

Dear Theo,

What life I think best, oh, without the least shadow of a doubt it is a life consisting of long years of intercourse with nature in the country – and Something on High – inconceivable, “awfully unnamable” – for it is impossible to find a name for that which is higher than nature. Be a peasant – be, if it could be considered possible nowadays, a village clergyman or a schoolmaster – be – and in my opinion this ought to be thought of first, the present times being what they are – be a painter, and as a human being, after a number of years of living in the country and of having a handicraft, as a human being you will in the course of these years gradually become something better and deeper in the end.

This is my firm belief. Whether one is more or less clever at the start, whether one has the advantage of favorable circumstances to a greater or to a lesser extent, is, to my way of thinking, far from being the main thing. One should start with the conviction that one is in need of intercourse with nature, with the conviction that one cannot lose one’s way by taking this road, and that one’s course will be straight. And ... there is that other important thing: if one should have an easy time of it, like a man living on his private means, it would be of very little help; the very fact that there is many a hard day and many an “effort of lost souls” will make one a better man.

And I believe not being absolutely alone does a lot of good, as one is apt to become absorbed in one’s work; but this should not lead to losing one’s way, and by taking each other’s advice the right way can be followed steadily. If you talked it over with other people, they would say, What are you thinking of? – how wild a venture to give up this, that and the other! In short, they would think it madness – a blunder. As for myself, I find wildness in a conception of life other than the one I am talking about – i.e. being a painter – I think it wildly reckless to tie oneself down irrevocably to the city and the affairs of the city.

They will tell you that you are a fanatic, but most certainly you – after having undergone so many mental trials – will know that it is impossible for you to be fanatical, for you are in a period of disenchantment. Don’t let them try to turn things upside down, that won’t do for me!

I feel my own incurable melancholy, caused by certain developments in the past, and then they want to tell me that my mood is “the rash fanaticism of youth”! Far, very far from it. In your mood one is “in damned earnest,” as the English say. You do not expect to find something soft or sweet, no, you know that you are in for a fight against something like a rock, no, you know that it is impossible to conquer nature and to make her more amenable without a terrible struggle and without more than ordinary patience.

And when speaking of your being a painter, they would describe your state of mind as that of a dreamer, imagining himself on a bed of roses. I ask you, what do those who represent things that way know? But people being what they are, this is only one of their enormities and not even the worst by a long shot. This hopeless absurdity of public opinion makes it only natural for one to want to avoid the world.

One feels things to be wretched and much too distorted, and however peaceful and cheerful and full of serenity one’s natural disposition may be, one feels that this cannot be otherwise – but then I ask, what is more practical than telling yourself: If I don’t do anything about it, I shall lose my energy and strength of mind; I am going to refresh, to rejuvenate myself in nature; I am going to attack things in a new way, and I will arrange my life in such a way that, let’s say, in a few years I shall have quite new and sure ground under my feet.

I have no patience with “so-called” common sense (a spurious article, unutterably different from the genuine one) one is told to use, and which they say one does not use as soon as one deviates from the ordinary course and takes a risk. I repeat, I have no patience with it. I have no patience with it for the very reason that my own natural common sense, if I reflect, leads me to wholly different results than the conclusion of narrow-minded worldly wisdom and prudent, halfhearted righteousness.

Oh, that dawdling, oh, those hesitations, oh, that not believing that good is good, that black is black, that white is white.

Dear brother – I cannot speak; at the present moment I am glad I can express myself stumblingly, incoherently, roughly. I am glad I cannot write you like Tersteeg or Father – for the moment – anyway.

I am so deeply convinced of your artistic talent that to me you will be an artist as soon as you take up a brush or a piece of crayon and, adroitly or maladroitly, make something.

Before you are able to express yourself, that is, your plain-thinking virile soul – peaceful, good – before you can express this in your work, quite a lot of things must happen; but it will come, for as you are, so you paint – not in the beginning, assuredly, if one is good.

It is clear to me that there is a je ne sais quoi – I already see it in your words, pictures of some little corners in Paris,

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etc., even now I should see it in your first sketches and studies. When I think of Father, it seems to me that the good in him is due to his intercourse with nature, and in my opinion his error is that he attaches more value to other things than they are really worth.

In my eyes Father is a man who, when he ought to have had it, did not possess any knowledge of the intimate life of some great men. What I mean to say is that in my opinion Father never knew, and does not know now, and never will know what the soul of modern civilization is. What is it? The eternal quality in the greatest of the great: simplicity and truth. Dupré, Daubigny, Corot, Millet, Israëls, Herkomer – as well as Michelet, Hugo, Zola, Balzac, and many another master of older and newer times. Father is too much circumvented by his prejudices to understand this; all through life he applies them with a punctiliousness worthy of a better cause. For me he is the rayon noir. Why isn't he a rayon blanc? – this is the only fault I find in Father. True, it is a great fault – I cannot help it. And listen to what I say: Try to find the rayon blanc, but blanc, do you hear?

With a handshake,  
Yours sincerely, Vincent

I do not say - far, very far be it from me to say – that I myself have the rayon blanc, but I am not ashamed to say that it exists, this White Light – and that I seek it, and only this do I consider simplicity.