

Dear Theo,

Your letter has done me good and I thank you for having written to me in the way you have.

The roll with a new selection of etchings and various prints has just arrived. First and foremost the masterly etching, "Le Buisson" by Daubigny and Ruysdael. Well! I propose to make two drawings, in sepia or something else, one after that etching, the other after "Le Four dans les Landes" by Th. Rousseau. Indeed, I have already done a sepia of the latter, but if you compare it with Daubigny's etching you will see that it contrasts feebly, although considered on its own the sepia may betray some tone and sentiment. I shall have to return to it and tackle it again.

I am still working on Bargue's Cours de Dessin, and intend to finish it before I go on to anything else, for both my hand and my mind are growing daily more supple and strong as a result, and I cannot thank Mr. Tersteeg enough for having been so kind as to lend it to me. The models are outstanding. Meanwhile I am reading one book on anatomy and another on perspective, which Mr. Tersteeg also sent me. These studies are demanding and sometimes the books are extremely tedious, but I think all the same that it's doing me good to study them.

So you see that I am working away hard, though for the moment it is not yielding particularly gratifying results. But I have every hope that these thorns will bear white blossoms in due course and that these apparently fruitless struggles are nothing but labour pains. First the pain, then the joy.

You mention Lessore. I think I remember some very elegant watercolour landscapes by him in a blonde tone, worked with an apparent ease and a light touch, yet with accuracy and distinction, and a somewhat decorative effect (that is not meant badly, but on the contrary, in a favourable sense). So I know a little about his work and you mention someone not entirely unknown to me.

I admire the portrait of Victor Hugo. It is done very conscientiously with the evident intention of portraying the truth without straining after effect. That is precisely what makes it so effective.

Last winter I pored over some of Hugo's works, *Le Dernier Jour d'un Condamné* and an excellent book on Shakespeare. I first started studying this writer long ago. He is just as splendid as Rembrandt. Shakespeare is to Charles Dickens or Victor Hugo what Ruysdael is to Daubigny, and Rembrandt to Millet.

What you say in your letter about Barbizon is perfectly true and I can tell you one or two things that will make it clear how much I share your view. I haven't been to Barbizon, but though I haven't been there, I did go to Courrières last winter. I went on a walking tour in the Pas-de-Calais, not the English Channel but the department, or province. I had gone on this trip in the hope of perhaps finding some sort of work there, if possible – I would have accepted anything – but in fact I set out a bit reluctantly, though I can't exactly say why. But I had told myself, You must see Courrières. I had just 10 francs in my pocket and because I had started out by taking the train, that was soon gone, and I was on the road for a week, it was a rather gruelling trip. Anyway, I saw Courrières and the outside of M. Jules Breton's studio. The outside of the studio was a bit of a disappointment, seeing that it is in a brand-new studio, recently built of brick, of a Methodist regularity, with an inhospitable, stone-cold and forbidding aspect, just like C. M.'s Jovinda, which, between ourselves, I am none too keen on either, for the same reason. If I could have seen the inside, I am quite certain that I should have given no further thought to the outside, but there you are, I could not see the inside because I dared not introduce myself and go in. Elsewhere in Courrières I looked for traces of Jules Breton or any other artist. All I was able to find was a portrait of him at a photographer's and a copy of Titian's Entombment in a corner of the old church which looked very beautiful to me in the darkness and masterly in tone. Was it by him? I don't know because I was unable to make out any signature.

But of any living artist, no trace, just a café called Cafe des Beaux Arts, also of new, inhospitable, stone-cold, repulsive brick – the café was decorated with a kind of fresco or mural depicting episodes from the life of that illustrious knight, Don Quixote.

To tell the truth, those frescoes seemed to me rather poor consolation, and fairly mediocre at the time. I don't know who did them.

But anyway I did see the country around Courrières then, the haystacks, the brown farmland or the marled earth, almost coffee-coloured (with whitish spots where the marl shows through), which seems somewhat unusual to people like us who are used to a blackish soil. And the French sky looked to me much finer and brighter than the smoky, foggy sky of the Borinage. What's more, there were farms and barns that, God be praised, still retained their mossy thatched roofs. I also saw the flocks of crows made famous by the pictures of Daubigny and Millet. Not to mention, as I ought to have done in the first place, the characteristic and picturesque figures of all manner of workmen, diggers, woodcutters, a farmhand driving his wagon and a silhouette of a woman in a white cap. Even in Courrières there was still a coal mine or pit, I saw the day shift come up at nightfall: but there were no women

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workers in men's clothes as in the Borinage, just the miners looking tired and careworn, black with coal dust, dressed in ragged miners' clothes, one of them in an old army cape.

Although this trip nearly killed me and I came back spent with fatigue, with crippled feet and in more or less depressed state of mind, I do not regret it, because I saw some interesting things and the terrible ordeals of suffering are what teach you to look at things through different eyes.

I earned a few crusts here and there en route in exchange for a picture or a drawing or two I had in my bag. But when my ten francs ran out I tried to bivouac in the open air the last 3 nights, once in an abandoned carriage which was completely white with hoarfrost the next morning, not the best accommodation, once in a pile of faggots; and once, and that was a slight improvement, in a haystack, that had been opened up, where I succeeded in making myself a slightly more comfortable little hideaway, though the drizzle did not exactly add to my enjoyment. Well, and yet it was in these depths of misery that I felt my energy revive and I said to myself, I shall get over it somehow, I shall set to work again with my pencil, which I had cast aside in my deep dejection, and I shall draw again, and from that moment I have had the feeling that everything has changed for me, and now I am in my stride and my pencil has become slightly more willing and seems to be getting more so by the day. My over-long and over-intense misery had discouraged me so much that I was unable to do anything.

