

What is it Like to Look at a Painting?

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There are many poems about paintings, but surprisingly few bring to the fore the actual experience of looking, in particular the kind of looking that comes with falling under a picture's spell and trying to work out why. This seminar will focus on some poems that do, either directly – Ciaran Carson's 'Claude Monet, Artist's Garden at Vetheuil' from his book *Still Life* – or discursively – Wislawa Szymborska's 'The People on the Bridge', preeminently. (I enclose two translations of Szymborska's poem, the first by Clare Cavanagh and Stanislaw Baranczak, the second by Joanna Trzeciak.) I hope we shall also read Tomas Tranströmer's 'Vermeer', as translated by Robin Fulton, and George Oppen's 'Giovanni's Rape of the Sabine Women at Wildenstein's'. (This last is about a sculpture, but as a treatment of looking and wondering it is indispensable.)

As before in these seminars, the difference between language and depiction will be on our minds. In this case, maybe the difference between reading a sentence, a proposition or a poem, and looking at a *picture* or a sculpture for a moment, or for many, and reaching a judgement of what it could mean. If anything. (Szymborska and Carson speak to this.)

from Still Life,
by Carson Carson.

Claude Monet,
Artist's Garden at Vétheuil, 1880

Today I thought I'd just take a lie-down, and drift. So here I am
Listening to the tick of my mechanical aortic valve—
 overhearing, rather, the way
It flits in and out of consciousness. It's a wonder what goes on
 below the threshold.
It's quiet up here, just the muted swoosh of the cars on the
 Antrim Road,
And every so often the shrill of a far-off alarm or the squeal
 of brakes;
But yesterday some vandal upended the terracotta pot of
 daffodils
In our little front garden, that's not even as big, when I
 consider it,
As the double bed I'm lying on. Behind the privet hedge,
 besides the daffodils
There's pansies, thyme and rosemary. A Hebe bush. A laurel.
 Ruefully
I scuffed the spilled earth and pebbles with my shoe and
 thought of Poussin—
Was it Poussin?—and his habit of bringing back bits of
 wood, stones,
Moss, lumps of earth from his rambles by the Tiber; and the
 story of him

Reaching among the ruins for a handful of marble and
 porphyry chips
 And saying to a tourist, 'Here's ancient Rome.' So, here's
 Glandore Avenue.

So different now from thirty years ago, the corner shop at
 the interface
 Torched and the roadway strewn with broken glass and rubble.

There was something beautiful about the tossed daffodils all
 the same.
 I'd never really taken them under my notice these past few
 difficult weeks.
 It's late March, some of them beginning to turn and wilt and
 fade, heads
 Drooping, papery at the tips, desiccated, or completely gone,
 reduced to calyx.
 So many shades of yellow when you look at them. Gorse.
 Lemon. Mustard.
 Honey. Saffron. Ochre. But then any word you care to mention
 has so many
 Shades of meaning, and the flower itself goes under different
 names.
 Narcissus. Daffadowndilly. Lent lily. So we wander down the
 road of what it is
 We think we want to say. Etymologies present themselves,
 like daffodil
 From asphodel—who knows where the d came from? —
 the flower

Of the underworld. They say it grows profusely in the meadows
 of the dead,
 Like a buttercup on its branching stem. And I see a galaxy of
 buttercups in
 A green field, and the yellow of the tall sunflowers in Monet's
Garden at Vétheuil
 That flank the path where the woman and the two children
 stand commemorated.

Strange how a smear of colour, like a perfume, resurrects
 the memory
 Of another, that which I meant to begin with. 'Asphodel, that
 greeny flower.'

I'd just found the book I had in mind — *What Painting Is*
 by James Elkins —
 When the vandal struck. *Thud*. What the...? The gate clanged.
 I looked out
 The bay window to see a figure scarpering off down the street
 to the interface...

What a book, though. I have it before me, open at this colour
 plate, jotting notes
 Into a jotter, which I'll work up later into what you're
 reading now.

'The detail I'm reproducing here is a graveyard of scattered
 brush hairs
 And other detritus,' said Elkins. 'At the centre left, glazed over
 by Malachite Green,

Are two crossed brush hairs, one of them bent almost at a right angle.
 Just below them are two of Monet's own hairs, fallen into the wet paint.'
 Brushstrokes laid down every which way. Jiggles. Jabs.
 Impulsive
 Twists and turns. Gestures that 'depend on the inner feelings of the body,
 And the fleeting momentary awareness of what the hand might do next.'
 You listen to the body talking, exfoliating itself cell after cell.
 I saw it
 Happening just now in the dust-motes drifting through this ray of sunlight.

So everything gets into the painting, wood-smoke from the studio stove,
 The high pollen count of a high summer's day *en plein air* by the Seine.

The detail is so magnified it is impossible to tell what it is of, if you didn't,
 Like Elkins, know. The visual field looks like a field. Shades of umber, khaki, mud,
 And other greens beside the malachite. It could stand for anything it seems
 In Monet's garden—or *Garden*, rather—as Poussin's handful of porphyry

Is Rome and of the days of the fall of Rome. I want it to go to the stately tune
 Of a Poussin painting, *Landscape with a Man Washing His Feet by a Fountain*,
 Say, where a woman sweeps by, balancing a basket on her head, and an old man
 In blue dreams full-length on the grass. There are milestones and tombs,
 And puddles on the road, and you can just imagine the whispering of the cistern.
 A line of blue hills in the distance is contoured like a monumental sentence.
 It's beautiful weather, the 30th of March, and tomorrow the clocks go forward.
 How strange it is to be lying here listening to whatever it is is going on.
 The days are getting longer now, however many of them I have left.
 And the pencil I am writing this with, old as it is, will easily outlast their end.

