

# Objects

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*The real is what resists.*

—Lacan

A painting hangs on a wall in a room that smells faintly of floor polish and old stone. The room is not crowded. It is a Tuesday, mid-afternoon, the hour when museums belong to the retired and the lost and the occasional person who has simply wandered in to get out of the rain. The painting is not large. It is maybe sixty centimeters across, oil on canvas, seventeenth century, Dutch. The frame is dark wood, original or close to it, and the varnish has yellowed just enough to give the whole surface a quality like looking

through amber, like seeing something preserved in the resin of its own age.

A man is standing in front of it. He has been standing there for some time—long enough that the guard in the corner has noticed him and then, having determined that he is not a threat, has gone back to staring at the middle distance the way museum guards do, existing in that particular limbo between alertness and trance that the job requires. The man does not look like a scholar. He does not have a notebook. He is not leaning in to examine brushwork or stepping back to assess composition. He is just standing there, at the distance you would stand from another person if you were having a conversation, and looking.

What is he looking at? He could tell you the subject—a woman pouring milk from a jug, a table, a wall, a window, a basket of bread. He could tell you the colors, the way the light falls from the upper left and catches the stream of milk and the edge of the woman's sleeve and the crusts of the bread in a way that makes each of these things more present than they have any right to be. He could describe all of this and he would be correct and he would not have said the thing, the thing that has kept him here for twenty minutes, the thing that would keep him here for twenty more if the museum were not

closing soon. The thing is that the painting is more than what he can see. He can see everything and something remains. The surface is completely available to him—every square centimeter of it is right there, pigment on canvas, visually exhaustible in a way that a novel or a symphony is not—and yet the thing is not exhausted. He keeps looking because the looking does not finish.



There is a word for this. Graham Harman, the American philosopher who has spent twenty-five years building a metaphysics out of the stubbornness of things, calls it withdrawal. Every object, he says, withdraws from its relations. No encounter with a thing, however long, however careful, however intimate, exhausts the thing. The real object hides behind every sensual surface. You can describe every brushstroke, catalog every pigment, X-ray the underdrawing, carbon-date the canvas, reconstruct the studio conditions and the cost of lapis lazuli in 1658 and the social position of the woman who may or may not have modeled for the figure, and you will still not have the painting. Something remains. Something always remains.

This is the central insight of object-oriented ontology, and it is either the most profound thing anyone has said about reality in a century or it is completely obvious, and the answer is probably both. Of course the painting is more than its description. Everyone who has ever stood in front of a painting they love knows this. The contribution is not the observation but the generalization—Harman says this is true of everything. Not just paintings. Bricks, cotton balls, fire, the East India Company, the number seven, fictional characters, historical events. Everything withdraws. Everything has a hidden interior that no relation can access. The universe is made of objects that refuse to be fully known, and this refusal is not a deficiency in our knowledge but a feature of how things are. The brick really does hide from the fire that burns it. The fire really does fail to access the brick's full reality. And this is true all the way down and all the way up, from quarks to corporations, from pebbles to planets.

But here is where it gets interesting, and here is where the philosophy needs something more than itself. If everything withdraws, then withdrawal alone tells you nothing about the difference between one thing and another. The painting withdraws. The brick withdraws. The museum guard withdraws. The floor polish with-

draws. They all have hidden interiors. They are all more than any encounter can reveal. And this is true, and it is important, but it is also radically unhelpful if you are trying to understand why the man has been standing in front of the painting for twenty minutes and not in front of the brick.



The answer is simpler than it should be, and the simplicity is what makes it interesting. An art object has three properties: it has an author, it is unique, and it has a market price. That is it. Those three criteria, taken together, pick out the category of things that the man is standing in front of, and they do it without recourse to beauty, or genius, or the ineffable, or any of the other words that art criticism uses to avoid saying anything precise.

