THE OBJECT STARES BACK

On the Nature of Seeing

James Elkins
"Just Looking"

What is the simplest—the absolute minimum—that can be said about seeing? That the eye opens and the light comes in. What is the least that vision can accomplish, the easiest task for the eyes? It is seeing without thinking of seeing: seeing without strain, not squinting at a sharp light or peering intently into a darkness or trying to focus on something a finger's breadth away, but merely seeing, in a passive, unthinking way. In a word: just looking.

And when does that happen? Normally, almost all the time: seeing happens without our noticing that we are seeing. There are, of course, those bewildered moments in the early morning when your eyes are trying to remember how to see and you have to help them find their focus. Eyes just opened after a heavy sleep are bleary, and clogged with the thoughts of the night. They are unfocused and unwilling. The first look in a mirror may reveal not a face but a cottony blur bathed in garish fluorescent light. Only later and with effort does the face congeal into an approximate focus and reflect a
more or less acceptable human shape. And at the end of a long day, it all happens in reverse: late at night the words in a book start to slur and waver, until black-and-white becomes gray, gray darkens into black, and the eyes close over what remains of the page. These are daily problems with seeing, and they do not require much attention—not more than one or two minutes a day.

The same happens on a much larger scale over the course of a lifetime. To infants, the world is said to be a great glowing confusion, a bewilderment with no beginning or end. In old age the world can become infuriatingly inexact, and it can refuse to snap back into focus. As the eyes weaken and slowly give way, the world and the people in it dim and recede and finally die along with the eyes in an opaque gloom. In that respect, each day rehearses the progress of the eyes from birth to death.

Still, this daily drama of the eyes, which foreshadows the darknesses of old age, is only a minuscule portion of the daily ration of sight. Normally we open our eyes and see, and it is as easy as breathing. Even people with thick glasses spend many hours forgetting how oddly they are forced to view the world. Ordinarily, just looking is just what the eyes do: they open, they see the world, they close.

But vision, I think, is more like the moments of anxious squinting than the years of effortless seeing. Looking at the world is not a matter of raising the eyelids and turning the eyes in their sockets; or, to say it more exactly, that idea is a lie we tell in order to make sense of ourselves. In hopes of overturning that fiction as forcibly and quickly as possible, I have arranged this first chapter as a kind of point-by-point refutation of "just looking." It is a skeptical exercise, and it opens the door to a wider and deeper account.

The first thing to be said is that this informal notion of just looking will not do, since the eyes never merely accept light. Instead, there is force to the light: it pushes its way into our eyes; and conversely, there is force to the eyes: they push their way into the world. The phrase "just looking" is a point of departure, and later I will use a more formal sentence to describe seeing: "The observer looks at the object." That sentence—that version of the fiction—condenses the three irreducible elements of vision: the subject, the act of seeing, and the object that is seen. It looks as sturdy as a description of seeing could be. Yet it also comes apart: first, because looking is suspect, and then, because it is built on the very simple but mistaken idea that the observer and the object are two different things. In the end, I think, the sentence itself is a kind of hopeless nonsense: there is no such thing as an observer looking at an object, if seeing means a self looking out at a world.

(One word about vocabulary. "Vision" usually means the anatomical action of the eyes, and "sight" refers to all the wider senses of seeing, from suspicion to unconscious desires. I follow that distinction in a haphazard way because I think that, the more neurological evidence is taken into account, the harder it is to separate anatomy from history, manners, or psychology.)

Let me begin with another daily example. Sometimes, when I'm shopping, I pause a little too long in front of a counter. A salesperson leans my way and says, "May I help you?"

And I reply, "No, just looking."

I wonder at that question. How did she know just when to ask? Was it something in the way I was standing? Was I lingering, as if I couldn't quite leave? Maybe I looked a little dazed, as if I weren't really concentrating. Probably, though, I looked as if I had been caught: hooked by the object in the display case. Some objects have an irresistible effect, as if we were tied to them by little wires. It could be that the salesperson had been watching me from a distance, the way some spiders hide at the edge of the web until a moth becomes so tangled that it's safe to approach. When the salesperson saw I was half caught, she came a little nearer and asked her question.

The threads that tie us to objects are invisibly fine, and normally we scarcely notice their little tugs and pulls. But the webs of vision are there nonetheless. All those familiar gestures of shoppers—bending forward for a closer look and then straightening up, raising the eyebrows, tilting the head to one side, stepping back to think, shifting weight from one foot to the other, crossing the arms, sighing, scratching the head—those are signs that they are already caught in the web.

Thinking of things this way, I begin to wonder if shopping isn't
like being hunted. Instead of saying I am the one doing the looking, it seems better to say that objects are all trying to catch my eye, and their gleams and glints are the hooks that snare me. A harmless display case of watches becomes a forest of traps, a dangerous place for my eyes. Every shining dial and silver band is a barb, a tiny catch just the size of my eye. Perhaps shoppers are like fish who like to swim in waters full of hooks.

At the same time, shopping is also hunting. After all, I am the one who decides to go shopping, and normally I'm on the lookout for something in particular: I'm hunting for it and trying to pick it out of the thousands of objects that I do not want. If I can find the one perfect watch, it's because I know what I'm looking for, and I can tell a good watch from imitations and distinguish styles that are very close to one another. In this way of looking at things, the watches are all camouflaged: each is almost identical to the next, and the one I want is somewhere among them. Like a leopard hunting in the jungle, I can look at a tangle of leaves, vines, and flickering lights and pick out just half of the pupil of a frightened deer.

