one take such a figure seriously? I mean, the life of us men is so dependent on our relations with women – and, of course, the opposite is also true – that it seems to me one must never laugh at women or think lightly of them. If one reads carefully, Balzac's *Petites misères de la vie conjugale* is very, very serious and honestly well meant – not intended to separate but to unite; but not everybody sees that in it. When I read your letter, what struck me immediately was that you are involved with a person who, for instance, would be able to evoke the past along with you, who will learn to see the same things in art that you see, and this is of great value.

I congratulate you, my dear fellow, because by your description, she is a woman to whom one may apply Michelet's words, "Une dame c'est une dame."

I think you will also find her in Ary Scheffer's work.

As to reading, I think the works of Michelet would be something to soothe and strengthen her mind.

Just like Victor Hugo.

And what Michelet himself thought desirable reading for a woman is *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis – of course the original edition, not the one that has been garbled and spoiled by the clergy.

But I suppose you know more about French literature than I.

That book by Thomas a Kempis is as beautiful as, for instance, Ary Scheffer's "[Christus] Consolator" – it can be compared to nothing else. But I have seen editions that were purposely changed and distorted by adding to each chapter a kind of explanation which was terrible. I once bought one like that; it was a very bad bargain indeed.

And do you know what seems excellent to me? – that a patient should breathe fresh air from a book. What I mean is *La Nature chez elle* [Nature at home] by Bodmer, with text by Théophile Gautier – the old series for sale at *L'Illustration* or *Monde Illustré*. But I recently saw a *Nature chez elle* which was much thinner and less fresh than the first series, nor do I think the text was by Théophile Gautier. Probably done by Bodmer at a later period, when he had lost some of his early vigour.

Boy, I have been drawing with such delight – fishermen's heads with that sou'wester I told you about; the fish scales were still sticking to it when I got it.

What a feeling you must have had when you walked into the hospital or clinic to visit her the day after the operation! Isn't that one of the things one can hardly talk about, the emotion being so intense? At least, when you wrote me about that operation, I was reminded of visiting the woman on the day of her confinement last summer.

Recently you wrote about a certain Laurens who generally makes large drawings or pictures. I didn't know him then (only as a painter of Oriental landscapes), but today I saw an etching by Courtry after a picture by Jean Paul Laurens, a scene from the Revolution, and I liked it very much, especially some types and heads. But it is quite possible that his pictures are not so good as the etching.

Is Jules Goupil's work still good? One is inclined to ask that question when one sees men like Émile Wauters and Hoeterinks, for instance, lose their strong grip on reality, replacing it with things which are correct, yes, and have a delicate sentiment, too, but which do not reach the vigour of their earlier work and instead betray a certain timidity.

And it is sad when it's that way.

So few manage to remain vigorous like Israëls, for instance.

Recently I saw a new edition of R. Caldecott's picture books and bought two of them, namely, illustrations of Washington Irving's Sketch Book, which both together cost a shilling now. There is a description of Christmas in a little village at the beginning of this century. Those small drawings are pithy, like Jacque's, for instance, or Menzel's. When you come, you must look at the wood engravings again. Right now there are some people like Caldecott, for instance, who are quite original and highly interesting. How I wish we could be together more, and on an evening or a Sunday, look over those things which many others pass by. I am reading Eliot's Middlemarch. Eliot analyzes like Balzac or Zola – but English situations, with an English sentiment.

Adieu, boy, may everything go well, and once more, best wishes.

Yours sincerely, Vincent