And our faces,
    My heart,
          Brief as photos.

ONCE IN A PAINTING

Paintings are static. The uniqueness of the experience of looking at a painting repeatedly—over a period of days or years—is that, in the midst of flux, the image remains changeless. Of course the significance of the image may change, as a result of either historical or personal events, but what is depicted is unchanging: the same milk flowing from the same jug, the waves on the sea with exactly the same formations unbroken, the smile and the face which have not altered.

One might be tempted to say that paintings preserve a moment. Yet on reflection this is obviously untrue. For the moment of a painting, unlike a moment photographed, never existed as such. And so a painting cannot be said to preserve it.

In early Renaissance art, in paintings from non-European cultures, in certain modem works, the image implies a passage of time. Looking at it, the spectator sees Before, During, and After. The Chinese sage takes a walk from one tree to another, the carriage runs over the child, the nude descends the staircase. Yet the ensuing images are still static whilst referring to the dynamic world beyond their edges, and this poses the problem of what is the meaning of that strange contrast between static and dynamic. Strange because it is both so flagrant and so taken for granted.

When is a painting finished? Not when it finally corresponds to something already existing-like the second shoe of a pair—but when the
foreseen ideal moment of its being looked at is filled, as the painter feels or calculates it ought to be. The long or short process of painting a picture is the process of constructing such a moment. Of course, the painting’s moment-of-being-looked-at cannot be entirely forseen and thus completely filled by the painting. Nevertheless every painting is, by its very nature, addressed to such a moment.

Whether the painter is a simple practitioner or a master makes no difference to this address of the painting. The difference is in what the painting delivers: in how closely the moment of its being looked at, as foreseen by the painter, corresponds to the interests of the actual moments of its being looked at by other people, when the circumstances surrounding its production (patronage, fashion, ideology) have changed.

Some painters when working have a habit of studying their painting, when it has reached a certain stage, in a mirror. What they then see is the image reversed. If questioned about why this helps, they say that it allows them to see the painting anew, with a fresher eye. What they glimpse in the mirror is perhaps a little like the look of their painting at that future moment to which it is being addressed.

All finished paintings, whether a year or five hundred years old, are now prophecies, received from the past, about what the spectator is seeing in front of the canvas at the present moment. Sometimes the prophecy is quickly exhausted-the painting loses its address; sometimes it remains persistently true.

Yet why is the still imagery of painting so compelling? What prevents painting being patently inadequate-just because it is static?
To say that paintings prophesy the experience of their being looked at does not really answer the question. Such prophecies assume a continuing interest in the static image. Why, at least until recently, was such an assumption justified? The conventional answer is that, because painting is static, it has the power to establish a visually “palpable” harmony. Only something which is still can be so simultaneously composed, and therefore so complete.

A musical composition, since it uses time, is obliged to have a beginning and an end. A painting only has a beginning and an end insofar as it is a physical object: within its imagery there is neither beginning nor end. This is what makes possible pictorial composition, harmony, form.

The terms of the explanation seem to me to be both too restrictive and too aesthetic. There has to be a virtue in that flagrant contrast: the contrast between the unchanging painted form and the dynamic living model. Could it not be that the stillness of the painted image speaks of timelessness? The fact that paintings are prophecies of themselves being looked at has nothing to do with the perspective of modem avant-gardism, whereby the future is always vindicating the misunderstood prophet. What the past, the present, and the future share is a substratum, a ground of timelessness.
The language of pictorial art, because it is static, is the language of such timelessness. Yet what it speaks about—unlike geometry—is the sensuous, the particular, and the ephemeral.

A sailor receives a letter from a thousand versts away. His wife has written that in their house beyond the cliffs she is happy.

And this is of her letter during evenings with girls in untranslatable ports, through the sea of the months persuades the cursing sailor that his never-ending voyage will end.