

Letter 219
The Hague, 23 July 1882
Sunday morning

My dear Theo,

I received your letter with enclosed 50 fr. My warm thanks for both, and I am very glad you have given some details about your visit. Do you approve of our arranging to spend the time you have free from business and visits together, and both trying to be in the same frame of mind as we were in the days of the Rijswijk mill?

As for me, brother – though the mill is gone and the years and my youth are gone as irrevocably – deep within me has risen again the feeling that there is some good in life, and that it is worth while to exert oneself and to try to take life seriously. Perhaps, or rather certainly, this is more firmly rooted than it used to be, when I had less experience. The question for me now is how to express the poetry of that time in my drawings.

Your letter to me crossed one of mine in which I told you I had resolved to set to work again, sick or not sick. Well, I have done so, and I find it does me no harm, though I must take more medicine to brace me up. But of course the work itself puts me in a much better mood. I could not bear staying away from my drawings any longer.

Now when you come, brother, I shall have a few watercolours for you. It is damn nice working in the studio. Do you remember that last winter I told you you would have your watercolours within a year? Those I have done now are simply to show you that my studying drawing, correct perspective and proportions, helps me make progress in watercolours. And for my part, I did them as an experiment to find out what progress I had made in watercolours after six months of drawing exclusively; and secondly, to see what I shall have to work harder on in that fundamental drawing which everything depends on. They are landscapes with complicated perspective, very difficult to draw, but for that very reason there is a real Dutch character and sentiment in them. They resemble those I sent last, the drawing is no less conscientious; but in addition these have colour – the soft green of the meadow contrasting with the red tile roof, the light in the sky contrasting more strongly with the sombre tones of the foreground, a yard full of wet wood and sand [F 943, JH 156].

When judging me and my behaviour, Tersteeg always starts with the fixed idea that I can do nothing and am good for nothing. I heard it from his own lips, “Oh, that painting of yours will be like all the other things you started, it will come to nothing.”

He spoke like this last winter; he speaks that way now, to which I replied that I did not wish to go to see him or have him come here for six months. You should thoroughly understand – for this reason I no longer care for him; and he should clearly understand once and for all that lately I have developed a strong aversion to him, and prefer to be done with him for good and all. I quietly continue working, and I shall gladly let him tell all the absurdities about me he may get into his noodle, as such sayings only annoy and upset me. As long as he does not hinder my work, I shall absolutely forget him.

It was different last winter when he said something about his seeing to it that I should get no more money from you, and I wrote you about it at once. But I shall not write about him any more unless such a thing happens again. It would be too foolish to run after him, saying, Mr. Tersteeg, Mr. Tersteeg, I am a real painter like other painters, no matter what you say.

No, since I do indeed have the artistic sense in the very marrow of my bones, I think it's much better to go quietly camping in the meadows or the dunes, or to work in the studio from the model, without paying the slightest attention to him.

I am glad that you have been reading *Le Ventre de Paris*; lately I read *Nana* too. I tell you, Zola is really a second Balzac. Balzac the First describes society from 1815 to 1848. Zola begins where Balzac leaves off and goes on until Sedan, or rather until now. I think it's splendid. I just want to ask you what you think of Mme. François, who lifted poor Florent into her cart and took him home when he was lying unconscious in the middle of the road where the greengrocers' carts were passing.

Though the other greengrocers cried, Let that drunkard lie, we have no time to pick men up out of the gutter, etc.

That figure of Mme. François stands out so calmly and nobly and sympathetically all through the book, against the background of the Halles, in contrast with the brutal egoism of the other women.

See, Theo, I think Mme. François is truly humane; and I have done, and will do, for Sien what I think someone like Mme. François would have done for Florent if he had not loved politics more than her. Look here, that humanity is the salt of life; I should not care to live without it, that's all.

I care as little about what Tersteeg says as Mme. François cared about the other women and greengrocers when they cried, "Let him be, we have no time," and about all the noise and gossip. Then I must tell you that it will not be long before Sien earns her own bread by posing. My very best drawing, "Sorrow" – at least, I think it's the best I've done – well, she posed for that, and in less than a year I shall draw the figure regularly. I promise you that. For understand clearly that however much I may like landscapes, I love drawing the figure more. But it is the most difficult, and therefore costs me more study and work, and also more time. But don't let them tell you she keeps me from my work; at the studio you will see for yourself how things are. If it were true that I worked less for her sake, yes, then you would be right; but, indeed, now it is exactly the reverse.