Just looking is just hunting, but it is not quite right to say it is only hunting. There is also something quietly hypnotic about just looking, something less like hunting and more like dreaming. It is as if the looker were Gulliver, tied to the beach by the Lilliputians but still dreaming he's in England having a nice time, perhaps out for a stroll, but beginning to notice in some dull way that it's hard to move—it's inexplicably difficult to just walk down that street in London, to reach out and turn that doorknob—and then waking up and discovering himself in a much worse nightmare. But unlike Gulliver, I never really wake up. Just looking is like dreaming, but dreaming fitfully, tossing and turning and not knowing quite what's happening.

And the dream also gives pleasure. The shoppers who struggle, and then let themselves become even more entangled, and then struggle again, are often hoping to lose. They want to be caught—that's part of the game of shopping—and they let themselves be swathed in threads. When I am entranced by something, I tend to forget everything else. I lose track of where I am, what I'm doing there, and how much time I have before my next appointment. If there are people waiting in line behind me, I forget them. For a while I am harmlessly hypnotized, and the world falls away, leaving me in a silent, empty place, alone with the object.

So just looking is like hunting or being hunted, but it is also kin to hypnosis, nightmares, and dreams. Those meanings draw near to yet another, because there is also a deep parallel between looking and loving. Sometimes falling in love really feels like falling, as if you have no control, always tilting forward like that first step parachutists take out of a plane. Then you may be genuinely helpless, at the mercy of the person who has caught your eye. Saying that someone is caught or is swept off her feet or falls for someone are all ways of describing the work of the invisible strands. On other occasions love is all a calculated pursuit. Some people spend their lives searching like detectives among all the faces and bodies they can find. They make no visual wires are laid thick between their eyes and the eyes of the people they love. But as lovers say, it's not always so easy to know who catches whom, and looking happens in both directions.

There might be a good definition of love here: love as the moment when the prey becomes another hunter, so that both people are hunters and hunted at once. It wouldn't be enough that I hunt you and you hunt me in return—love would be the state in which I hunt a hunter or fall prey to prey.

It's strange that love stories begin to fill my mind when I meant to think only about looking, and that is what I want to say about that phrase “just looking.” It is not possible; there is no such moment. All seeing is heated. It must always involve force and desire and intent. Even when I think I am least interested, I am already on the prowl. It doesn't matter what I'm looking at—a watch, a shiny hook; “just looking” is a lie. I am always looking out, looking for, even just looking around. Even the mildest looking—for example, right now, as I sit typing these words, glancing at my hands and up at the screen, looking over at my empty coffee cup—even this weightless looking is directed. I need to hit the right key and find the right word. I need to see the words on the screen, and at the moment I would like to see a full cup of coffee. There is no looking that is not also directed.
at something, aimed at some purpose. Looking is looking at or for or just away. Everything that the eye falls on has some momentary interest and possible use.

The proof of this is the way that absentminded looking becomes contaminated with stray thoughts. If I'm just looking around while thinking of something else, every object that comes into focus will remind me of my life: the calendar reminds me I haven't changed it this week; the old file folders remind me of work not yet done; the black architect's lamp reminds me I don't like architect's lamps; the coffee cup reminds me again that I am thirsty. Even when I am not thinking of the use of objects, they remind me of use. And there is a curious thing here that easily passes unnoticed: I do not focus on anything that is not connected in some way with my own desires and actions. I fail to see the stretch of wall between the lamp and the coffee cup, or the manila paper of the file folders, or the black plastic calendar holder. My eyes can understand only desire and possession. Anything else is meaningless and therefore invisible.

When I say, "Just looking," I mean I am searching, I have my "eye out" for something. Looking is hoping, desiring, never just taking in light, never merely collecting patterns and data. Looking is possessing or the desire to possess—we eat food, we own objects, and we "possess" bodies—and there is no looking without thoughts of using, possessing, repossessing, owning, fixing, appropriating, keeping, remembering and commemorating, cherishing, borrowing, and stealing. I cannot look at anything—any object, any person—without the shadow of the thought of possessing that thing. Those appetites don't just accompany looking: they are looking itself.

Ordinarily we are convinced otherwise. Aren't there moments of pure seeing, when I'm not trying to find anything in particular? Even if desire infects seeing, can't there be times when I am in remission from the incessant urging of desire? Is looking always also shopping and hunting and loving and dreaming, never blank, affectless seeing? As I write these lines, I'm sitting at a desk that faces a blank wall. I like it that way because it offers no distraction, but sometimes I turn my head to my left, where there's a panorama of the city. Today is a particularly beautiful summer afternoon with a bright hazy sky. The trees are sheets of green broken by buildings, and there's a lake scattered with white sails. My eyes love this scene, and I keep looking away from the computer and letting my gaze drift through the trees and the heavy air and then out onto the distant lake. Could there be anything tense about this? Is this still a kind of hunger? I think it may be, since I also look out there when I find myself at a loss for a word or an idea. Writing is hard, and when my concentration is broken it needs to be healed by bathing in the soft, meaningless landscape. That unselfish, abstracted, empty moment I spend looking at sailboats and thinking of nothing is really an oasis for my eyes, a source of nourishment that lets me continue my pursuit of words. It only seems to be a senseless pleasure. It's more like a quick drink of water during a speech or a gap of air after a long dive. I would almost say that the moments I spend looking at the view are not looking at all: they are the gaps between looking, the balm that lets me use my eyes as pitilessly as I can. Seeing is incessant searching from the first moments we can focus our blurry infant eyes all the way to the closing second when we last see the world.

