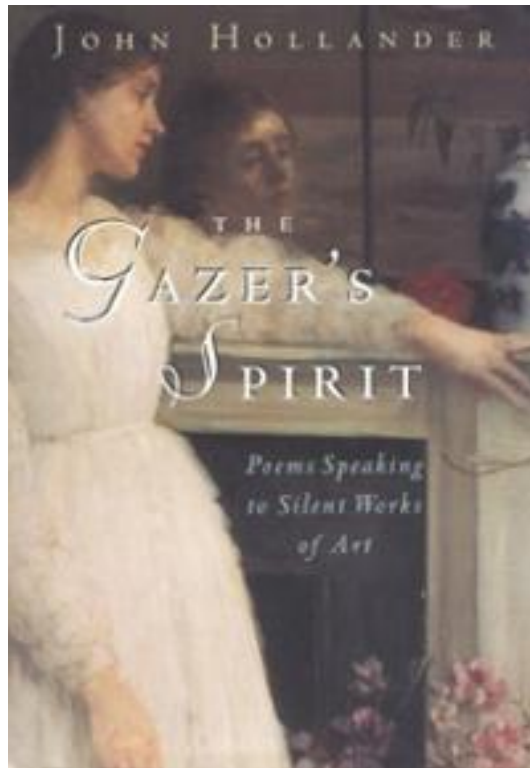


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The Gazer's Spirit: Visual Art and Poetry



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Many of these poems and paintings can be found at:

<http://english.emory.edu/classes/paintings&poems/titlepage.html>

Brueghel's Winter

Walter de la Mare

Jagg'd mountain peaks and skies ice-green
Wall in the wild, cold scene below.
Churches, farms, bare copse, the sea
In freezing quiet of winter show;
Where ink-black shapes on fields in flood
Curling, skating, and sliding go.
To left, a gabled tavern; a blaze;
Peasants; a watching child; and lo,
Muffled, mute--beneath naked trees
In sharp perspective set a-row--
Trudge huntsmen, sinister spears aslant,
Dogs snuffling behind them in the snow;
And arrowlike, lean, athwart the air
Swoops into space a crow.

But flame, nor ice, nor piercing rock,
Nor silence, as of a frozen sea,
Nor that slant inward infinite line
Of signboard, bird, and hill, and tree,
Give more than subtle hint of him
Who squandered here life's mystery.

Winter Landscape

John Berryman

The three men coming down the winter hill
In brown, with tall poles and a pack of hounds
At heel, through the arrangement of the trees,
Past the five figures at the burning straw,
Returning cold and silent to their town,

Returning to the drifted snow, the rink
Lively with children, to the older men,
The long companions they can never reach,
The blue light, men with ladders, by the church
The sledge and shadow in the twilit street,

Are not aware that in the sandy time
To come, the evil waste of history
Outstretched, they will be seen upon the brow
Of that same hill: when all their company
Will have been irrecoverably lost,

These men, this particular three in brown
Witnessed by birds will keep the scene and say
By their configuration with the trees,
The small bridge, the red houses and the fire,
What place, what time, what morning occasion

Sent them into the wood, a pack of hounds
At heel and the tall poles upon their shoulders,
Thence to return as now we see them and
Ankle-deep in snow down the winter hill
Descend, while three birds watch and the fourth flies.

Hunters in the Snow: Brueghel

Joseph Langland

Quail and rabbit hunters with tawny hounds,
Shadowless, out of late afternoon
Trudge toward the neutral evening of indeterminate form
Done with their blood-annunciated day
Public dogs and all the passionless mongrels
Through deep snow
Trail their deliberate masters
Descending from the upper village home in lowering light.
Sooty lamps
Glow in the stone-carved kitchens.

This is the fabulous hour of shape and form
When Flemish children are gray-black-olive
And green-dark-brown
Scattered and skating informal figures
On the mill ice pond.
Moving in stillness
A hunched dame struggles with her bundled sticks,
Letting her evening's comfort cudgel her
While she, like jug or wheel, like a wagon cart
Walked by lazy oxen along the old snowlanes,
Creeps and crunches down the dusky street.

