

My dear Theo,

Enclosed is one of Mother's letters, of course you know all the news in it. I think that Cor is very smart to go there. [Their youngest brother was going to the Transvaal.]

It's different from staying in Europe, down there you don't have to put up with the influence of our big cities, which are so old that everything in them seems to be tottering and in its dotage. Instead of seeing his vital strength and native and natural energy evaporate in circumlocution, it's possible that he might be far happier distancing himself from our society.

He should do this without delay and act with honesty as he has been taught, and not hesitate to accept the situation. However, it's not to acquaint you with all this news that I am sending you this letter, which you know already.

But it is to let you see how firm and regular the handwriting is, remarkable enough when you think that what she says is really true, that she is a mother of almost seventy. And just as you already wrote me, and our sister too, that she seems to have grown younger, I see it myself in this clear handwriting and the very clear logic in what she writes, and the simplicity with which she appreciates facts.

I think now that this growing young again has come to her just because she is glad that you are married; she has wanted it for such a long time, and I congratulate you because your marriage enables you and Jo to have the rather rare pleasure of seeing your mother grow young again. It is really for that reason that I am sending you the letter. For my dear boy, one sometimes needs a reminder later on, and it happens so fortunately that just at the moment when she will have the great sorrow of parting with Cor – it will be hard on her, that – she will be comforted by knowing you are married. If possible, you must not wait a whole year before going back to Holland, for she will be longing to see you again, you and your wife.

At the same time, since you have married a Dutchwoman, within a few years' time – sooner or later – it may revive the business relations with Amsterdam or The Hague.

Well, once more, I have not seen a letter of Mother's showing so much inner serenity and calm contentment as this – not for many years. And I am sure that this comes from your marriage. They say that pleasing your parents assures long life.

Thank you very much for the package of colours. Subtract them from the order sent since, but if you could manage it, not for the quantity of white. Thank you also very heartily for the Shakespeare. It will help me not to forget the little English I know, but above all it is so fine. I have begun to read the series of which I knew least, which formerly, distracted by other things or not having the time, I could not read; the series of the kings: I have already read Richard II, Henry IV and half of Henry V. I read without wondering if the ideas of the people of those times were different from our own, or what would become of them if you confronted them with republican and socialist beliefs and so on. But what touches me, as in some novelists of our day, is that the voices of these people, which in Shakespeare's case reach us from a distance of several centuries, do not seem unfamiliar to us. It is so much alive that you think you know them and see the thing.

And so what Rembrandt has alone or almost alone among painters, that tenderness of gaze which we see, whether it's in the "Men of Emmaus" or in the "Jewish Bride" or in some such strange angelic figure as the picture you have had the good fortune to see, that heartbroken tenderness, that glimpse of a super-human infinitude that seems so natural there – in many places you come upon it in Shakespeare too. And then above all he is full of portraits, grave or gay, like "Six" and like the "Traveller," and like "Saskia."

What a good idea of Victor Hugo's son to translate all this into French, so that it will be within everyone's reach.

When I think of the impressionists and of all the problems of art nowadays, what lessons there are for us in that very thing. And so the idea came to me from what I have just been reading that the impressionists are right a thousand times over, yet even then they must think over long and well whether it follows from this that they have the right or the duty to take justice into their own hands.

If they dare call themselves primitives, certainly they would do well to learn a little to be primitives as men before pronouncing the word primitive as a title, which would give them a right to anything whatever. But as for those who may be the cause of the impressionists' unhappiness, well, they are in a pretty serious predicament, even though they make light of it.

And then it looks as though fighting a battle seven times a week really could not go on.

It is amazing how L'Abbesse de Jouarre, when you think of it, holds its own even beside Shakespeare.

I think that Renan treated himself to that, so as to be able for once to use beautiful words plentifully and pleasurably, for the words are beautiful there.

In order that you have some idea of what I am doing, I am sending you a dozen drawings today, all from canvases I am working on.

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The latest one I've started is the "Wheat Field," in which there is a little reaper and a big sun. The canvas is all yellow except for the wall and the background of violet-tinted hills. The canvas which is almost the same in subject is different in colouring, being greyish-green with a white and blue sky.

How often I think of Reid when I am reading Shakespeare, and how often I have thought of him while I was worse than I am now. Thinking that I was far, far too hard on him and too discouraging when I claimed that it was better to care for the painters than for the pictures.

It is not within my power to make distinctions like this, even faced with the problem which we see our living friends suffering under, the lack of enough money to live on and to pay for their paints, and on the other hand the high prices paid for the canvases of dead painters. I was reading in a newspaper a letter from a collector of Greek things to one of his friends, in which this phrase occurred: "You who love nature, I who love everything the hand of man has made, this difference in our tastes is basically a unity."

And I thought that this was better than my argument.

I have a canvas of cypresses with some ears of wheat, some poppies, a blue sky like a piece of multicoloured Scotch plaid [F 717, JH 1756]; the former painted with a thick impasto like the Monticellis, and the wheat field with the sun, which represents the extreme heat, very thick too; I think that these would make it more or less clear to him that he could not lose much by remaining friends with us. But that is true for us as well, and just because it was perhaps right to disapprove of his method, we must on our side take a step toward reconciliation. Anyhow, I dare not write now for fear of saying too many silly things, but when I am more certain of my pen, I should very much like to write to him someday.

I still have some canvases in Arles which were not dry when I left. I very much want to go and get them one of these days in order to send them to you; there are half a dozen. The drawings seem to me to have little colour this time, and the too-smooth paper must have caused it.

The "Weeping Tree" and the courtyard of the "Hospital at Arles" [F 519, JH 1687] have more colour, but all the same this will give you an idea of what I am doing. The canvas of the "Reaper" is going to be something like the "Sower" of last year.

How fine Zola's books will continue to be, just because there is life in them.

What has life in it too is that Mother is glad that you are married, and I think that this cannot be unpleasant to yourselves, you and Jo. But the separation from Cor will be harder on her than one can imagine. It is just in learning to suffer without complaint, in learning to look on pain without repugnance, that you risk vertigo, and yet it is possible, yet you may even catch a glimpse of a vague likelihood that on the other side of life we shall see good reason for the existence of pain, which seen from here sometimes so fills the whole horizon that it takes on the proportions of a hopeless deluge. We know very little about this, about its proportions, and it is better to look at a wheat field, even in the form of a picture.

I shake hands with you both, and I hope to hear from you soon. Good health to both of you.

Ever yours, Vincent