THE PEOPLE ON THE BRIDGE

An odd planet, and those on it are odd, too.
They're subject to time, but they won't admit it.
They have their own ways of expressing protest.
They make up little pictures, like for instance this:

At first glance, nothing special.

What you see is water.

And one of its banks.

And a little boat sailing strenuously upstream.

And a bridge over the water, and people on the bridge.

It appears that the people are picking up their pace
because of the rain just beginning to lash down
from a dark cloud.

The thing is, nothing else happens.

The cloud doesn't change its color or its shape.

The rain doesn't increase or subside.

The boat sails on without moving.

The people on the bridge are running now
exactly where they ran before.

It's difficult at this point to keep from commenting.

This picture is by no means innocent.

Time has been stopped here.

Its laws are no longer consulted.

It has been relieved of its influence over the course of events.
It has been ignored and insulted.

On account of a rebel,
one Hiroshige Utagawa

(a being who, by the way,
died long ago and in due course),
time has tripped and fallen down.

It might well be simply a trifling prank,
an antic on the scale of just a couple of galaxies,
let us, however, just in case,
add one final comment for the record:

For generations, it's been considered good form here
to think highly of this picture,
to be entranced and moved.

There are those for whom even this is not enough.
They go so far as to hear the rain's spatter,
to feel the cold drops on their necks and backs,
they look at the bridge and the people on it
as if they saw themselves there,
running the same never-to-be-finished race
through the same endless, ever-to-be-covered distance,
and they have the nerve to believe
that this is really so.

— Wisława Szymborska
(Trans. Clare Cavanagh &
Stanisław Barańczak)

People on the Bridge

Strange planet and strange people on it.
They yield to time, but don't want to recognize time.
They have their ways of expressing resistance.
They make pictures such as this:

Nothing remarkable at first glance.
One can see water,
one riverbank,
a narrow boat strenuously moving upstream,
a bridge over the water,
and people on the bridge.
They are clearly picking up the pace,
as rain starts lashing down from a dark cloud.

The point is, nothing happens further.
The cloud changes neither shape nor color.
The rain neither subsides nor surges.
The boat moves without moving.
The people on the bridge run
exactly where they ran before.

It is hard to get by without commentary:
This is not at all an innocent picture.
Time's been stopped here,
its laws no longer consulted.
It's been denied impact on the course of events,
disregarded and dishonored.

Thanks to a rebel,
one Hiroshige Utagawa
(a being who, by the way,
passed away, as is proper, long ago),
time stumbled and fell.

Perhaps it is merely a prank without much meaning,
a whim on the scale of just a few galaxies,
but just in case,
let's add what happens next:

For generations it has been considered in good taste
to hold this painting in high esteem,
to praise it and be greatly moved by it.

For some, even that is not enough.
They hear the patter of rain,
feel the chill of raindrops on necks and shoulders,
they look at the bridge and the people on it
as if they saw themselves there,
in that never-ending race
along the endless road, to be traveled for eternity
and they have the audacity to believe
that it is real.

—Wislawa Symperska
(trans. Joanna Trzeciak)

Vermeer

No protected world... Just behind the wall the noise begins, the inn is there with laughter and bickering, rows of teeth, tears, the din of bells and the insane brother-in-law, the death-bringer we all must tremble for.

The big explosion and the tramp of rescue arriving late the boats preening themselves on the straits, the money creeping down in the wrong man's pocket demands stacked on demands gaping red flowerheads sweating premonitions of war.

In from there and right through the wall into the clear studio into the second that's allowed to live for centuries. Pictures that call themselves 'The Music Lesson' or 'Woman in Blue Reading a Letter' – she's in her eighth month, two hearts kicking inside her. On the wall behind is a wrinkled map of Terra Incognita.

Breathe calmly... An unknown blue material is nailed to the chairs. The gold studs flew in with incredible speed and stopped abruptly as if they had never been other than stillness.

Ears sing, from depth or height. It's the pressure from the other side of the wall. It makes each fact float and steadies the brush.

It hurts to go through walls, it makes you ill but is necessary.

The world is one. But walls... And the wall is part of yourself – we know or we don't know but it's true for us all except for small children. No walls for them.

The clear sky has leant against the wall. It's like a prayer to the emptiness. And the emptiness turns its face to us and whispers 'I am not empty, I am open.'

— Trans Translancer
(Trans. Robin Fulton)

~~Romanesque Archives~~

GIOVANNI'S RAPE OF THE SABINE WOMEN
AT WILDENSTEIN'S

Showing the girl
On the shoulder of the warrior, calling
Behind her in the young body's triumph
With its despairing arms aloft
And the men violent,
being violent
In a strange village. The dust
Settles into village clarity
Among the villagers, a difficult
Song
Full of treason.
Sing?
To one's fellows?
To old men? in the villages,
The dwindling heritage
The heart will shrivel in
Sometime—But the statue!
Spiraling its drama
In the stair well

Of the gallery . . . Useless!
Useless! Thick witted,
Thick carpeted, exhilarated by the stylish
Or the opulent, the blind and deaf. There was the child
The girl was:
Seeking like a child the eyes
Of the animals
To promise
Everything that matters, shelter
From the winds
The winds that lie
In the mind,
The ruinous winds
'Powerless to affect
The intensity of what is'—
'It has been good to us,'
However. The nights
At sea, and what
We sailed in, the large
Loose sphere of it
Visible, the force in it
Moving the little boat.

Only that it changes! Perhaps one is himself
Beyond the heart, the center of the thing

And cannot praise it

As he would want to, with the light in it, feeling the long
helplessness
Of those who will remain in it

And the losses. If this is treason
To the artists, make the most of it; one needs such faith,

Such faith in it
In the whole thing, more than I,
Or they, have had in songs.

— George Oppen