Usually an afternoon in an art museum is a way to relax and enjoy a little leisure. We may even lull ourselves into believing we are there for purely aesthetic reasons, just to bask in the colors and to remain impassive. I'd like to think that's true, anyway: that I could lose myself in the pictures and be finally freed of the pressing little urges and necessities of ordinary living.

But another part of me knows it is not so. For one thing, I can sense that I'm relaxing in order to work after I've left the museum. The paintings offer the same softness as the view out of my window. They're like erasers moving over a crowded blackboard: the clutter is gone, leaving a beautiful emptiness—but the entire purpose of erasing the blackboard is to do more work and to get at it right away, as soon as the confusion is cleared. It's no different for me, even though I am trained as an art historian, and so a museum is a place I go to work. Paintings still have that effect—they are ways of thinking about something other than what I am. And if I attend to my
seeing carefully enough, I will note all the signs of possession creeping under the veneer of disinterested enjoyment. In front of an imposing portrait of Napoleon I begin to feel a little edgy, and I may find my eyes straying from his face to his epaulets or his buttonholes, just like an intimidated clerk who can’t look his master in the eye. In front of a painting of a nude I may start to feel uncomfortable, thinking about how I might be caught staring; or else my mind may begin to swim with thoughts of smooth skin and warmth. In front of a still life, I may—if I listen to my thoughts closely enough—begin to hear a faint voice urging me to eat, as if I could pick up the knife that the painter has carefully left on the table and begin buttering some bread. These are the almost inaudible urgings of my possessive eyes, trying to work the way they would with real-life objects and knowing they shouldn’t and can’t. One of the most interesting properties of pictures is the way they provoke this stifled dialogue, how they hold out the possibility of disinterested seeing while offering the eyes so much. My eyes and mind and body and fingertips all respond to the picture, or rather they want to respond, and the picture keeps stopping them, shutting them down and trying to keep them quiet. So even a museum is a place where seeing is possession, or the hope or memory of it. I can’t “just look” in a museum any more than I can in a store, and it’s worse in a museum because I can’t touch, I can’t hold, I can’t own—in short, I can’t complete the urge that seeing starts.

Even so, it would be wrong to insist too much on any of this, because we get along in the world by pretending, or perhaps I should say deeply believing, that vision is passive. In a word, we sometimes think that artworks provoke “disinterested interest”: we are engaged, but we don’t want anything but ocular pleasure. I would say that those who defend that idea may need to see artworks in that way: they may need to think that the work provides a privileged kind of seeing, released from the unpoetic urges of biology. And in a way that’s a sensible attitude, since it lets them get on with the business of seeing without being tied down to metaphors of spider’s webs and helpless moths. I can’t see the way I normally do if I’m constantly thinking of how each harmless glance is tangled in some sticky web of unthought urges.

Seeing is effortless and mercurial, or so it seems, and it appears we prefer it that way. But we cannot permanently forget the harshness and pressure of seeing. Seeing is at the very root of our way of getting along in the world, and a single look can have all the force of hatred and violence that may end up being expressed in more brutal ways. Consider, for instance, a particularly harsh example of seeing, one that bears evidence of the intimate connection between the habitual incessant searching of seeing and some less pleasant thoughts, especially unhappiness, displeasure, violence, and pain. The example comes from La Salpêtrière, a Parisian hospital. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the doctors at La Salpêtrière published a journal that was mostly concerned with the appearances of patients. They wondered, for instance, how a hysterical patient looks. Does hysteria give a person a particular face? Does it produce certain gestures, certain typical poses? Does a melancholic have an identifiable expression? Is there such a thing as a wandering Jew, and if so, how might one appear? What happens to someone who spends her entire life in bed? What does it look like to have a belly so fat it scrapes the floor? The doctors who worked at La Salpêtrière were interested in neurological pathologies, and they tried to understand them by photographing the patients’ gestures, their poses, expressions, mannerisms, “irritable signs,” and twitches.

One article exhibits a photograph of a eunuch (figure 1). The face is impassive or perhaps resigned. It is a tired face, and the eyes are gently shut, as if to close out the world and “dissolve the skin and the name,” as the novelist Harold Brodkey puts it. At first the body seems posed, as if the eunuch meant to show off some feminine grace, and then we see the inwardness of it, how the arms enclose the body without hiding it, how the legs are relaxed and frail.

The accompanying text tells a sad story about a forty-year-old man, habitually stoned on hashish, who declared he was going to marry a princess and raise a family. With the princess, he thought, he would have an orgasm and an ejaculation. He had once been manic-depressive, but recently he had “entered into a period of continuous calm.” The text is written by a doctor and it is not unsympathetic. But these stories are followed by a brutal medical assessment. “Rectal examination revealed a normal prostate,” the
doctor writes, meaning nothing less than that he had inserted a finger into the subject’s rectum. Ejaculations in such cases are possible, the doctor explains, by the expulsion of nonspemmatric secretions. The orgasms are to be understood as wishful thinking based on the sensations produced by irritating the mucous membrane around the urethra.

