

# Steps Toward A Small Theory of the Visible

(for Yves) by John Berger

When I say the first line of the Lord's Prayer: Our father who art in heaven..." I imagine this heaven as invisible, unenterable but intimately close. There is nothing baroque about it, no swirling infinite space or stunning foreshortening. To find it -- if one had the grace -- it would only be necessary to lift up something as small and at hand as a pebble or a salt-cellar on the table. Perhaps Cellini knew this.

"Thy kingdom come..." the difference is infinite between heaven and earth, yet the distance is minimal. Simone Weil wrote concerning this sentence: "Here our desire pierces through time to find eternity behind it and this happens when we know how to turn whatever happens, no matter what it is, into an object of desire."

Her words might also be a prescription for the art of painting.

Today images abound everywhere. Never has so much been depicted and watched. We have glimpses at any moment of what things look like on the other side of the planet, or the other side of the moon. Appearances registered, and transmitted with lightning speed.

Yet with this something has innocently changed. They used to be called physical appearances because they belonged to solid bodies. Now appearances are volatile. Technological innovation has made it easy to separate the apparent from the existant. And this is precisely what the present system's mythology continually needs to exploit. It turns appearances into refractions, like mirages: refractions not of light but of appetite, in fact a single appetite, the appetite for more.

Consequently -- and oddly, considering the physical implications of the notion of appetite -- the existant, the body, disappears. We live within a spectacle of empty clothes and unworn masks.

Consider any news-reader on any television channel in any country. These speakers are the mechanical epitome of the disembodied. It took the system many years to invent them and to teach them to talk as they do.

No bodies and no Necessity -- for Necessity is the condition of the existant. It is what makes reality real. And the system's mythology requires only the not-yet-real, the virtual, the next purchase. This produces in the spectator, not, as claimed, a sense of freedom (the so-called freedom of choice) but a profound isolation.

Until recently, history, all the accounts people gave of their lives, all proverbs, fables, parables, confronted the same thing: the everlasting, fearsome, and occasionally beautiful, struggle of living with Necessity, which is the enigma of existence -- that which followed from the Creation, and which subsequently has always continued to sharpen the human spirit. Necessity produces both tragedy and comedy. It is what you kiss or bang your head against.

Today, in the system's spectacle, it exists no more. Consequently no experience is communicated. All that is left to share is the spectacle, the game that nobody plays and everybody can watch. As has never happened before, people have to try to place their own existence and their own pains single-handedly in the vast area of time and the universe.

I had a dream in which I was a strange dealer: a dealer in looks or appearances. I collected and distributed them. In the dream I had just discovered a secret! I discovered it on my own, without help or advise.

The secret was to get inside whatever I was looking at -- a bucket of water, a cow, a city (like Toledo) seen from above, an oak tree; and once inside, to arrange its appearances for the better. Better did not mean making the thing seem more beautiful or more harmonious; nor did it mean making it more typical, so that the oak tree might represent all oak trees; it simply meant [DEMO] it more itself so that the cow or the city or the bucket of water became

more evidently unique!

The doing of this gave me pleasure and I had the impression that the small changes I made from the inside, gave pleasure to others.

The secret of how to get inside the object so as to rearrange how it looked was as simple as opening the door of a wardrobe. Perhaps it was merely a question of being there when the door swung open on its own. Yet when I woke up, I couldn't remember how it was done and I no longer knew how to get inside things.

The history of painting is often presented as a history of succeeding styles. In our time art dealers and promoters have used this battle of styles to make brand-names for the market. Many collectors -- and museums -- buy names rather than works.

Maybe it's time to ask a naive question: what has all painting from the paleolithic period until our century have in common? Every painted image announces: I have seen this, or, when the making of the image was incorporated into a tribal ritual: we have seen this. The this refers to the sight represented. Non-figurative art is no exception. A late canvas by Rothko represents an illumination or a coloured glow which derived from the painter's experience of the visible. When he was working, he judged his canvas according to something else which he saw.

Painting is, first, an affirmation of the visible which surrounds us and which continually appears and disappears. Without the disappearing, there would perhaps be no impulse to paint, for then the visible itself would possess the surety (the permanence) which painting strives to find. More directly than any other art, painting is an affirmation of the existant, of the physical world into which mankind has been thrown.