Authorship means a person made it. Not a volcano, not an algorithm, not the random action of wind on sand. A person. A human being who stood in front of a surface and made choices—this color here, this line there, this shape rather than that one. The author criterion cuts out sunsets. It cuts out the Grand Canyon. It cuts out everything that is beautiful and natural and

irreducible and not made. Nature does not make art objects. People do. This is not a value judgment. The Grand Canyon may be more beautiful than any painting ever made. But the Grand Canyon is not an art object, because nobody made it, and the definition is not about beauty. It is about what kind of thing something is.

Uniqueness means there is only one. Not one edition, not one pressing, not one instance of a type. One. This painting, here, on this wall, is the only one. You can photograph it, reproduce it, print it on postcards and tote bags and coffee mugs, and the postcards and tote bags and coffee mugs will not be the painting. The painting is this physical thing, this specific aggregation of pigment and canvas and varnish, and nothing else is it. Uniqueness cuts out prints. It cuts out recordings. It cuts out anything that exists as a work distributed across instances rather than as a singular physical entity.

Market price means the world has reckoned with it. Someone, at some point, decided that this thing was worth exchanging something for. And this is the criterion that sounds the most reductive and turns out to be the most profound, because the market price is not an arbitrary number. It is the world's ongoing attempt to answer the question: how much withdrawn interi-

ority is in there? How deep does the thing go? How inexhaustible is it? The price is not the value. The price is the world's best guess at the value, and the guess is always wrong, and the wrongness is itself informative, because the thing that keeps defeating the estimate is the thing that makes the object real.



Consider a doodle. You are sitting at a table, bored, and you draw something on a napkin. A circle, a face, a pattern. You are the author. It is unique—there is only one napkin with this particular doodle on it. But it has no market price. Nobody would buy it. Nobody would trade anything for it. And this is not because the doodle is bad—maybe it is charming, maybe it is even beautiful in some small way—but because the world has not recognized it as an object. It has not crossed from the private sphere of your boredom into the public sphere where things acquire prices and provenance and the whole apparatus of reckoning.

And this is where the definition gets its teeth. Because you could say, in the Harman register, that the doodle also withdraws. The doodle also has a hidden interior. The doodle also exceeds its description. And

maybe this is true. Maybe every mark on every napkin has some infinitesimal flicker of withdrawn depth. But the withdrawal without market recognition is indistinguishable from there being nothing there. The market is not the arbiter of value. The market is the detection instrument. It is the thing that registers, however imperfectly, when an object has enough depth to sustain attention, to reward repeated encounters, to resist being exhausted. The doodle does not register. The Vermeer does. The difference is real and the three criteria name it.

Now consider what happens when the artist doodles. Picasso draws a face on a napkin in a restaurant and leaves it on the table. The napkin is now worth thousands of dollars. The same marks, the same napkin, the same casual gesture—but the authorship has changed. Or rather, the authorship has intensified. The criterion is not just “a person made it” but “a person operating as an artist made it.” Picasso at the restaurant table is still Picasso. His hand carries with it the entire weight of everything he has done, everything the market has recognized, the whole accumulated evidence that when this particular person makes marks, the marks tend to have depth that rewards attention. The napkin doodle inherits this. It acquires a market price not because

the marks are better than your marks but because the author is the kind of author whose marks the world has learned to take seriously.

This sounds like it reduces art to reputation, to celebrity, to the art market's self-reinforcing logic of fame. And there is something to that objection. But the objection misses the directionality. Picasso did not become famous and then his doodles became valuable. His paintings became valuable because they had depth, because people stood in front of them and could not stop looking, because the withdrawal was real and inexhaustible, and the fame followed from that, and the napkin doodle rides the wake. The market is fallible. The market gets things wrong. But over enough time and enough transactions, the market tracks something real, and the real thing it tracks is the depth of the object.



The market can be spectacularly wrong, and its errors are instructive.

Han van Meegeren spent years in the 1930s and 1940s painting forgeries of Vermeer. He was good. He was very good. He fooled experts, collectors, even Hermann

Göring, who bought one of his paintings for a price equivalent to millions of current dollars. The forged paintings had everything a Vermeer was supposed to have—the light, the composition, the particular quality of stillness that Vermeer achieves, where the figures seem caught in a moment that has always been happening and will always be happening. Van Meegeren reproduced the surface with astonishing skill.

