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## A View of Delft

Early in the sixth grade I became obsessed with the frontispiece of our textbook in European history. I would find myself staring at the painting reproduced there when we were supposed to be studying one of the chapters, working on fractions, or whatever else it was we did that year. I'd seize every chance when Sister Miriam Joseph was preoccupied. I remember sneaking looks at the picture to the reassuring tat of her chalk, as she built spines of sentence diagrams on the blackboard. I stored the memory of the image against periods of drought, snatching a last glimpse when we were putting away our books to go home for lunch or at the end of the day. I had no words to explain even to myself this mute staring, especially its furtiveness. Of course the sneaking is in one sense easily accounted for; I was poring over the picture when I was supposed to be carrying out curricular tasks. But I was just as anxious to conceal what I was doing from the classmates sitting around me as from the teacher. What did I fear from them? They were friends, and in general every bored kid in the class enjoyed vicariously a classmate's small ingenuities of rebellion. But this obsession was not, at least in any conscious sense, about rebellion at all. It was about something I assumed implicitly my classmates would disapprove of even more strongly than my teacher would. My concealment had little to do with guilt; it stemmed from an embarrassment that darkened into shame. It resembled what I could imagine feeling if I were to wet my pants.

The picture responsible for this knot of delight and constraint was of a Dutch walled town of the seventeenth century. According to the caption underneath, it was A

View of Delft, by an artist whose name I sounded to myself with an English J as Jan Vermeer. I was impressed by the ingenuity of the author of our textbook in fishing out of obscurity such an unlikely old relic, merely to give us modern youngsters a taste of what towns looked like three hundred years ago. Why did I not deduce how well known and widely admired the painting must be? The author had obviously selected it for its place of honor from among a myriad of possible cultural ikons. But I was too absorbed in my personal relation to it to think of anyone else's. It was as if I had found the original stuffed in a pile of junk in a farmhouse attic and assumed that no one had ever appreciated it before.

This episode lay abandoned for many years in my personal attic until an occasion I'll mention shortly. But first I want to bring into clearer focus the image I was entranced by. When I recently consulted a reproduction of the painting I was surprised to discover how inaccurate, how narrowly selective and shabby my mental image of the View had become. The damage done to the painting stored unsummoned for so many years in the circuits of my brain was like the disintegration of a stolen masterpiece, maybe the Vermeer taken from the Gardner Museum, in a mouldy warehouse container. Some think that the function of dream is a constant processing of the day's and the life's impressions. Perhaps the same is true of memory, and my distortion of the Vermeer could serve as an emblem of it. I suspect now that the image available to my mind's eye was seriously infected by an Impressionist painting I can't identify. This latter canvas presents a view across tilled fields of a line of village houses and trees with a small stretch of blue sky behind it. Its only serious resemblance to Vermeer's View lies in the rich colors of the walls and roofs of the houses, brought out by the rays of a low sun. Apparently the most

unforgettable feature of the Vermeer for me was the bold sunlight slanting across the city's interior from the viewer's right, turning roofs, a steeple, a tower, to glowing red, salmon, yellow, gold. A viewer unfamiliar with Delft doesn't know whether this is the light of early morning or late afternoon. I had thought of it all these years as afternoon radiance because it seemed so mellow and valedictory, but art historians familiar with the layout of the old town recognize the scene as a view from the south, dressed in the light of morning.

My principal sins of Impressionist-poisoned memory were revisions of three of the most important elements in the pictures's composition. Vermeer's foreground is far from depicting tilled fields. In the right and center, there's a sandy beach, pinkish in the sun, with several small, blue figures standing near a tiny quay, as if waiting for a ferry. Behind this shore, stretch the barely rippling wavelets of a harbor basin formed in the river Schie in front of the watergate to the city. The angle of the sun casts on the water's pallor long somber reflections from the still dark city walls, from ships anchored in the basin, and from the two time-blackened gatehouses in the center of the scene, guarding on either side the channel that opens into the heart of the city. And finally, Vermeer offers, not a niggling strip of blue as background for Impressionist trees, but an enormous vault that looms high over the city. This Dutch sky, occupying more than half the canvas, repeats the tonality of what lies beneath; the cumuli over the water are shadow-bottomed; those massed in back of the town glow in sunlight, dwarfing the city even as they serve to set its skyline in sharp silhouette. My defacement of sand, water and sky as the painting deteriorated in the vault of memory had been damaging any chance of my understanding the landscape's mysterious radiance. The dense, predominantly dark-colored frieze of the

city's structures lies in a horizontal band between these three luminiscent planes. They diffuse on the solid wharves and gables that light that one might simply think of as "Vermeer," a light that is in itself a unique mode of praise for the presence and colors of the physical world.