Animals were the first subject in painting. And right from the beginning and then continuing through Sumerian, Assyrian, Egyptian and early Greek art, the depiction of these animals was extraordinarily true. Many millenia had to pass before an equivalent "life-likeness" was achieved in the depiction of the human body. At the beginning, the existant was what confronted man.

The first painters were hunters whose lives, like everybody else's in the tribe, depended upon their close knowledge of animals. Yet the act of painting was not the same as the act of hunting; the relation between the two was magical.

In a number of early cave paintings there are stencil representations of the human hand beside the animals. We do not know what precise ritual this served. We do know that painting was used to [DEMO]m a magical "companionship" between prey and hunter, or, to put it more abstractly, between the existant and human ingenuity. Painting was the means of making this companionship explicit and therefore (hopefully) permanent.

This may still be worth thinking about, long after painting has lost its herds of animals and its ritual function. I believe it tells us something about the nature of the art.

The impulse to paint comes neither from observation nor from the soul (which is probably blind) but from an encounter: the encounter between painter and model -- even if the model is a mountain or a shelf of empty medicine bottles. Mont. St. Victoire as seen from Aix (seen from elsewhere it has a very different shape) was Cézanne's companion.

When a painting is lifeless it is the result of the painter not having the nerve to get close enough for a collaboration to start. He stays at a copying distance. Or, as in [DEMO]ist periods like today, he stays at an art-historical distance, playing stylistic tricks which the model knows nothing about.

To go in close means forgetting convention, reputation, reasoning, hierarchies and self. It also means risking incoherence, even madness. For it can happen that one gets too close and then the collaboration breaks down and the painter dissolves into the model. Or the animal devours or tramples the painter into the ground.

Every authentic painting demonstrates a collaboration. Look at Petrus Christus' portrait of a young girl in the Staatliche Museum of Berlin, or the stormy seascape in the Louvre by Courbet, or the mouse with an aubergine painted by Tchou-Ta in the 17th century, and it is impossible to deny the participation of the model. Indeed, the paintings are not first and foremost about a young woman, a rough sea or a mouse with a vegetable; they are about this participation. "The brush," wrote Shitao, the great 17th century Chinese landscape painter, "is for saving things from chaos."

It is a strange area into which we are wandering and I'm using words strangely. A rough sea on the northern coast of France, one autumn day in 1870, participating in being seen by a man with a beard who, the following year, will be put in prison! Yet there is no other way of getting close to the actual practice of this silent art, which stops everything moving.

The *raison d'être* of the visible is the eye; the eye evolved and developed where there was enough light for the visible forms of life to become more and more complex and varied. Wild flowers, for example, are the colours they are in order to be seen. That an empty sky appears blue is due to the structure of our eyes and the nature of the solar system. There is a certain ontological basis for the collaboration between model and painter. Silesius, a 17th century doctor of medicine in Vroclau, wrote about the inter-dependence of the seen and the seeing in a mystical way:

"La rose qui contemple ton oeil de chair

A fleuri de la sorte en Dieu dans l'éternel"

How did you become what you visibly are? asks the painter.

I am as I am. I'm waiting, replies the mountain or the mouse or the child.

What for?

For you, if you abandon everything else.

For how long?

For as long as it takes.

There are other things in life.

Find them and be more normal.

And if I don't

I'll give you what I've given nobody else, but it's worthless, it's simply the answer to your useless question.

Useless?

I am as I am.

No promise more than that?

None. I can wait for ever.

I'd like a normal life.

Live it and don't count on me.

And if I do count on you?

Forget everything and in me you'll find -- me!

The collaboration which sometimes follows is seldom based on good will: more usually on desire, rage, fear, pity or longing. The modern illusion concerning painting (which post-modernism has done nothing to correct) is that the artist is a creator. Rather he is a receiver. What seems like creation is the act of giving form to what he has received.

Bogena and Robert and his brother Vitek came to spend the evening because it was the Russian new year. Sitting at the table whilst they spoke Russian, I tried to draw Bogena. Not for the first time. I always fail because her face is very mobile and I can't forget her beauty. And to draw well you have to forget that. It was long past midnight when they left. As I was doing my last drawing, Robert said: This is your last chance tonight, just draw her, John, draw her and be a man!