But the forgeries were not Vermeers. They were van Meegerens. The surface was borrowed. The depth was not.

And this is where the three criteria do their work. While the forgeries were undetected, they had a market price—an enormous one. They had an attributed author—Vermeer. They were unique—each one a singular canvas. By every criterion, they were art objects. But the authorship was wrong. The market price was not their price; it was Vermeer's price, misattributed to a copy. The detection instrument was malfunctioning. And the malfunction was not a flaw in the concept of market price as a criterion—it was simply error, the kind of error that occurs whenever any instrument encounters a signal it misidentifies.

Then van Meegeren was exposed, and something remarkable happened. The forgeries did not disap-

pear. They did not become nothing. They became van Meegerens. They acquired their own names, their own provenance, their own place in art history. They became famous as forgeries. Collectors began buying them as van Meegerens. And the market price that appeared—the van Meegeren price, not the Vermeer price—was the market’s detection of a real transition. Something had changed. The parasitic pseudo-object, the thing that had no identity of its own, had become an object. It now had an author (van Meegeren, the forger, operating as himself), uniqueness (each forgery is a singular canvas), and a market price (its own, not Vermeer’s). The three criteria converged. The object arrived.

The quality is irrelevant to the objecthood question. Van Meegeren’s paintings are not great paintings. Compared to actual Vermeers they are stiff, slightly wrong in ways that become obvious once you know to look. But they are real objects. They have their own withdrawn interiority. You can stand in front of a van Meegeren and feel something that you would not feel in front of a random painting by a random person, because the forgery carries with it the whole story of the deception and the exposure and the strange afterlife, and that story has become part of the object’s depth, part of what withdraws

behind the surface, part of what makes it more than a description can capture.



A company is an object. This claim sounds stranger than it should, perhaps because we are used to thinking of objects as physical things you can hold in your hand, and a company is not a physical thing, and you cannot hold it. But consider the East India Company. It had employees and ships and trade routes and warehouses and legal charters and shareholders and debts and guns. And none of those things were the East India Company. You could have replaced every employee. You could have sunk every ship. You could have altered every route, burned every warehouse, revised the charter, paid off the debts, melted the guns. And something would have persisted. Some principle of identity, some organizing force, some withdrawn core that exceeded the sum of the parts. The company did things that none of its parts could do. It colonized a subcontinent. It fought wars. It governed millions of people. No employee did those things. No ship did those things. The company did them, and the company was not its employees or its ships or its charter. It was something else,

something that used all of those things as instruments but was not reducible to any of them.

Harman would recognize this immediately. The East India Company withdrew from its relations. No encounter with any of its parts—no audit of its books, no survey of its fleet, no reading of its charter—exhausted the thing. It was always more than what you could access from any particular angle. And the market recognized this too, in its way. The company's stock had a price, and the price fluctuated, and the fluctuations were the market's ongoing attempt to estimate how much reality was in there, how much depth, how much capacity to persist and act and generate effects that nobody had predicted from the parts alone.

Now consider Twitter. Jack Dorsey started it. It was unique—there was literally only one Twitter, a particular configuration of code and culture and habit and addiction and discourse that had never existed before and could not be replicated by copying the features. And it had a market price, which Elon Musk paid: forty-four billion dollars.

What did he buy? Not the servers. You can rent servers. Not the code. You can write code. Not the user base—you cannot buy people, and in any case the users were already leaving and arriving in patterns that

no purchase could control. He bought the object. He bought the thing that withdrew behind all of those components, the thing that was more than any description of its features, the thing that had its own identity, its own stubbornness, its own way of being in the world that resisted whatever anyone wanted it to be.

And his entire experience since buying it has been the experience of discovering that the object resists. He renamed it. He redesigned it. He changed the rules, fired the employees, altered the algorithm, invited back the banned. And the thing pushed back. Not because the users organized a resistance—though some did—but because the object itself had a reality that was not amenable to the new owner’s vision. The painting does not care that you bought it. The painting is what it is. You can hang it in a different room. You can put it in a different frame. You can shine a different light on it. The painting remains the painting, and the gap between what you want it to be and what it is—that gap is the withdrawal, and the withdrawal is what makes it an object.

