

Letter 148
Etten, early August 1881

Dear Theo,

It was very pleasant to have you here again, and to have long talks together about everything. I always regret that we cannot be together much more. Not that I think talking in itself so valuable, but I mean that I wish we knew each other much better and more intimately than we do now. That thought occurred to me especially when coming back from Roozendaal after seeing you off at the station; also with regard to some things we said that last moment at the station.

I am glad to see in the letter I got today that you hope to come back before very long. Of course I feel quite better now. The day after you left I stayed in bed, however, and had a long talk with Dr. Van Gent, a clever and practical man; not because I thought this insignificant malaise important, but rather because in general, either well or unwell, I like to talk with a doctor now and then, in order to know that everything is all right. If one occasionally hears a sound and true word about health, by and by one gets much clearer ideas about it; and if one knows what to do and what to avoid, one is not shaken like a reed by every wind and does not believe all the nonsense so often heard about health and ill health.

For the rest, I am drawing the Exercices au Fusain on the Ingres paper you brought with you; it is difficult enough. It is much more inspiring to draw from nature than to copy such a page from the Barges, but still I set myself the task of drawing them once more, and now for the last time. It would not be right if I paid too much attention to details and overlooked the great things when drawing from nature. And that was too much the case in my last drawings, I thought. Therefore I want to study Barge's method again (he gives only broad lines and forms, and simple delicate outlines). And for the moment I have stopped drawing outdoors. When I go back to it shortly, I shall have a better view of things than before.

I do not know if you ever read English books; if you do, I can strongly recommend that you read Shirley by Currer Bell, author of another book called Jane Eyre. It is as beautiful as pictures by Millet or Boughton or Herkomer. I found it at Prinsenhage and finished it in three days, though it is quite a voluminous book. I wish all people had what I am gradually beginning to acquire: the power to read a book in a short time without difficulty, and to keep a strong impression of it. In reading books, as in looking at paintings, one must admire what is beautiful with assurance – without doubt, without hesitation.

I am busy rearranging all my books; I have read too much not to work on systematically to get at least an idea of modern literature. Sometimes I am so sorry that I do not know more about history, especially modern history. Well, being sorry and giving up doesn't help us on; the only thing to do is to push forward. I was very glad to detect now and then in your talk some very good philosophy. Who knows what a great thinker you may become in time. If you think Illusions Perdues by Balzac too long (two volumes), then try Le Père Goriot, only one volume; once you have tried Balzac, you will prefer him to many others. Remember Balzac's nickname, "vétérinaire des maladies incurables." [Veterinary of incurable diseases.] By the time I have finished the Barges, it will be autumn; that is a delightful time for drawing. I wish that Rappard would come back here then.

I think I shall find a good model here in Piet Kaufman, the gardener, but I think it will be better to let him pose with a spade or plough or something like that – not here at home, but either in the yard or in his own home or in the field. But what a tough job it is to make people understand how to pose. Folks are desperately obstinate about it, and it is hard to make them yield on this point: they only want to pose in their Sunday best, with impossible folds in which neither knees, elbows, shoulder blades nor any other part of the body have left their characteristic dents or bumps. Indeed, that is one of the petites misères de la vie d'un dessinateur [small miseries of a draughtsman's life].

Well, adieu, write when you can and receive a handshake in thought from
Yours sincerely, Vincent