

My dear Bernard,

You do very well to be reading the Bible. I begin with that, because I have always refrained from advising you to do so. As I read the many sayings of Moses, Luke, etc., I couldn't help thinking, you know, that's all he needs – and now it has come to pass...the artistic neurosis. For that is what the study of Christ inevitably leads to, especially in my case, where it is aggravated by the smoking of innumerable pipes.

The Bible is Christ, for the Old Testament leads to that culmination. Paul and the evangelists stand on the other slope of the holy mountain.

How small-minded the old story really is! My God! Does the world consist solely of Jews, who declare from the very start that all those who are different from them are impure?

Why didn't the other nations under the great sun over there, the Egyptians, the Indians, the Ethiopians, Babylon and Nineveh, record their annals with the same care? Well, anyway, the study of it is beautiful, and, after all, being able to read everything would be tantamount to not being able to read at all.

But the consolation of that deeply saddening Bible, which arouses our despair and indignation, which seriously offends us and thoroughly confuses us with its pettiness and infectious foolishness – the consolation it contains like a stone inside a hard rind and bitter pulp, is Christ.

Only Delacroix and Rembrandt have painted the face of Christ in such a way that I can feel him...and then Millet painted...the teachings of Christ.

The rest rather makes me laugh, the rest of religious painting – from the religious point of view, not from the point of view of painting. And the Italian primitives – Botticelli, or let's say the Flemish primitives, Van Eyck, the German, Cranach – they are no more than heathens who only interest me for the same reason as do the Greeks, Velásquez and so many other naturalists.

Christ alone, of all the philosophers, magicians, etc., has affirmed eternal life as the most important certainty, the infinity of time, the futility of death, the necessity and purpose of serenity and devotion. He lived serenely, as an artist greater than all other artists, scorning marble and clay and paint, working in the living flesh. In other words, this peerless artist, scarcely conceivable with the blunt instrument of our modern, nervous and obtuse brains, made neither statues nor paintings nor books. He maintained in no uncertain terms that he made...living men, immortals.

That is a profoundly serious matter, the more so as it is the truth.

Nor did this great artist write books. Christian literature as a whole would undoubtedly have aroused his ire, and includes very few literary works beyond Luke's Gospel or Paul's epistles – so simple in their austere and militant form – that would have found favour in his eyes.

This great artist – Christ – although he did not concern himself with writing books on ideas (sensations), felt considerably less disdain for the spoken word, and for parables in particular (what a sower, what a harvest, what a fig tree! etc.).

And who would dare claim that he lied on that day when, scornfully predicting the destruction of Rome, he said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away."

These spoken words – which, like a prodigal grand seigneur, he did not even deign to write down – form one of the pinnacles, the highest pinnacle, reached by art, which at that point becomes creative force, pure creative force.

These thoughts, Bernard, dear friend, lead us far, very far, afield, they raise us above art itself. They give us a glimpse of the art of life-creation, the art of being immortal and alive. They are bound up with painting. The patron saint of painters – Luke, physician, painter, evangelist – who has as a symbol, alas, nothing more than an ox, gives us hope.

Yet our own life is a modest one indeed, our life as painters, languishing under the back-breaking yoke of the problems of a calling that is almost too hard to practise on this ungrateful planet, where "love of art drives out true love."

However, since nothing confutes the assumption that lines and forms and colours exist on innumerable other planets and suns as well, we are at liberty to feel fairly serene about the possibilities of painting in a better and different existence, an existence altered by a phenomenon that is perhaps no more ingenious and no more surprising than the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly or of a grub into a maybug.

The existence of a painter-butterfly would be played out on the countless celestial bodies which, after death, should be no more inaccessible to us than the black dots on maps that symbolize towns and villages are in our earthly lives.

Science – scientific reasoning – strikes me as being an instrument that will go a very long way in the future.

For look: people used to think that the earth was flat. That was true, and still is today, of, say, Paris to Asnières. But that does not alter the fact that science demonstrates that the earth as a whole is round, something nobody nowadays disputes.