The enormous disagreement about whether Musk overpaid is exactly the kind of disagreement you get at an art auction. One person looks at the thing and sees forty-four billion dollars of depth. Another person

looks at the same thing and sees a platform with a declining user base and a moderation problem. They are both looking at the same object and reaching different conclusions about how much withdrawn interiority is in there, how inexhaustible it is, how much it will reward attention over time. The market is the aggregation of these disagreements, and the market price at any given moment is the current best guess, and the guess is always revisable, because the object keeps withdrawing, keeps producing new effects, keeps exceeding whatever the last estimate said.



When Trump was banned from Twitter, he built Truth Social, and this is the forgery case playing out in real time. Truth Social began as a copy—a parasitic pseudo-object defined entirely by reference to the original. It was “Trump’s Twitter clone,” and the phrase exhausted it. There was no remainder, no depth, no withdrawal. You could describe its features—it looks like Twitter, it works like Twitter, it has a feed and posts and a timeline—and you had the whole thing. It was a pseudo-object, a parasite on the original, defined entirely by reference to the thing it was imitating.

And then it went public. It got its own stock ticker, its own valuation, its own market price. It got its own user culture—different from Twitter’s, with its own norms and its own atmosphere and its own strange internal logic. It became, gradually, painfully, a thing. Not a good thing, necessarily. Not an impressive thing. But a thing with its own identity, its own withdrawal, its own capacity to surprise. A van Meegeren. A bad painting that is nonetheless a real object.

And then there is Mastodon, and Mastodon is the control case that proves the definition works. Mastodon has no singular author in the strong sense. It is not unique—the entire point is that anyone can run their own instance, that the protocol is open, that the thing is designed to be replicated infinitely. And it has no market price, because there is no object there to price. It is a tool, a protocol, a set of instructions. You can use it but you cannot point at it. Nobody loves or hates Mastodon. Nobody has feelings about Mastodon as an entity. It does not provoke, it does not seduce, it does not resist. It just sits there, available, fully transparent, fully exhaustible. Read the code and you have the whole thing. There is no remainder.



There is a particular kind of intellectual error that consists of explaining something by dissolving it into something else. You explain the painting by dissolving it into pigments. You explain the company by dissolving it into employees. You explain the mind by dissolving it into neurons. Each dissolution captures something true and loses something essential. The pigments are real. The employees are real. The neurons are real. But the painting is not its pigments, the company is not its employees, the mind is not its neurons, and the thing that is lost in each dissolution is the same thing: the object. The thing that organizes the parts into something that exceeds them. The thing that withdraws.

This is what Harman is fighting against, and it is a fight on two fronts simultaneously. On one side are the people who dissolve objects downward—the reductionists, the people who say that everything is really just particles, just physics, just matter in motion, and that anything that seems to be more than its parts is an illusion, a convenient fiction, a way of talking about complexity that we will eventually replace with a more precise account of the underlying mechanism. On the other side are the people who dissolve objects upward—the holists, the contextualists, the people who say that nothing exists except in relation to other things, that

objects are just nodes in networks, that everything is constituted by its connections and has no independent reality.

Harman says no to both. The painting is not just pigments. And the painting is not just a node in the network of art history, gallery economics, cultural context, viewer psychology. The painting is a thing. It is itself. It has its own reality that is neither reducible to its parts nor constituted by its relations. It sits there on the wall, in between the atoms and the art world, being what it is, withdrawing from both directions at once.

And this is where the three criteria—author, uniqueness, market price—earn their philosophical keep. Because the criteria are entirely ontic. They are concrete, specific, measurable properties of actual things. Author: was this made by a person operating as an artist? Check the provenance. Uniqueness: is there only one? Count the copies. Market price: has the world assigned it a value? Check the auction records. There is nothing mystical here, nothing that requires a philosophical training to verify. A child could do it. A bureaucrat could do it. The museum placard already does it, every day, for every painting on every wall.