Describing the painting does nothing to clarify my sixth grade scopophilia or to sort out the attendant emotions whose incoherence probably hastened my forgetting. Perhaps because I'm often too dreamy to notice things consciously when they're occurring, I've sometimes rediscovered fragments of past experience only upon encountering their analogues in books. My experience with A View of Delft was still buried under the avalanche of adolescence and young adulthood when I first read In Search of Lost Time and arrived at the narrator's account of the death of Bergotte, Proust's fictional archetype of the novelist. The seriously ailing Bergotte is picqued into getting out of bed against his doctor's orders, to visit A View of Delft, currently on loan in Paris. This is a picture "which he adored and imagined that he knew by heart," but he has read a review by a critic who has praised "a little patch of yellow wall (which he could not remember)... so well painted that it was, if one looked at it by itself, like some priceless specimen of Chinese art, of a beauty that was sufficient in itself." Struggling against dizziness and nausea from the moment he climbs the stairs to the gallery, Bergotte reaches the Vermeer. "He noticed for the first time some small figures in blue, that the sand was pink, and, finally, the precious substance of the tiny patch of yellow wall. His dizziness increased; he fixed his gaze, like a child upon a yellow butterfly that it wants to catch, on the precious little patch of wall. 'That's how I ought to have written,' he said.... 'made my language precious in itself, like this little patch of yellow wall.'"

Bergotte's sudden view of his own work under the aspect of eternity is nothing less than a personal and secular Last Judgment. Even as he makes it, "he was not unconscious of the gravity of his condition. In a celestial pair of scales there appeared to him, weighing down one of the pans, his own life, while the other contained the little patch of wall so beautifully painted in yellow. He felt that he had rashly sacrificed the former for the latter. 'All the same,' he said to himself, 'I shouldn't like to be the headline news of this exhibition for the evening papers.'" He sinks down onto a circular settee, tells himself optimistically that he's only suffering from indigestion, is struck by another attack and rolls to the floor, dead. This embarrassing gaffe will indeed be the subject of the evening headlines.

The melodramatic death of so major a character would be a striking incident no matter where it appeared, but this one also stands out from its context--the narrator's protracted mourning for the lost Albertine--with vivid and puzzlingly unmotivated urgency. I didn't know when I first read it that Proust had in fact left his apartment late in 1921, for the last time ever as it turned out, to visit A View of Delft, on loan at the Jeu de Paume. He there experienced a severe attack of vertigo, had to be escorted home, and inserted the account of Bergotte's death into his manuscript only a couple of months before his own. This poignant episode surely explains the intensity of Bergotte's last minute swings between aesthetic exaltation and the animal fright that would deny its worth. It accounts, too, for the narrator's eloquent vacillation in the meditation that follows between his atheistic conviction of the finality of death and his unsuppressible notion that beauty of the order achieved by Vermeer (and Bergotte) can be the work of creatures merely mortal. The strength of the tensions in this passage induced as severe a

scorner of positive metaphysics as Theodor Adorno to select it as his unique example of an artistic moment that balances successfully on the knife-edge of his “negative dialectics.”

But reflections like these were far from my mind when I first discovered Bergotte’s interrogation of and by “A View of Delft.” There are numerous allusions to Vermeer throughout In Search of Lost Time; Charles Swann, for blatant example, is forever planning to write a book about him. Only, however, with Bergotte’s specific encounter did the proper biochemical tumblers click in the proper cellular locks, and all my sixth grade experience rise before my eyes. My madeleine and lime-blossom tea was his text, steeped in a summer afternoon. Although my recollection did not in itself enable me to understand any better the twittering aura of emotion that accompanied it, the stimulus of this one reactivated memory, as so often happens, prompted my recall of two other visual obsessions from that same period. These other two don’t testify so flatteringly to good taste. Nor do they come preserved in such an intense medium of furtiveness and shame. But they do promise some leverage in prying open those feelings.

The first of these surprises occurred when I was leafing through a pile of Life magazines on the partly enclosed back porch of my grandmother’s house. The old pear tree in the backyard was in fruit, so this incident must belong to the late summer of 1943, just before I started in the sixth grade. The magazines had been bundled for my brother and me to haul off in our wagon to sell to the local paper factory. This was a popular source of spending money for many neighborhood children during the War. By 1944 the price for magazines was up, I seem to remember, to fifty cents a pound. But I had unbound one of the bundles and was flipping through the issues, looking for pictures of

glamorous women. The only one I can clearly recollect finding was of the movie-star Gene Tierney, on whom I already had a crush. But then, abruptly, I happened upon one of Life's typically ambitious photo essays, this one about the Reformation.