When they had gone, I took the least bad drawing and started working on it with colours -- acrylic. Suddenly, like a weather vane swinging round because the wind has changed, the portrait began to look like something. Her "likeness" now was in my head -- and all I had to do was draw it out, not look for it. The paper tore. I rubbed on paint sometimes as thick as ointment. At four in the morning the face began to lend itself to, to smile at, its own representation.

The next day the frail piece of paper, heavy with paint, still looked good. In the daylight there were a few nuances of tone to change. Colours applied at night sometimes tend to be too desperate -- like shoes pulled off without being untied. Now it was finished.

From time to time during the day I went to look at it and I felt elated. Because I had done a small drawing I was pleased with? Scarcely. The elation came from something else. It came from the face's appearing -- as if out of the dark. It came from the fact that Bogen's face had made a present of what it could leave behind of itself.

What is a likeness? When a person dies, they leave behind, for those who knew them, an emptiness, a space: the space has contours and is different for each person mourned. This space with its contours is the person's likeness and is what the artist searches for when making a living portrait. A likeness is something left behind invisibly.

Soutine was among the great painters of the 20th century. It has taken fifty years for this to become clear, because his art was both traditional and uncouth, and this mixture offended all fashionable tastes. It was as if his painting had a heavy broken accent and so was considered inarticulate: at best exotic, and at worst barbarian. Now his devotion to the existant becomes more and more exemplary. No other painter has revealed more graphically than he the collaboration, implicit in the act of painting, between model and painter. The poplars, the carcasses, the children's faces on Soutine's canvases clung to his brush.

Shitao -- to quote him again -- wrote: Painting is the result of the receptivity of ink: the ink is open to the brush: the brush is open to the hand: the hand is open to the heart: all this is the same way as the sky engenders what the earth produces: everything is the result of receptivity.

It is usually said about the late work of Titian or Rembrandt or Turner that their handling of paint became freer. Although, in a sense, true, this may give a false impression of willfulness. In fact these painters in their old age simply became more receptive, more open to the appeal of the "model" and its strange energy. It is as if their own bodies fall away.

When once the principle of collaboration has been understood, it becomes a criterion for judging works of any style, irrespective of their freedom of handling. Or rather (because judgement has little to do with art) it offers us an insight for seeing more clearly why painting moves us.

Rubens painted his beloved H el ene Fourment many times. Sometimes she collaborated, sometimes not. When she didn't, she remains a painted ideal; when she did, we too wait for her. There is a painting of roses in a vase by Morandi (1949) in which the flowers wait like cats to be let into his vision. (This is very rare for most flower paintings remain pure spectacle.) There is a portrait of a man painted on wood two millenia ago, whose participation we still feel. There are dwarfs painted by Velasquez, dogs by Titian, houses by Vermeer in which we recognize, as energy, the will-to-be-seen.

More and more people go to museums to look at paintings and do not come away disappointed. What fascinates them? To answer: Art or the History of art, or art Appreciation, misses, I believe, the essential.

In art museums we come upon the visible of other periods and it offers us company. We feel less alone in the face of what we ourselves see each day appearing and disappearing. So much continues to look the same: teeth, hands, the

sun, women's legs, fish... in the realm of the visible all epochs co-exist and are fraternal, whether separated by centuries or millenia. And when the painted image is not a copy but the result of a dialogue, the painted thing speaks if we listen.

In matters of seeing Joseph Beuys was the great prophet of the second half of our century, and his life's work was a demonstration of, and an appeal for, the kind of collaboration I'm talking about. Believing that everybody is potentially an artist, he took objects and arranged them in such a way that they beg the spectator to collaborate with them, not this time by painting, but by listening to what their eyes tell them and remembering.

I know of a few things more sad (sad not tragic) than an animal who has lost its sight. Unlike humans, the animal has no supporting language left which can describe the world. If on a familiar terrain, the blind animal manages to find its way about with its nose. But it has been deprived of the existant and with the deprivation it begins to diminish until it does little but sleep, therein perhaps hunting for a dream of that which once existed.

The Marquise de Sorcy de Thélusson, painted in 1790 by David, looks at me. Who could have foreseen in her time the solitude in which people today live? A solitude confirmed daily by networks of bodiless and false images concerning the world. Yet their falseness is not an error. If the pursuit of profit is considered as the only means of salvation for mankind, turn-over becomes the absolute priority, and, consequently, the existant has to be disregarded or ignored or suppressed.

To paint now is an act of resistance which answers a widespread need and may instigate hope.