The whole diagnosis is impersonal, and it is done in a particularly medical fashion: the body is a hard fact, and even the strongest fantasy cannot make it into something else. The doctor’s entire manner is professionally impeccable—which is to say it is horrible, invasive and brutish. The eunuch, who is already once removed from us in the photograph, is brought a little nearer by the story of his imaginary wedding and then thrown back away from us by the medical account of his body. The photograph is the harshest of all: it penetrates his privacy with an insistent, intense thrust that cannot be rejected.

This is the violent side of seeing, where the mere act of looking—an act that can also be the gentlest, least invasive way to make contact with the world—becomes so forceful that it turns a human being into a naked, shivering example of a medical condition. However nourishing and eloquent the eunuch’s intimate thoughts might have been, whatever qualities his life might have had, they are lost forever. In their place we inherit this document: part of it a clipped medical narrative and part a wordless photograph. This seeing is aggressive: it distorts what it looks at, and it turns a person into an object in order to let us stare at it without feeling ashamed. Here seeing is not only possessing (the doctor “owned” this case: he was the authority, he got to lecture about it, he had the reproduction rights to his photograph and his article); seeing is also controlling and objectifying and denigrating. In short, it is an act of violence and it creates pain.

Yet it seems to me that all seeing has this property, and even though it can be modified or diluted, it can never be eradicated. Any sequence of photographs bears out that point. Imagine a set of twenty portrait photographs newly arrived from the studio. Of the twenty, five might sport an awkward smile, several more a dumb grin, and the rest might have that portentous look that comes from
trying to look serious. There’s usually at least one photo that catches its subject with the eyes half closed, as if she were on the point of falling asleep. The fact that most people don’t enjoy photographs of themselves is usually chalked up to vanity, as if they don’t like the photographs because they think they look better. There is some truth in that, and there’s a physical reason for it. Photographs clip out instants in time, and since we see in overlapping moments and usually base our sense of a person on a fluid sequence of moments and motions, a single photograph can often seem wrong. (Painters can blend moments, so that few oil portraits have the weirdness of snapshots.) But there’s something else at stake as well: a photograph pushes a small part of the person forward and presents it as the whole and adequate person, and that will tend to hurt the subject’s sense of herself. “I am not that exaggerated thing,” she might say, “or that gangly model, that stiff mannequin, that mysterious brooding actress, that adolescent poser—and I am certainly not the punch-drunk person in that last photo.” It is significant that we take vain offense at photos of ourselves but hardly notice the same problems in photos of other people. That is partly because we know our own selves so well that we are hypersensitive to partial versions of what we are. I think this incompleteness is an inbuilt property of photographs, and it is only because we see so many thousands of photographs that we lose sight of how each one is a little travesty, a peculiar caricature. It is as if all the pictures of a person were pieces of different jigsaw puzzles. Someone who had never seen that person could never force them together into a single picture, even though it would seem as if they must fit somehow, since each snapshot is an aspect of that one person. But photographs are strange connivances. Their conventions are not those of the living experience of a person—and why should they be? Instead, they are bitter, pungent, sweet, sour, and salty droplets mechanically extracted from a more fluid existence.

I’m backing away from the example of the desolate eunuch because I want to say that displeasure is something that accompanies all seeing, not just medical photographs. John Pecham, a medieval scientist who thought long and hard about seeing, came to the conclusion that in order for vision to work, it must hurt just a little. “The action of the visible object on the eye,” he wrote, “is painful.” He meant that light itself causes a sensation in the eye—that is, a gentle pain—that enables us to see. It is an interesting thought, this almost invisible daily pain of seeing, and I like to sense its echoes in the urges I have been describing. All seeing, I think, is painful. The eunuch would have felt real pain if he had ever seen a copy of the Parian journal. The doctor shared some of the eunuch’s pain and mixed in some of his own, and his essay continues to cause pain in everyone who sees it. The photograph is the crossroad of this pain. Every photograph is a little sting, a small hurt inflicted on its subject, but even more: every glance hurts in some way by freezing and condensing what’s seen into something that it is not.

This may seem entirely different from my opening examples. Looking at some object for sale in a display case hardly conjures this kind of trauma. But can we really say what the difference is? If I listen very carefully, there is displeasure in every glance. Looking is not only active—it is a form of the desire to possess or be possessed—but also potentially violent. The evanescent displeasures of searching for an object or confronting some wild version of myself in a photograph are linked by imperceptible degrees to the violent hatred and sexual obsession of the photograph of the eunuch. And in an exactly mirroring fashion, the pleasure of finding the object I’m looking for or discovering some glamorous picture of myself are continuous with the temptation to succumb to the morbid fascination of the eunuch’s portrait. Storms of uncontrolled violent emotion can calm themselves into the slight aversions and the faint breaths of interest that I feel in a department store. There are many ideas mingling here, and it will take the rest of this book to tease them apart. Seeing is wonderfully complicated, and people who study it—art historians, art critics, artists, cognitive psychologists, neurobiologists—are just beginning to understand what it involves.

We have arrived at the point where we can say what seeing is not: it is not merely taking in light, color, shapes, and textures, and it is not simply a way of navigating through the world.