One picture struck me as intensely as the Vermeer. This was a reproduction of a nineteenth-century historical painting of John Knox preaching to Mary, Queen of Scots. Knox, all in black, immensely noble and of course aflame with righteous indignation, towers over Mary from the pulpit, very impolitely pointing with the index finger of his raised right hand directly at the Queen in the front pew. For her part, Mary, in the left side of the picture, leans backward, looking up at quite a steep angle in order to stare defiantly right back into the eyes of the preacher. The Queen is young and beautiful, bejewelled and gorgeously dressed, and she sits amid a cluster of her male courtiers arrayed every bit as extravagantly. Even though she's obliged to lean back and look up, her pose is insultingly negligent; I'm not sure she doesn't have her right arm slung over the back of the pew. Given the youth and insolence of Mary and her courtiers, the gravamen of Knox's denunciation is easy to imagine.

The romantic painter quite clearly intends to suggest a deadlock of equal and contrary outsized personalities, but my allegiance, for reasons both sexual and religious, was sealed instantly; Gene Tierney was eclipsed. I devoured what I could, but must have had very little time before I had to replace the issue in the bundle and sell for cash to the Howell Paper Company the image of my new ideal. The memory dogged me for months. Why hadn't I torn the picture out of the magazine? Worse yet, I had promptly forgotten the painter's name. And the Steele Memorial Library, the pride of my hometown, had no file of Life magazines, the only research possibility then within the

scope of my imagination. I consoled myself with the assurance that I was certain to encounter that painting sooner or later. So far the wait has lasted more than sixty years.

The second picture hung on the wall in our family doctors' waiting-room. Whenever I read Elizabeth Bishop's wonderful autobiographical poem, "In the Waiting-Room," this is the one I place her in. It was not large, lined along three walls with benches of some sturdy dark wood in the style now called "Mission." These were padded, hardly the appropriate word, with shiny, slippery black cushions stuffed with something that made them bow out in the middle, almost as unforgiving as stone. The fourth wall was mostly an archway through which patients could see the desk at which presided the lone secretary, nurse-receptionist, bookkeeper, file clerk, cheer-dispenser and wise counsellor of the two Doctors Burke, father and son. Their entire suite of rooms, four in number, was pervaded by a smell of disinfectant so strong it couldn't help but induce aches in the bones of every person sitting on the benches, no matter how successfully convalescent they might have felt upon entering.

I sat in this waiting-room at more or less regular intervals throughout my childhood, so the picture, unlike the two others, must have entered my consciousness at some unremembered point. But in this case too I was somewhere around eleven when I realized its power over me. Two parties of knights in armor, but unhelmeted, some mounted, are met in a field. Lances and pennons stick straight up against a menacing sky. The grey atmosphere makes for highlights of a dull silvery sheen on various parts of the conferees' armor. The parties don't look angry or belligerent; this seems to be a parley during a truce. I can see in retrospect that the painting was a poor echo of wonderful things like the thicket of lances in the Louvre panel of Uccello's Battle of San Romano

or, closer yet, Velasquez's Surrender of Breda, where the line of upright Spanish lances stands out against the bluish haze of the burning town below and serves in turn as backdrop for the central figures of the governor tendering the key to the city to the tactful victor.

For years I always tried to get a seat in the generally crowded room from which I could devour this picture with the same uncritical appetite as I did the other two. At fifteen, however, during what I didn't know would be my last round of visits to this waiting-room, I made a double discovery. As I sat there nursing a crushed and swollen knuckle acquired while making a wild shoestring tackle during a football game, I gazed up at my ikon as usual. But this time, I realized in two swift jumps, first that it was not a very good piece of work, and, second, why I was so moved by it. It was because it had so little to do with the waiting-room. No one ever ever sat in that space except in a state of pain or trouble, while the painting hung above us being, regardless of its execution actually being, a world of peace, beauty, honor, decorum, tranquillity, indifferent and inaccessible to us who sat agonized or anxious for twenty minutes or half an hour on our hostile cushions, smelling the demoralizing disinfectants. How this vision continued to console after its flaws were apparent I still had no clear idea, but it did so, just as surely as, six years later, the night sky did as soon as the car I had been driving stopped tumbling down an embankment and in the stillness, looking up at that crowded sky with its familiar winter stars, I realized that I still shared their cosmos.