High in the fire-red dooryard
Half unhitched the sign of the Inn
Hangs in wind
Tipped to the pitch of the roof.
Near it anonymous parents and peasant girl,
Living like proverbs carved in the alehouse walls,
Gather the country evening into their arms
And lean to the glowing flames.

Now in the dimming distance fades
The other village; across the valley
Imperturbable Flemish cliffs and crags
Vaguely advance, close in, loom
Lost in nearness. Now
The night-black raven perched in branching boughs
Opens its early wing and slipping out
Above the gray-green valley
Weaves a net of slumber over the snow-capped homes.

. And now the church, and then the walls and roofs
Of all the little houses are become
Close kin to shadow with small lantern eyes.
And now the bird of evening
With shadows streaming down from its gliding wings
Circles the neighboring hills
Of Hertogenbosch, Brabant.

Darkness stalks the hunters,
Slowly sliding down,
Falling in beating rings and soft diagonals.
Lodged in the vague vast valley the village sleeps.

The Hunter in the Snow

William Carlos Williams

The over-all picture is winter
icy mountains
in the background the return

from the hunt it is toward evening
from the left
sturdy hunters lead in

their pack the inn-sign
hanging from a
broken hinge is a stag a crucifix

between his antlers the cold
inn yard is
deserted but for a huge bonfire

that flares wind-driven tended by
women who cluster
about it to the right beyond

the hill is a pattern of skaters
Brueghel the painter
concerned with it all has chosen

a winter-struck bush for his
foreground to
complete the picture

The Parable of the Blind

William Carlos Williams

This horrible but superb painting
the parable of the blind
without a red

in the composition shows a group
of beggars leading
each other diagonally downward

across the canvas
from one side
to stumble finally into a bog

where the picture
and the composition ends back
of which no seeing man

is represented the unshaven
features of the des-
titude with their few

pitiful possessions a basin
to wash in a peasant
cottage is seen and a church spire

the faces are raised
as toward the light
there is no detail extraneous

to the composition one
follows the others stick in
hand triumphant to disaster

The Man with the Hoe

Edwin Markham

God made man in His own image
In the image of God He made him.--Genesis

Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans
Upon his hoe and gazes on the ground,
The emptiness of ages in his face,
And on his back the burden of the world.
Who made him dead to rapture and despair
A thing that grieves not and that never hopes,
Stolid and stunned, a brother to the ox?
Who loosened and let down this brutal jaw?
Whose was the hand that slanted back this brow?
Whose breath blew out the light within this brain?

Is this the Thing the Lord God made and gave
To have dominion over sea and land;
To trace the stars and search the heavens for power;
To feel the passion of Eternity?
Is this the dream He dreamed who shaped the suns
And markt their ways upon the ancient deep?
Down all the caverns of Hell to their last gulf
There is no shape more terrible than this--
More tongued with censure of the world's blind greed--
More filled with signs and portents for the soul--
More packt with danger to the universe.

What gulfs between him and the seraphim!
Slave of the wheel of labor, what to him

Are Plato and the swing of Pleiades?
What the long reaches of the peaks of song,
The rife of dawn, the reddening of the rose?
Through this dread shape the suffering ages look;
Time's tragedy is in that aching stoop;
Through this dread shape humanity betrayed,
Plundered, profaned and disinherited,
Cries protest to the Powers that made the world,
A protest that is also prophecy.

O masters, lords and rulers in all lands,
Is this the handiwork you give to God,
This monstrous thing distorted and soul-quencht?
How will you ever straighten up this shape;
Touch it again with immortality;
Give back the upward looking and the light;
Rebuild in it the music and the dream;
Make right the immemorial infamies,
Perfidious wrongs, Immedicable woes?

O masters, lords and rulers in all lands,
How will the future reckon with this Man?
How answer his brute question in that hour
When whirlwinds of rebellion shake all shores?
How will it be with kingdoms and with kings--
With those who shaped him to the thing he is--
When this dumb Terror shall rise to judge the world,
After the silence of the centuries?

1195. The Man with the Hoe

A Reply

By John Vance Cheney

Let us a little permit Nature to take her own way: she better understands her own affairs than we.—MONTAIGNE.

NATURE reads not our labels, "great" and "small";
Accepts she one and all

Who, striving, win and hold the vacant place;
All are of royal race.