© Copyright 2001 R. G. Harrison

For all that, people still persist in thinking that life is flat and runs from birth to death.

But life, too, is probably round, and much greater in scope and possibilities than the hemisphere we now know. Future generations will probably be able to enlighten us on this very interesting subject, and then science itself – with all due respect – may reach conclusions that are more or less in keeping with Christ's sayings about the other half of our life.

Be that as it may, the fact is that we are painters in real life, and it's a matter of continuing to draw breath while one has breath left in one's body.

Oh, what a beautiful picture that is by Eug. Delacroix, Christ in the Boat on the Sea of Gennesaret! He – with his pale lemon-yellow aureole, sleeping, luminous in the dramatic purple, dark-blue, blood-red patch of the group of bewildered disciples – on that terrible emerald-green sea, rising, rising, right to the top of the frame. Ah, what an inspired conception! I would do a sketch of it for you, but because I've been drawing and painting a model – a Zouave – for three or four days now, I am all in. Writing, on the other hand, calms and diverts me. What I've been doing looks very ugly – a drawing of a seated Zouave [F 1443, JH 1485], a painted sketch of the Zouave against a completely white wall [F 424, JH 1488], and finally his portrait against a green door and some orange bricks in a wall [F 423, JH 1486]. It is harsh, and taking it all in all, ugly and unsuccessful. Yet, because I was tackling a real difficulty with it, it may pave the way for the future.

Nearly all the figures I do look abominable in my own eyes, let alone the eyes of others. Yet the study of the figure is the most useful of all, provided one does it in a different way from that taught at, for instance, Monsieur Benjamin Constant's.

Your letter pleased me very much, the sketch¹ is very, very interesting, and I thank you very much for it. One of these days I shall be sending you a drawing of mine. Tonight I am too exhausted, my eyes are tired even if my mind is not.

Tell me, do you remember the John the Baptist by Puvis? I find it staggeringly beautiful and as magical as Eugene Delacroix.

The passage about John the Baptist you tracked down in the Gospel means exactly what you have read in it... people crowding round a man: "Are you the Christ? Are you Elias?" As would happen today if you were to ask of impressionism or of one of its questing representatives, "Have you found it yet?" Exactly the same.

My brother is holding an exhibition of Claude Monets, 10 paintings done in Antibes from February to May, apparently it's all very beautiful.

Have you ever read the life of Luther? Because Cranach, Dürer, Holbein belong with him. He – his personality – is the shining light of the Middle Ages.

I don't like the Sun King any more than you do – that Louis XIV was rather a killjoy, it seems to me – my God, what an utter bore that Methodist Solomon was. I don't like Solomon either and Methodists not at all. Solomon strikes me as a hypocritical heathen. I have really no respect for his architecture, an imitation of other styles, and none at all for his writings, for the heathens have done better.

Do tell me how things are going with your military service. Do you want me to speak to that second lieutenant in the Zouaves or not? Are you going to Africa or not? Do the years in Africa count double in your case or not? Try to make sure above all that your blood is all right – anaemia doesn't get you very far and your painting slows right down. You must try to acquire an iron constitution, a constitution that will allow you to grow old, you ought to live like a monk who goes to the brothel every two weeks – that's what I do myself, it isn't very poetic, but I feel it's my duty to subordinate my life to painting.

If I were at the Louvre with you, what I should very much like would be to go and see the primitives in your company. I still go, full of love, to look at the Dutch in the Louvre, Rembrandt first, Rembrandt, whom I used to study so much – and then, say, Potter, who paints a white stallion done in a meadow on a size 4 or 6 panel – a stallion neighing and aroused – forlorn under a heavy thundery sky, inconsolable in the soft green immensity of the damp meadow. In short, there are marvels among the old Dutchmen which cannot be compared to anything else.

With a handshake, and once again thanks for your letter and your sketch,
Ever yours, Vincent

P.S. The sonnets are doing well – that is to say, their colour is fine; the drawing is less strong, or rather less sure, the drawing is still hesitant – I don't know how to express it – their moral purpose is not clear.

1. Brothel Scene.