

Dear Theo,

I must write once again, for the sooner we can make up our minds, the better.

As to a studio, if we can find in one and the same house a room with an alcove and also a garret or corner of an attic, then you could have that room and alcove, and we could make ourselves as comfortable as can be. And during the daytime the room might serve as a studio, and the garret would serve for various more or less unsightly implements, and for dirty work; besides, I could sleep there, and you in the alcove of the studio. Such an arrangement or something similar would be perfectly satisfactory for the first year, I think. What I am not sure of is whether we shall get on personally, though I don't despair of it, but it will be much more comfortable for you to come home in the evening to a studio than to an ordinary room which is always more or less dreary, and that dreariness is our worst enemy.

As the doctor tells me that I must improve my physical way of living, who knows but what you also would feel better for such a measure. For you too are neither happy nor in sufficiently good spirits, let's call things by their names, you have too many cares and too little prosperity.

But perhaps the fault is in ourselves, because we are both too isolated, and because our forces and resources are too much divided and therefore insufficient. So union is strength, that would be much better.

So I think there must be more animation, and we must throw all doubts overboard, and also a certain lack of confidence. Do you want a  motive  for keeping one's serenity even when one is isolated and misunderstood, and has lost all chance for material happiness?

This one thing remains –  faith ; one feels instinctively that an enormous number of things are changing and that everything will change. We are living in the last quarter of a century that will end again in a tremendous revolution.

But suppose both of us see its beginning at the end of our lives. We certainly shall not live to see the better times of pure air and the rejuvenation of all society after those big storms.

But it is already something not to be duped by the falsity of one's time, and to scent the unhealthy closeness and oppressiveness of the hours that precede the thunderstorm.

And to say, We are still in the closeness, but the following generations will be able to breathe more freely.

A Zola and the de Goncourts believe in it with the simplicity of grown-up children. They, the most rigorous analysts whose diagnoses are both so merciless and so exact.

And the very ones you have mentioned too, Turgenev and Daudet, they do not work without an aim or without looking ahead. But all avoid, and with reason, prophesying Utopias, and are pessimistic in that if one begins to analyze, the history of this country shows terribly clearly how revolutions may come to nothing, though they begin ever so nobly.

You see the thing that supports one is that one doesn't always have to be alone with one's feelings and thoughts when one works and thinks together with other people.

At the same time that increases one's strength, and one is infinitely happier.

Now I have wanted it to be this way between us for a long time already, and I imagine if you stayed alone, you would get depressed, because times are not cheerful  unless one finds satisfaction in one's work .

I am sending you that novel by de Goncourt, especially for the preface, which gives a summary of their work and aims. You will see that those people have not been exactly happy, in the same way as Delacroix said of himself, "Je n'ai pas du tout été heureux dans le sens ou je l'entendais, le désirais autrefois." [I have not been at all happy in the sense in which I understood, I desired it formerly.] Well it may come sooner or later, but for you too there will come a moment when you know  for sure  that all chance of material happiness is lost, fatally and irrevocably. I feel sure of it, but remember that at the same moment there will be a certain compensation in feeling the power to work within one's self.

What cuts me to the heart is the beautiful serenity of the great thinkers of the present, as, for instance, that last walk of the two de Goncourts, of which you will read the description. The last days of the old Turgenev were the same way, too; he was with Daudet a great deal then. Sensitive, delicate, intelligent like women, also sensitive to their own suffering, and yet always full of life and consciousness of themselves, no indifferent stoicism, no contempt for life. I repeat – those fellows, they die the way women die. No fixed idea about God, no abstractions, always on the firm ground of life itself, and only attached to that. I repeat – like women who have loved much, hurt by life, and as Silvestre says of Delacroix, "Ainsi il mourut presque en souriant." Meanwhile we are not yet that far; on the contrary, we have to work first, to live first, although without happiness in the ordinary sense of the word.

But whatever there may be of the future, you may be sure that I shall be very glad if I can work a year at Cormon's, unless there is a better opportunity for drawing at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts or some other studio that I have heard mentioned here.

© Copyright 2001 R. G. Harrison

The ancients will not prevent us from being realistic, on the contrary. Of course I am also longing enormously for the French pictures.

By the way – don't you like this little poem?

Tout le mal est venu de la femme – Raison  
Obscurcie, appétit de lucre, trahison

[Translation of the whole poem].

All evil has come from woman – Obscured reason, appetite for lucre, treachery...

Golden cups in which the wine is mixed with lees,

Every crime, every happy lie, every folly

Comes from her. Yet adore her, as the gods

Made her...and it is still the best thing they did.

After all painting has the secret of being able to give one a second youth.

Tell me, have you ever read anything by Carlyle? Perhaps it is not even necessary if you only see the face of that man and know that his work is something like Michelet's; Whistler and Legros have both painted his portrait.

He is also one who dared a great deal, and had a different insight into things than the rest. But always when I study the lives of such men, I find the same story, lack of money, bad health, opposition, isolation – in short, trouble from beginning to end.

Mantz's article on Paul Baudry was very good, and I like this especially: "Il a travaillé au renouvellement du sourire." [He has worked at the renewal of the smile.]

Could one say of Delacroix, "Il a travaillé au renouvellement de la passion"? Perhaps so.

Well, at all events write soon. Goodbye,

Ever yours, Vincent