Him, there, rough-cast, with rigid arm and limb, 5
The Mother moulded him,

Of his rude realm ruler and demigod,
Lord of the rock and clod.

With Nature is no "better" and no "worse,"
On this bared head no curse. 10

Humbled it is and bowed; so is he crowned
Whose kingdom is the ground.

Diverse the burdens on the one stern road
Where bears each back its load;

Varied the toil, but neither high nor low. 15
With pen or sword or hoe,

He that has put out strength, lo, he is strong;
Of him with spade or song

Nature but questions,— "This one, shall he stay?"
She answers "Yea," or "Nay," 20

"Well, ill, he digs, he sings;" and he bides on,
Or shudders, and is gone.

Strength shall he have, the toiler, strength and grace,
So fitted to his place

As he leaned, there, an oak where sea winds blow, 25
Our brother with the hoe.

No blot, no monster, no unsightly thing,
The soil's long-lineaged king;

His changeless realm, he knows it and commands;
Erect enough he stands, 30

Tall as his toil. Nor does he bow unblest:

Labor he has, and rest.

Need was, need is, and need will ever be
For him and such as he;

Cast for the gap, with gnarlèd arm and limb, 35
The Mother moulded him,—

Long wrought, and moulded him with mother's care,
Before she set him there.

And aye she gives him, mindful of her own, 40
Peace of the plant, the stone;

Yea, since above his work he may not rise,
She makes the field his skies.

See! she that bore him, and metes out the lot,
He serves her. Vex him not

To scorn the rock whence he was hewn, the pit 45
And what was digged from it;

Lest he no more in native virtue stand,
The earth-sword in his hand,

But follow sorry phantoms to and fro,
And let a kingdom go.

Number 1 by Jackson Pollock (1948)

Nancy Sullivan

No name but a number.
Trickles and valleys of paint
Devise this maze
Into a game of Monopoly
Without any bank. Into
A linoleum on the floor
In a dream. Into
Murals inside of the mind.
No similes here. Nothing
But paint. Such purity
Taxes the poem that speaks

Still of something in a place
Or at a time.
How to realize his question
Let alone his answer?

DEATH'S VALLEY.

BY WALT WHITMAN.

NAY, do not dream, designer dark,
Thou hast portray'd or hit thy theme entire:
I, hoverer of late by this dark valley, by its confines, having glimpses of it,
Here enter lists with thee, claiming my right to make a symbol too.

For I have seen many wounded soldiers die,
After dread suffering—have seen their lives pass off with smiles;
And I have watch'd the death-hours of the old; and seen the infant die;
The rich, with all his nurses and his doctors;
And then the poor, in meagreness and poverty;
And I myself for long, O Death, have breathed my every breath
Amid the nearness and the silent thought of thee.

And out of these and thee,
I make a scene, a song, brief (not fear of thee,
Nor gloom's ravines, nor bleak, nor dark—for I do not fear thee,
Nor celebrate the struggle, or contortion, or hard-tied knot),
Of the broad blessed light and perfect air, with meadows, rippling tides, and trees
and flowers and grass,
And the low hum of living breeze—and in the midst God's beautiful eternal right
hand,
Thee, holiest minister of Heaven—thee, envoy, usherer, guide at last of all,
Rich, florid, loosener of the stricture-knot call'd life,
Sweet, peaceful, welcome Death.

On the Same Picture

Intended for first stanza of "Death's Valley"

Aye, well I know 'tis ghastly to descend that valley:
Preachers, musicians, poets, painters, always render it,
Philosophers exploit—the battlefield, the ship at sea, the myriad beds, all lands,
All, all the past have enter'd, the ancientest humanity we know,
Syria's, India's, Egypt's, Greece's, Rome's:

only further from home
on freeways fifty lanes wide
on a concrete continent
spaced with bland billboards 30
illustrating imbecile illusions of happiness

The scene shows fewer tumbrils
but more strung-out citizens
in painted cars
and they have strange license plates 35
and engines
that devour America

Musee des Beaux Arts W. H. Auden

About suffering they were never wrong,
The old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position: how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting 5
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course 10
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may 15
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky, 20
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

