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A Window In The Poem  
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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 ven-
turing 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?