Sometimes the desire to possess what is seen is so intense that vision reaches outward and creates the objects themselves. The Parian doctor did not need to create his eunuch, exactly; he discovered
the eunuch in Tunis. His creation was limited to matters of presentation: making sure the eunuch was interviewed, examined, described, pictured, and packaged in the way he wanted. But if the desire grows large enough, it can impel us to make what we want to see out of whole cloth. Stendhal wrote a lovely and cynical book, *On Love*, telling in pitiless and yet happy detail how a lover forms a misguided idea of the person he loves and distills it into a perfect crystal. He worships the crystal, no matter what his lover might actually be like, until the moment comes when the insistent presence of the woman herself shatters the crystal and the love affair is ruined. The crystal is an entirely mistaken image of the beloved, something built out of things that have been mis-seen and misunderstood. According to Stendhal—and he was a bit of a sexist by our standards—a love affair is a triangle, made of the man and the woman, who actually exist, and the crystalline version of the woman created by the man.

What is this image of a mermaid (figure 2), if not a picture of someone’s desire? If the need is pressing and the world is not forth-

![Figure 2](image)

coming, then vision will dictate how the object of desire can be created. This wrinkled confection was someone’s crystal. A visual hunger produced it, and it was kept as long as it mattered that such a thing could be seen. Pictures and seeing work in some of the same ways, and pictures have much to tell us about the ways we see. A picture is not only a view onto the world or onto someone’s imagination: it is a peculiar kind of object that sets us thinking about desire. If I see a mermaid, a silk shirt, a snapshot, a gorgeous landscape, a picture of bread and butter, or photograph of a eunuch, those images are not just passively recorded in my mind. Looking immediately activates desire, possession, violence, displeasure, pain, force, ambition, power, obligation, gratitude, longing... there seems to be no end to what seeing is, to how it is tangled with living and acting. But there is no such thing as just looking.

IN thinking about these things, it is important not to become too enraptured with the idea that seeing is desire, because it tends to split seeing into the ordinary occurrences of life, when we behave as if seeing could be disinterested and passionless, and the reflective moments, when we become archaeologists of our desires. In my profession of art history, that is what people routinely do. We construct theories about how all seeing is fraught with gender constructions and power relations, but then we study works of art as if we were just trying to appreciate them—as if we had no desire to possess them by writing about them and reproducing them in our books, as if we had no urge to capture and domesticate the odd things of the world. When a historian reproduces a famous painting and writes about it, how is she different from the Parisian doctor with his exotic eunuch? We write books about art and leave ourselves out, as if we weren’t involved. Just as it would never have occurred to the Parisian doctor to say anything about his own sexuality and his attraction to freakish things, so it seldom seems appropriate among the members of my profession to connect their own lives and loves to the pictures that they study. That may be prudent, since it is difficult to connect private thoughts with professional ones, and it is also appropriate in a deeper sense, because our reticence makes art history
a good match for the dynamic of pictures. A picture presents itself as an unapproachable object forever detached from the nets of possessiveness and violence, and yet it urges on its viewers, compelling them to walk up to it, to touch it, to move into it or run away. In my profession we do the same by exhibiting artworks in an appreciative but disinterested way, and that only makes them that much more seductive. Art history and pictures mimic the world in this, since seeing itself works the same way: the world is simply there, and it can be described and appreciated from a distance, as if we were all operating lunar landers and training their glassy eyes on impossibly distant objects. But I suppose astronauts know better than most of us that the lure increases with the distance, and the most inaccessible object is the one that is the most desperately attractive.

There is a wonderful novel about this kind of drama, Alain Robbe-Grillet’s Jealousy. In the opening pages it seems to be about a banana plantation and a woman who lives there. The writing is strangely finicky, and the narrator lavishes his attention on peculiar details, like the exact shape of the sun’s shadow on a porch, the smudge of a squashed centipede, the wobbly outline of a car seen through a wavy windowpane. The descriptions seem to be objective, impartial, and a little inhuman, and they are impeccably precise. The days pass, and everything seems fairly normal—until the reader guesses that the narrator, who does not seem to be part of the story, is actually living at the plantation with the woman. The people in the story barely acknowledge that he exists: every once in a while the woman will sit at a table with a male friend of hers, and there will be three glasses instead of two. The third one belongs invisibly to the narrator. There is something weirdly wrong with the narrator’s scientific, nearsighted precision. Slowly it becomes apparent that the narrator is invisible not because he is a naturalist who likes to describe what he sees, but because he is out of his mind with jealousy for this woman and does nothing with his life except observe her as closely as he possibly can. Every detail of the plantation that he sees is motivated by his obsessive jealousy.

Jealousy is an exact allegory of the way we usually think about seeing. We imagine that seeing is entirely objective: after all, the world gives us what there is to see, and we cannot do anything but open our eyes and see it. But like the observer in Jealousy, we are so deeply involved in the world, so desperately dependent on it, that we must pretend that we have some distance in order to go on at all. In the national parks there are signs reading, “Don’t take anything but photographs.” It is true that the landscape suffers only infinitesimal change when it loans me a few photons. But we mistake that for the nature of seeing. I may not change a pine tree by taking its picture, though I obviously do affect a bison or a bear by taking its picture. Some national parks have problems with tourists who lure bears with food in order to take their pictures. (And this is where there is truth in that phrase, “taking a picture.”) Years ago in Yellowstone I saw a group of cars parked by the side of the road. People were standing at the roadside with their binoculars, looking out across a wide valley. When I got out my binoculars I could see what they were watching: in the far distance a man with a camera was running full-tilt after a bison. I doubt Yellowstone has any problem with people mobbing pine trees or patches of turf. What the tourists see is driven by their desire: on the one hand they want large animals, dangerous scenes, and close encounters with white fangs, and on the other they want bucolic, sublime, and picturesque landscapes. Wildness and wilderness are the two goals, and there is very little seeing of botany, geology, miscellaneous zoology, or unpicturesque landscape. Most of Yellowstone is invisible, even though it is there to be seen, just as in Jealousy the world has shrunk to a bit of shadow, a few glasses on a table, and a squashed centipede.