I saw something else during the trip – the weaver's villages.

The miners and the weavers still form a race somehow apart from other workers and artisans and I have much fellow-feeling for them and I should consider myself fortunate if I could draw them one day, for then these as yet unknown, or virtually unknown, types would be brought out into the light of day.

The man from the depths, from the abyss, de profundis, that is the miner. The other, with the faraway look, almost daydreaming, almost a sleepwalker, that is the weaver. I have been living among them now for nearly 2 years and have learned a little of their special character, in particular that of the miners. And increasingly I find something touching and even pathetic in these poor, humble workers, the lowest of the low in a manner of speaking, and the most despised, who, owing to a possibly widely held but quite baseless and inaccurate presumption, are usually considered a race of knaves and scoundrels. Knaves, drunkards and scoundrels may be found here, of course, just as elsewhere, but the real type is nothing at all like that.

You refer vaguely in your letter to my coming sooner or later to Paris or its environs, if it were possible and if I wanted to. It is of course my eager and fervent wish to go either to Paris or to Barbizon, or somewhere else, but how can I, when I do not earn a cent and when, though I work hard, it will be some time before I reach the point at which I can give any thought to something like going to Paris. For honestly, to be able to work properly I need at least a hundred francs a month. You can certainly live on less, but then you really are hard up, much too hard up in fact! "Poverty stops the best minds in their tracks" the old Palissy saying goes, which has some truth in it and is entirely true if you understand its real meaning and import. For the moment I do not see how it could be feasible, and the best thing is for me to stay here and work as hard as I can, and, after all, it is cheaper to live here.

At the same time I must tell you that I cannot remain very much longer in the little room where I live now. It is very small room indeed, and then there are the two beds as well, the children's and my own. And now that I am working on Bague's fairly large sheets I cannot tell you how difficult it is. I don't want to upset these people's domestic arrangements. They have already told me that I couldn't have the other room in the house under any circumstances, not even if I paid more, for the woman needs it for her washing, which in a miner's house has to be done almost every day. In short, I should like to rent a small workman's cottage. It costs about 9 francs a month.

I cannot tell you (though fresh problems arise and will continue to arise every day), I cannot tell you how happy I am that I have taken up drawing again. I had been thinking about it for a long time, but always considered it impossible and beyond my abilities. But now, though I continue to be conscious of my failings and of my depressing dependence on a great many things, now I have recovered my peace of mind and my energy increases by the day. As far as coming to Paris is concerned, it would be of particular advantage to me if we could manage to establish contact with some good and able artist, but to be quite blunt about it, it might only be a repetition on a large scale of my trip to Courrières, where I hoped to come across a living example of the species Artist and found none. For me the object is to learn to draw well, to gain control of my pencil, my charcoal or my brush. Once I have achieved that I shall be able to do good work almost anywhere and the Borinage is as picturesque as old Venice, as Arabia, as Brittany, Normandy, Picardy or Brie.

Should my work be no good, it will be my own fault. But in Barbizon, you most certainly have a better chance than elsewhere of meeting a good artist who would be as an angel sent by God, should such a happy meeting take place. I say this in all seriousness and without exaggeration. So if, sometime or other, you should see the means and the opportunity, please think of me. Meanwhile I'll stay here quietly in some small workman's cottage and work as hard as I can.

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You mentioned Méryon again. What you say about him is quite true. I know his etchings slightly. If you want to see something curious, then place one of his meticulous and powerful sketches next to a print by Viollet-le-Duc or anyone else engaged in architecture. If you do, then you will see Méryon in his true light, thanks to the other etching which will serve, whether you like it or not, as a foil or contrast. Right, so what do you see? This. Even when he draws bricks, granite, iron bars, or the railing of a bridge, Méryon puts into his etchings something of the human soul, moved by I do not know what inner sorrow. I have seen Victor Hugo's drawings of Gothic buildings. Well, though they lacked Méryon's powerful and masterly technique, they had something of the same sentiment. What sort of sentiment is that? It is akin to what Albrecht Dürer expressed in his "Melancholia," and James Tissot and M. Maris (different though these two may be) in our own day. A discerning critic once rightly said of James Tissot, "He is a troubled soul." However this may be, there is something of the human soul in his work and that is why he is great, immense, infinite. But place Viollet-le-Duc alongside and he is stone, while the other, that is, Méryon is Spirit.

Méryon is said to have had so much love that, just like Dickens's Sydney Carton, he loved even the stones of certain places. But in Millet, in Jules Breton, in Jozef Israëls, the precious pearl, the human soul, is even more in evidence and better expressed in a noble, worthier, and if you will allow me, more evangelical tone.

But to return to Méryon, in my view he also has a distant kinship with Jongkind and perhaps with Seymour Haden, since at times these two artists have been extremely good.

Just wait, and perhaps you'll see that I too am a workman. Though I cannot predict what I shall be able to do, I hope to make a few sketches with perhaps something human in them, but first I must do the Bargue drawings and other more or less difficult things. Narrow is the way and straight the gate and there are only a few who find it.

Thanking you for your kindness, especially for "Le Buisson," I shake your hand,

Vincent

I have now taken your whole collection, but you will get it back later and in addition I've got some very fine things for your collection of wood engravings, which I hope you will continue, in the two volumes of the Musée Universel, which I am keeping for you.