Well, I hope we shall agree on that by and by, less by words than by drawings. I hate words. Enough. But, brother, I am so very glad you are coming; when you are here, shall we really go through the meadows together, with nothing around us but that quiet, tender, soft green and the light sky above? Fine – and the sea and the beach, and the old part of Scheveningen. Delightful.

Apropos – the other day I saw some very beautiful little fusains by Th. de Bock, with touches of white and a delicate blue in the sky, very well done; I like them better than his pictures.

I can't tell you how wonderful I find all the space in the studio – now that I have set to work, the effect is immediately apparent. We'll teach them to say of my drawings "they're only the old ones." After all, I didn't get ill for the fun of it.

So you must picture me sitting in my attic window as early as 4 o'clock in the morning, studying the meadows and the carpenter's yard with my perspective frame just as they're lighting the fires to make coffee in the yard and the first worker comes strolling in. A flock of white pigeons comes soaring over the red tile roofs between the smoking black chimney stacks. Beyond it all lies an infinity of delicate, soft green, miles and miles of flat meadow, and a grey sky, as calm, as peaceful as Corot or Van Goyen. That view over the ridges of the roofs and the gutters with grass growing in them, very early in the morning, and those first signs of life and awakening – the flying bird, the smoking chimney, the small figure strolling along far below – that is the subject of my watercolour [F 943, JH 156]. I hope you will like it.

I'm sure that it depends more on my work than on anything else whether or not I succeed one day. Provided I can just keep going, well then, I shall fight my fight quietly in this way and no other – by calmly looking through my little window at natural things and drawing them faithfully and with love. For the rest, I shall just adopt a defensive attitude against possible molestation, and beyond that I love drawing too much to want to be distracted by anything else. The peculiar effects of perspective intrigue me more than human intrigues.

If Tersteeg only understood that my painting is a thing apart, quite different from the rest, he would not make a fuss.

But in his opinion I have deceived and disappointed Mauve. Furthermore, he thinks I'm only doing it to get more money from you. All this is absurd – too absurd to attach any importance to it. Mauve himself will understand later that he was not deceived in me, and that I was not at all unwilling. He himself was the one who taught me to draw more conscientiously before trying anything else. But then there was a misunderstanding between us, perhaps Tersteeg was behind it. Relationships with people like Tersteeg, who cling to their prejudices, are absolutely sterile and useless.

In answer to your letter I must say one thing, that your not knowing about Sien's child was not my fault, for when I told you about her I certainly mentioned it, but you probably thought of the child that had not yet been born.

I have already spoken a few words about the love for humanity which some people possess, for instance, Mme. François in the book by Zola. However, I haven't any benevolent plans or projects for trying to help everybody, but I am not ashamed to say (though I know quite well that the word benevolence is in bad repute) that for my part I have always felt and will feel the need to love some fellow creature. Preferably, I don't know why, an unhappy, forsaken or lonely creature.

Once I nursed for six weeks or two months a poor miserable miner who had been burned. I shared my food for a whole winter with a poor old man, and heaven knows what else, and now there is Sien. But so far I have never thought all this foolish or wrong. I think it so natural and right that I cannot understand people being so indifferent to each other in general. I must add that if I were wrong in doing this, you were also wrong in helping me so faithfully – it would be too absurd if this were wrong. I have always believed that "love thy neighbour as thyself" is no exaggeration, but a normal condition. So be it. And you know that I

shall make every effort to try to sell my drawings soon, for the very reason that I do not want to abuse your kindness.

I certainly and confidently believe, brother, that to all the hints they may give you to convince you to stop sending me money, you will quietly answer that you have faith in my becoming a good painter, and so will continue to help me; that as to my private life and business, you left me free therein, and will neither force me nor help others to force me. Then I believe they will soon stop their gossip. The only thing they can do is exclude me from some circles where they consider me an outcast. Which is nothing new and doesn't bother me one way or the other. I will concentrate more and more on art. And though some people may damn me irrevocably and forever, in the nature of things my profession and my work will open new relationships to me, that much fresher for not having been frozen, hardened and made sterile by old prejudices.

Well, brother, thanks for your letter and the 50 fr.; my drawing has dried in the meantime, and I want to touch it up. The lines of the roofs and gutters shoot away into the distance like arrows from a bow, they are drawn without hesitation.

Adieu, with a handshake,

Ever yours, Vincent

P. S. Read as much of Zola as you can; that is good for one, and makes things clear.