Our “objective” descriptions are permeated, soaked, with our unspoken, unhought desires. Seeing can be a strange experience, like reading Jealousy. First there is the eye, “just looking” at the objects, just taking some mental notes on their names and their places; but just beneath the surface there are other forces that can’t quite be spoken, twisting their way through the viewer’s thoughts, forcing the eye here and there, suddenly focusing it on a charging bison or a crushed bug.
WHAT is seeing, then? Even though I can't just look, can't I simply see? Isn't there such a thing as mere biological sensation, so that my eyes might be technically considered just as passive recipients of phenomena, like my tongue or my ears? In a scientific sense, aren't my eyes just tools, like a blind man's cane or a carpenter's tape measure? But as soon as I start asking questions this way, comparing one sense to another as an eighteenth-century philosopher would have, the answer gets thrown back in my face. My ears are anything but passive recipients of noise. Out of the buzzing continuum of sounds I listen for certain things: I am acutely sensitive to voices, to rhythmic tappings that might be footsteps, to whistles, howls, shrieks, creaks, and whines. I am capable of entirely ignoring whole ranges of sound: in an airport I scarcely hear the jets, and when I'm cleaning house I don't even think of the deafening vacuum cleaner. The photoreceptors in my eyes have evolved so that they are acutely sensitive to single bursts of energy—twinkles of light from a department store display, or a momentary glimpse of a moving face—but the cells in my ears have evolved so that they can sift prolonged, faint signals from the world's constant random background noise.

That's the scientific way of putting it, and it implies my ears are specialized: they don't just pick up everything, but they actively search. The same could be said about my tongue, or my fingertips, or the blind man's cane.

Once I wanted to write a book with the title The Observer Looks at the Object. It would have been an academic exercise, designed to destroy its own title, to tear it apart and show how little sense it makes. The idea was to begin with the least objectionable, most elementary sentence describing the rudimentary facts of vision: after all, there has to be an observer, something to be observed, and an action such as looking. From what I've been writing so far, it already seems that the sentence says too little, as if it meant, "The observer just looks at the object," or as if it were only half a sentence and would need to give its reason: "The observer looks at the object in order to do something or get something."

Originally what I liked about the idea of dismantling the sentence was that it would seem the work was finished as soon as the word "looks" no longer sounded right. But I think there's much more wrong here. The whole sentence is suspect: there is no such thing as just looking, and there is also no such thing as an object that is simply looked at by something else called an observer. Looking is much too complex to be reduced to a formula that has a looking subject and a seen object. If I observe attentively enough, I find that my observations are tangled with the object, that the object is part of the world and therefore part of me, that looking is something I do but also something that happens to me—so that the neat architecture of the sentence becomes a morass.

Paintings are an interesting example, since we often think of them as isolated objects: There is the Mona Lisa, protected by its glass shields, cordoned off from people and placed apart from the other paintings in its room in the Louvre. There is the "sofa painting" hanging by itself on the white wall. There is the picture that is up above my desk as I type this. (It's a fierce battle scene of swimming centaurs and demure mermaids clubbing one another with bones and sticks.) Paintings seem to be exempt from the word, as if their frames were parentheses letting the text of the world flow on around them, or little fences keeping the picture from straying into the world.

But objects do not exist one by one in isolation, so that an observer could look at just one object. My picture of enraged centaurs looked quite different when it was in the bedroom, hanging over the bed—then it seemed to be more of a romantic fable and less of a story about hard work and fighting. I noticed that the centaurs seemed to protect the nereids and that it was really a love battle. Now, when it's over my desk, I tend to look at the clubs and sticks. The Mona Lisa would turn into a diva if she were hung in the Paris opera, and if she were hung in the Paris Métro she would look like a homeless person, wrapped in rags. The room in the Louvre that houses the Mona Lisa is transformed by her presence. The painting and its case are like a reliquary or an altar, and they make the room function like a little church. People line up to see it like worshipers waiting for the Eucharist. The other paintings look somehow less sacred—which is odd, considering that the Mona Lisa is not a religious work and the room contains several wonderful religious images.
For the same reasons a movie in a suburban theater is different from the same movie in an inner-city theater. I saw John Carpenter's *The Thing* in a huge old theater in downtown Chicago that has since been destroyed. It was a deep, cavernous space, decorated in faux-Baroque shields, twisting columns, parapets, and plaster statues. There was garbage under the seats, and people were talking and lobbing popcorn across the aisles. The sound was turned way up so that it could be heard over the noise. The people who were watching would yell at the screen, as if they were helping the hero:

"Look out!"

"Oh, my God, you idiot!"

"Don't look in there!"