Thinking of the three eidetic images together does secure a bit of purchase on my affair with A View of Delft. The trio shared the exotic remoteness of time and place that I finally recognized in the waiting-room picture. All three were windows of escape,

comparable to those offered by the historical romances I was beginning to discover in my reading life. It's possible to distinguish differences of emphasis among the three: love of beauty, and the shame that brings, dominates the Vermeer, erotic desire the photograph in Life, and escape from suffering the waiting-room pageant. But all three of these motives pervade, merely in different proportions, each of the images.

What happened in the case of A View of Delft is far from my only instance of a buried memory recovered through reading. One of these may be particularly relevant here because it belongs to the very season of the View. Almost seven years later, in the late winter or spring of my freshman year in college, I was sitting in my dorm room reading for the first time Thomas Mann's The Magic Mountain, when the story began to take on an uncanny tinge. Hans Castorp, already falling in love, though he doesn't know it, with the Russian woman, Clavdia Chauchat, goes for a solo hike in the mountains behind the sanatorium. Still unadjusted to the altitude he overexerts himself, flops down on a bench by a stream, and recalls, in a state of waking dream, something he has long forgotten, his attraction to a partly Slavic schoolmate, Pribislav Hippe. Hippe is in the form ahead of him and they have no occasion to meet. Hans cherishes his secret feeling for him for a year before he gets up enough nerve to speak to him. The one-way relationship peaks when Hans, finding he's without a pen for drawing class, asks Pribislav if he can borrow his, works with it happily for the hour and then returns it to him. This is their only direct exchange, and over the next year Hans's enthrallment gradually subsides. At this point in Mann's narrative, Hans snaps back into focus on his alpine bench and, thinking about his hallucinatory memory, realizes how much Clavdia and Pribislav resemble one another. This is not the last we hear of the pencil-borrowing. But when I came to the point where

Hans finds a pretext to talk with Pribislav, I read no further for some time; I was far too surprised by what came flooding in.

During the same months in which I was enthralled by A View of Delft I was in love with a boy named Jimmy. He was a fourth-grader whom I encountered only on the playground, before school in the morning or during recess. The whole business consisted, on my part, of a great deal of yearning and a few unsatisfactory conversations. It was a serious violation of protocol for someone of my exalted status to spend more than a brief moment of condescending sarcasm on a boy two years younger. The high point of our relationship was a day that autumn when, flouting the social risk, I persuaded Jimmy to be my rider during a game of "Horse." This consisted of a violent melee in which each duo opposed all the others, the winners being the last pair left standing with the rider still unripped from his mount. Soon after this our principal banned the game, winter set in, and in the spring Jimmy's family moved away, where to I didn't know. My parallel affair with A View of Delft faded rapidly after we turned in our history books at the end of June. The summer that had headed toward my date with Life on my grandmother's porch was succeeded by the one of 1944 that culminated in an epidemic of polio. Three of my neighborhood playmates, including my two younger brothers, were hospitalized and a curfew confined the rest of the children in the city in their own houses and yards. I didn't see how I could escape contagion; I slept in the same bed with my brother Dick, and sure enough, after two weeks of anxiety, I came down with the symptoms. These turned out to be merely an hysterical response, but between my continued worry about my brothers and my increasingly morbid awareness of the air war in Europe, Jimmy followed A View of Delft into oblivion.

Sudden recollections of this kind will perhaps seem too ordinary and normal to be taken as seriously as I have been doing, particularly since we've been steadily persuaded for a century now to distrust the integrity of memory. Perhaps the only odd feature of my two instances is their having been prompted by literary models. And even this fact can be turned against them. My principal motive, after all, for describing the discrepancies between my distorted image of the Vermeer and what I found upon a fresh look has been to record dismay at the betrayal of my once-bright vision. How do I know, to take this a short step further, that these aren't false memories, shaped, or perhaps even created, by their literary models as, after the recent national hysteria about day-care providers, many allegedly recovered memories have turned out to be? Isn't it suspicious that my forgetting of important features of the Vermeer is anticipated, even down to some of its details, in Bergotte's discoveries? Or that my recall of Jimmy follows so closely the shape of Mann's narrative? These are questions for a court in which I have no standing.

Troubling as I find these evidences of the lability of memory, my recollections disturb me more profoundly because they oblige me to face how much of my affective life, and not only during that year between eleven and twelve, is driven by forces I not only do not understand, but am scarcely conscious of. Considered thus, the congeries of incidents I've described as clustered in that year probably constitute what Freud called "screen memories," coded inventions that interpose a rationalizing story between my consciousness and the truly mysterious determinations that were shaping my future.

