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A Window In The Poem

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A WINDOW IN THE POEM

In painting after painting—sacred or secular—of the 15th and 16th centuries, there is a window. What it looks out upon may have nothing to do with the painting's ostensible subject. Yet, perhaps, for that very reason it does.

Consider, dear reader. I open this window. Behold:

The infant Jesus rests in Mary's lap. Behind them, through a window, you can see a clearing where monks are building a monastery several centuries later. All this is easy to explain.

So let us pass on. Here is a man—a merchant? a lawyer?—who's intent upon reading a document black with cobwebs of words. He squints at it, puzzles over it. His face is wrinkled. Yet, surely, he is not as old as he appears. And if he would only turn his head and gaze out the window, he could see a river gliding between forested banks. Look out that window now. How prosperous, how peaceful, things seem there. Wouldn't it be nice to hire a boat and float down that stream?

There is a window in these paintings to remind us that there is always something else: whatever happens, something else is also going on, or something else can be found in time by following this river or by venturing into that clearing.

Take, for example, this road you'll see in just a few seconds. Right now, though, Jesus has paused, looking patient and very vulnerable, to let Thomas place his fingers on his wounds. Look there: Thomas is touching him. And, see, there is an arched window behind them. And see through the window how an empty road winds uphill among trees. The road looks steep, dusty. But all the leaves on the trees are fresh and green. Where do you suppose the road is going? Would you travel it if you could? Would you risk it? Would you dare?

But in this painting the bound man has no chance of ever reaching the city whose banners can be glimpsed through the window at his back. He stares out in your direction. And you, too, have to stare. If you ran off now toward the city, would this be bravery or cowardice?