Landscape with the Fall of Icarus William Carlos Williams

According to Brueghel
when Icarus fell
it was spring

a farmer was ploughing
his field 5
the whole pageantry

of the year was
awake tingling
with itself

sweating in the sun 10
that melted
the wings' wax

unsignificantly
off the coast
there was 15

a splash quite unnoticed
this was
Icarus drowning

Matisse: "The Red Studio"

W. D. Snodgrass

There is no one here.
But the objects: they are real. It is not
As if he had stepped out or moved away;
There is no other room and no
Returning. Your foot or finger would pass
Through, as into unreflecting water
Red with clay, or into fire.
Still, the objects: they are real. It is
As if he had stood
Still in the bare center of this floor,
His mind turned in in concentrated fury,
Till he sank
Like a great beast sinking into sands
Slowly, and did not look up.
His own room drank him.
What else could generate this
Terra cotta raging through the floor and walls,

Through chests, chairs, the table and the clock,
Till all environments of living are
Transformed to energy--
Crude, definitive and gay.
And so gave birth to objects that are real.
How slowly they took shape, his children, here, Grew solid and remain:
The crayons; these statues; the clear brandy bowl;
The ashtray where a girl sleeps, curling among flowers;
This flask of tall glass, green, where a vine begins
Whose vines circle the other girl brown as a cypress knee.
Then, pictures, emerging on the walls:
Bathers; a landscape; a still life with a vase;
To the left, a golden blonde, lain in magentas with flowers scattering like stars;
Opposite, top right, these terra cotta women, living, in their world of living's colors;
Between, but yearning toward them, the sailor on his red cafe chair, dark blue, self-absorbed.
These stay, exact,
Within the belly of these walls that burn,
That must hum like the domed electric web
Within which, at the carnival, small cars bump and turn,
Toward which, for strength, they reach their iron hands:
Like the heavens' walls of flame that the old magi could see;
Or those ethereal clouds of energy
From which all constellations form,
Within whose love they turn.
They stand here real and ultimate.
But there is no one here.

American Gothic

after the painting by Grant Wood, 1930

John Stone

Just outside the frame
there has to be a dog
chickens, cows and hay

and a smokehouse
where a ham in hickory
is also being preserved

Here for all time
the borders of the Gothic window
anticipate the ribs

of the house
the tines of the pitchfork
repeat the triumph

of his overalls
and front and center
the long faces, the sober lips

above the upright spines
of this couple
arrested in the name of art

These two
by now
the sun this high

ought to be
in mortal time
about their businesses

Instead they linger here
within the patient fabric
of the lives they wove

he asking the artist silently
how much longer
and worrying about the crops

she no less concerned about the crops
but more to the point just now
whether she remembered

to turn off the stove.

The Street

Stephen Dobyns

Across the street, the carpenter carries a golden
board across one shoulder, much as he bears the burdens
of his life. Dressed in white, his only weakness is
temptation. Now he builds another wall to screen him.

The little girl pursues her bad red ball, hits it once with her blue racket, hits it once again. She must teach it the rules balls must follow and it turns her quite wild to see how it leers at her, then winks.

The oriental couple wants always to dance like this: swirling across a crowded street, while he grips her waist and she slides to one knee and music rises from cobblestones--some days Ravel, some days Bizet.

The departing postulant is singing to herself. She has seen the world's salvation asleep in a cradle, hanging in a tree. The girl's song makes the sunlight, makes the breeze that rocks the cradle.

The baker's had half a thought. Now he stands like a pillar awaiting another. He sees white flour falling like snow, covering people who first try to walk, then crawl, then become rounded shapes: so many loaves of bread.

The baby carried off by his heartless mother is very old and for years has starred in silent films. He tries to explain he was accidentally exchanged for a baby on a bus, but he can find no words as once more he is borne home to his awful bath.

First the visionary workman conjures a great hall, then he puts himself on the stage, explaining, explaining: where the sun goes at night, where flies go in winter, while attentive crowds of dogs and cats listen in quiet heaps.

Unaware of one another, these nine people circle around each other on a narrow city street. Each concentrates so intently on the few steps before him, that not one can see his neighbor turning in exactly different,

yet exactly similar circles around them: identical lives begun alone, spent alone, ending alone--as separate as points of light in a night sky, as separate as stars and all that immense black space between them.