Later I saw the same movie in an affluent suburban shopping mall. It was the kind of theater in which the cheapest available purple polyester curtains covered cinder-block walls painted in blue enamel. The audience was stony and silent, as if they were trying hard to scare themselves. Afterward they left grumbling and snickering. In effect, I have seen two movies: one that is mingled in my mind with a musty ancient theater, with noises and smells and interruptions, and another that I remember along with a slightly cold, cryptlike space that smelled like a new car. There is no such thing as the movie *The Thing* in my mind apart from those two experiences.

This painting (figure 3), which has the traditional title *Icon with the Fiery Eye*, is in a church in Moscow; but it also exists in many different sizes and shapes on postcards and in books, including this one. Each one is a different face. Even the reproduction on page 37 will change, depending on where you are right now as you're reading this. It will look different if you're on a sofa, or eating, or reading in bed. (I was once told not to look at religious images in the bathtub. Presumably that was because I could see holy bodies and my own body at the same time—but I was never quite sure why that was bad.) Each time you glance at this picture it will mean something slightly different. At first it might be just a picture of Jesus, and then on second look it might seem oddly frowzy or troubled (at least that's the way it looked to me at one point, since it is not the symmetric face found in many icons). Then you might notice the cracks and flaws, and it may suddenly seem ancient. On
later inspections you might take note of the single curl on the forehead, and the face might become a little more human. If you’re reading these sentences in between glances at the picture, you’re also mingling memories of the text with changing images of the Icon with the Fiery Eye. After a few moments, you might decide to give it a really thorough look and let its strange, surprised expression bear down on you in full force. After a long look at something, I usually shift my position a little or scratch my head. And each move I make moves the image in my mind. If you get a slight crick in your neck and press your hand over it, the icon might take on a subtle undertone of discomfort. If you’re lying in a bubble bath, that furrowed brow might look a little more relaxed and a bit less puzzled. In the end, when you’ve seen it enough and it’s time to move on, the image will be quite complex—a kaleidoscope of thoughts and images that coalesce from all the individual moments that you spent thinking and looking. Many people in my profession are attracted to a beautiful, bloody picture by the Renaissance painter Titian that hangs in a small town in Slovakia. I have never seen that painting, and I probably never will—but I have learned to love it by looking at reproductions in books. My idea of the picture is composed of all those reproductions, in black-and-white, in color, and in slides, together with all the remembered and half-remembered things I’ve read and heard.

I am simplifying a little here, since I am pretending there are only two players in this drama: one object and one person looking at it. But seeing and being seen is more complicated than that. Say you’re in a museum, looking at a painting that has a number of people in it. There may be up to ten different kinds of looking involved: (1) you, looking at the painting, (2) figures in the painting who look out at you, (3) figures in the painting who look at another, and (4) figures in the painting who look at objects or stare off into space or have their eyes closed. In addition there is often (5) the museum guard, who may be looking at the back of your head, and (6) the other people in the gallery, who may be looking at you or at the painting. There are imaginary observers, too: (7) the artist, who was once looking at this painting, (8) the models for the figures in the painting, who may once have seen themselves there, and (9) all the other people who have seen the painting—the buyers, the museum officials, and so forth. And finally, there are also (10) people who have never seen the painting; they may know it only from reproductions like the ones in this book or from descriptions.

A complementary source of complexity comes from the fact that we never see only one image at a time. Even up to this point in the book, if you haven’t looked ahead, you will still be mixing a eunuch and a mermaid into your ideas of the picture of Christ.

But I’d just as soon leave these sources of confusion aside: they all depend on the primary scene, where one observer encounters what appears to be one object.

How can the observer look at the object if it is multiplying and changing under his very eyes? The supposedly static object is a moving target, like the exit door in a hall of mirrors. In a good hall of mirrors, the exit cannot be seen at all, and it seems there is no way out—and then a moment later, with a slight change in position, there are nothing but exit doors wherever you look. Some of them are only half visible, and you can’t get a clear look at them. Others send out curving streamers, copying themselves into infinity. The elusive exit door is the analogue to the fixed object. Any object dissolves and shatters itself if it’s seen too long or sought for too carefully. Perhaps “the observer looks at the object” should be “the observer looks for the object” or “the observer looks among the objects.”

And all this so far supposes there is an observer. We need to think this, even when we have given up the idea that looking is straightforward or that objects are stable. I need to think that I am the one doing the looking and sifting one version of an object from the next. But what if I were changing along with the objects? What if the sentence were “The observers”—the multiple moments of myself—“look among the objects”? I am not a member of the Eastern Orthodox church—I’m not among the intended viewers of this icon—but since I’m an art histo-
Then I noticed some commotion in the dark recess... under the sculpture, as an older woman, dressed totally in black, dragged forward a young girl by her hair and knocked her head, again and again, on the base of the sculpture, chanting all the while. Horrified, I dropped my notebook, realizing that the image I was describing as a work of art was something else for this woman, something she was using to drive evil spirits from her daughter's mind.

The worshipers who prefer the plastic Jesus and the woman who tries to purge her daughter's soul are seeing very different objects from the ones I see, because they are very different people than I could ever be.