I can personify these determinations in one last image that belongs to the year of A View of Delft and its obsessive siblings. It's a piece of Christian calendar art that is still in circulation. I came to label it privately "The Angel of the Bridge." A copy of it

hung on the wall of our dining room in the house in which I grew up, just before the doorway to the kitchen. A barefoot girl of about six holds the hand of her three-year old brother as they cross, from the viewer's right to left, a rickety suspension bridge with one rail, high above an abyss. On the other side of the railing, behind the children from the viewer's perspective, an angel hovers suspended over the gulf, arms spread protectively inside its white robe as it gazes benevolently down on the two rosy-cheeked tots, adorable in their picturesque fairy-tale garments. They, of course, don't see the golden-haired, androgynous creature floating beside them as they make their way across the swaying bridge in the security of their innocence. In this case too I was puzzled about what kept drawing me to the picture, until one day I realized that I felt the scene to be sinister. Its melodrama lies in its invitation to the viewer to think of what the angel knows that the children don't. What it knows is the nature of the abyss. Outside the blind present in which the children intensely live, the angel must see the entire pattern of their childhoods as a series of unwitting steps above a fierce torrent, or whatever else may be down there in those lurid depths.

I confess that I can't take seriously the concept of guardian angels, that beautiful aftershine of medieval faith. The Angel of the Bridge fails as a personification of a power that protects childhood innocence, partly because it's too sentimental; we know that the notion of that innocence is itself a sentimental construct that will, in any case, not survive for long. But the Angel fails above all because it is a power that remains external to the consciousnesses of its wards. When we contemplate our lives retrospectively we do apprehend, across whatever blanks, disruptions and incoherences we have acquired, an internal principle of continuity that bears us along. Goethe, tempted in his autobiography,

to personify this internal gyroscope, or fatum, called it, thinking of the ancient Greeks, his daimon. If I extrapolated from Goethe's hints, I would say that the daimon is neither infallible nor omniscient, but it sees further into the abyss than any human could. It is thus far superior in its ability to perceive the patterns in our lives, particularly as these are laid down in childhood and worked out over the years. In early childhood the daimon has considerable power to intervene in its human's life, though whether or not these interventions are beneficent is very difficult for us to judge. The daimon does not always understand our feelings, or, better, cannot fully sympathize with them. It can seem cold in its almost unimaginably more stern and sometimes truly incomprehensible conception of what is for our good. Probably we all experience it in certain crises as exhibiting a kind of experimental curiosity that seems cruel or even malicious about what we are capable of doing or bearing.

Although the daimon accompanies its human for a lifetime, it becomes on the whole an increasingly passive, helpless witness of what it is unable to undo. Perhaps the sole generalizable exception occurs sometimes in the human's middle age, when some daimonoi rally for a last intervention as strong as the ones of childhood. But its charge grows old, the daimon changes its tactics; it now attempts to impart more of its own nature to its lifetime animal, as if it felt the opaque walls of the human tenement growing thinner and more permeable. It tries to inculcate its quality of witnessing, its love of recurrent, emotionally accumulating images, and of perspectives on the entanglements of good and evil so complex they become nearly intolerable to simple human yearnings for justice. Sometimes it even attempts to insinuate, surely with little hope of success, its

more cosmic, more karmic purview upon its human, who must still strike it after all is said and done as something like that barefoot child on the ever trembling bridge.

To speak of this indwelling power as a daimon is still to personify it. Among attempts to address its nature without personification, my favorite is a stanza of Gerard Manley Hopkins's from an unfinished poem that meditates on the fates of a brother and sister, "The Portrait of Two Beautiful Young People:"

Man lives that list, that leaning in the will  
 No wisdom may forecast by gauge or guess,  
 The selfless self of self, most strange, most still,  
 Fast furled and all foredrawn to No or Yes.

The first, the shallow self answers to a name, suffers the modifications of experience, vanishes under a gravestone that records the dates of its appearance and disappearance according to that most useful and most illusionary of human inventions, calendar time. Thinkers ever since David Hume have had little trouble disposing of this self's fallacious claims to continuity. But few irrational convictions dwell in us so stubbornly, so bodily, as awareness of that fold of chance and choice and fate that Hopkins names "the selfless self of self." This fold is the personal ground, the self of our shallow self. It has no comparable ground of its own knowable by us, which is why Hopkins calls it "selfless." Yet it's very difficult for us, given the intimacy of our bodily experience of this fold, to avoid personifying the "fast furled" thing. Perhaps this is why, when we encounter, in crucial moments of decision or in the ambushes of memory the traces of a me that isn't I, we're tempted to speak of a daimon or portray it even more helplessly in nursery terms as The Angel of the Bridge.