No two people will see the same object: that's a truism that is proved each time two artists try to draw the same object and end up with two irreconcilable versions of it. What makes it more than a common truth is that it applies just as well within a single person. I am divided, and at times my modes of seeing are so distinct from one another that they could belong to different people. At other moments they coalesce, but I am normally aware that differing viewpoints collide in the ways I see. Within limits, I do not want to see things from a single point of view: I hope to be flexible, to think in as liquid a way as I can, and even to risk incoherence. And above all, I want to continue to change—I do not wish to remain the same jaded eye that I was a moment ago. Art is among the experiences I rely on to alter what I am.

I expect pictures to have an effect on me, and I hope that the effect will not wear off: I want to see something new and to have an experience I can remember years later. Some pictures affect me for a few minutes, and others make permanent alterations in what I am. If you spend time in front of a painted portrait, the figure's mood will begin to change the way you feel. That new mood might become a part of you, recurring months or years later in very different circumstances. Some people go to the art museum every day, and they go to the same room to look at the same painting. Some of them work nearby and visit during their lunch hour, and others are retired or out of work and stay for hours on end. These are people who have developed a need for particular images. I teach a course in an art
museum, and the students in the course set up their easels in the galleries and copy paintings. Their experiences are very different from the experiences of the people who are used to visiting their favorite pictures. At first the students have a hard time looking at one image hour after hour, week after week. As the semester wears on and they spend five hours a day, two or three days a week, standing in one place and looking at one image, they tell me that they begin to have dreams about the paintings — and some of them also report nightmares. Many students rebel against the power of the images, and they complain that the paintings dog them, recurring like hallucinations when they are trying to eat or watch television. Eventually, though, most students end up feeling attached to their images: by a slow process the pictures find permanent places in their imaginations. Over the course of the semester the paintings have surprised and bored them, chastised them in their daydreams, scared them in nightmares, and eventually seduced them.

And this can also happen almost in the blink of an eye. There are pictures I love that I have seen only very briefly. The few moments I have spent in front of them are strong in my memory, and I can conjure them and continue to think of them whenever I want. Images like that take on a life of their own, like actual people, and they can appear suddenly to my eye’s mind the way a friend might turn up unexpectedly. I might be riding on a train or on the point of falling asleep, and suddenly the image will appear to me. Each time that happens, the associations I already had mix together with whatever else I have been doing and seeing and feeling that day, and after a number of years my memory becomes rich and entangled, just as it does with people I have known my entire life.

These are important experiences, no more and no less central in their way than my friendships. They not only add to what I am but also change what I am. The Icon with the Fiery Eye is not one of my favorite images, but even so I would not say that when I saw it I simply added it to some mental file of Russian icons. An image is not a piece of data in an information system. It is a corrosive, something that has the potential to tunnel into me, to melt part of what I am and re-form it in another shape. Some things in me are different because of that image, and that means — if I am willing to let down

my guard and be honest about how this works — that I am not the same person I was before. When people talk about experiences changing them, they usually mean that the change adds to them — the essential core of what they are remains the same. Philosophers are sometimes fond of speaking about the cloudy flux of the self, but it is not at all easy to acknowledge the absence of an architecturally solid foundation — the indestructible, immutable “I.” If pictures are corrosives, it is because light itself is an acid: it burns into me; it remakes me in its own image.

My sentence, “The beholder looks at the object,” is in serious trouble. There is no simple looking, there is no fixed object, and there is also no fixed observer. If I were a logician I would be tempted to write a syllogism something like this:

The beholder looks at the object,
but the object changes the beholder,
and therefore the beholder does not look at the object.

But it’s not as dry as that. The beholder is many beholders, and the object is many objects, and there is no scene in which a single beholder stands and absorbs facts and forms from an object while remaining impassive. The sentence is true only for a split second, before there is a chance to think about what is being seen or who is doing the seeing — which is to say it is never true. The sentence reminds me a little of a military action: “The soldier kills the enemy.” It sounds like a crisp action, a one-way gesture, with empty space between the protagonists. Like a bullet, the gaze shoots out toward the object; but the act of killing changes the killer, and like a bullet, light travels back from the object to the observer. When it comes to seeing, objects and observers alter one another, and meaning goes in both directions.

These are not things that happen sometimes, or under special conditions. They are not subtle nuances or refinements to the way we look at objects. Instead, they are the conditions of seeing itself. A picture is the ways and places it is viewed, and I am the result of those various encounters. In order to salvage the sentence, I would have to destroy it completely. I would need a new vocabulary of
hybrid objects: "observer-objects" would be observers altered by objects or fused with them through the act of seeing; "object-observers" would be objects altered by observation. It would no longer be possible even to write the sentence, because its subject, verb, and object would have fused together.

Some philosophers proceed this way, coining compound words and trying to push the grammar to make room for them. If this were a philosophic treatise, I might go ahead and do that, and start writing about seen and unseen observer-objects and seeing and unseeing object-observers. The sentence would deliquesce into an exchange of emerging identities, with "looking" rewritten as the force that causes objects and observers to appear or disappear. This subject is both important and complicated, and if I veer away from those possibilities it is not because I want to simplify things. Instead, I think it's important to remember the superior force of the sentence itself. "The observer looks at the object": it is how we live; we live by that sentence, and we need it to keep looking. Luckily, it's one thing to know that something is a lie and another to try to live with the truth.

And so looking has force: it tears, it is sharp, it is an acid. In the end, it corrodes the object and observer until they are lost in the field of vision. I once was solid, and now I am dissolved: that is the voice of seeing.