And yet these ontic criteria are doing ontological work. They are telling you which things in the world

have the kind of depth that Harman describes, the kind of withdrawal that makes an object more than a heap of parts or a node in a network. They are the observable surface through which the unobservable depth becomes legible. The price is the trace of the withdrawal. The uniqueness is the condition of the withdrawal. The authorship is the origin of the withdrawal. You cannot see the hidden interior directly—that is what makes it hidden—but you can see the three criteria, and the three criteria point at the interior the way a compass needle points at a pole it will never reach.



A sunset is not an art object. The sunset is the hardest case for the definition and also the one that proves it works.

The sunset is beautiful. Nobody disputes this. The sunset may even be more beautiful than any painting. It is unique—no two sunsets are alike, each one a particular arrangement of atmosphere and light that has never occurred before and will never occur again. And if you could somehow sell a sunset—if the technology existed to bottle a particular configuration of sky and light and sell it at auction—it would have an astronomical price,

because the beauty is real and the experience is genuine and people would pay for it.

But the sunset has no author. Nobody made it. And without authorship the thing remains a natural phenomenon. It does not matter how beautiful it is. It does not matter how unique. It does not matter how much someone might hypothetically pay. The author criterion is doing a specific kind of philosophical work here: it is separating things that happen from things that are made. The sunset happens. The painting is made. And the making is essential, because the making is what introduces intention, choice, the possibility that the thing could have been otherwise. The sunset could not have been otherwise. The atmosphere did what the atmosphere does. But the painter chose this color and not that one, this composition and not that one, this moment of the light and not some other moment. The choosing is the authorship, and the authorship is what creates the possibility of depth, because depth in an art object is partly the accumulated weight of all the choices that went into it, all the things the artist decided against, all the roads not taken that are somehow still present in the thing as absence, as the negative space that shapes the positive form.

Central Park is the edge case that keeps the definition honest. Olmsted and Vaux designed it. They chose the hills, the paths, the placement of trees, the sight lines, the relationship between open meadow and enclosed wood. It is unique—there is only one Central Park, with these particular trees that have been growing since the 1850s and are now enormous and unrepeatable. And if you could sell it, the price would be beyond calculation, because you would not be buying acreage. You would be buying Central Park. The object exceeds its materials.

A diamond is not an art object, and the reason is that nobody made it. The miner pulled it from the ground. The jeweler cut it. But the cutting reveals rather than creates—a different jeweler cutting the same rough stone would arrive at a similar result. The market prices the material, not the object's interiority. Nobody stands in front of a diamond and feels that there is something inexhaustible about this specific diamond's singular identity, some depth below the surface that keeps receding as you approach it. The diamond is spectacular and it is exhaustible. You have seen it and you have seen it.



Marcel Duchamp buys a urinal from a plumbing supply store. He signs it “R. Mutt.” He submits it to an art exhibition. The urinal is now one of the most famous art objects of the twentieth century. The same urinal, unsigned, sitting in a bathroom, is a plumbing fixture. Signed and submitted, it is an art object. What changed?

The material did not change. The porcelain is the same porcelain. The shape is the same shape. What changed is that an artist designated it. Duchamp, operating as an artist—not just “being a person who also happens to make art” but doing the thing, performing the act that creates art objects—performed an authorship that consisted entirely of pointing. He pointed at the urinal and said: this. And the pointing was the creation. The thing he created was not the porcelain. He created the art object, which is a different kind of entity from the porcelain, in the same way that a company is a different kind of entity from its employees.

The found object reveals something that was always true but hidden by the more conventional cases. In a painting, the authorship and the making are fused—the painter authors the painting by applying pigment to canvas. In a found object, the authorship and the making are separated. Duchamp did not make the urinal. He authored the art object. The authorship is the

designation, the framing, the act of saying: this is worth attending to in the way you attend to art. And the market ratified the designation. The urinal acquired a price. The three criteria converged. The object arrived.

If a random plumber signs a urinal, nothing happens. This is not a contradiction. It is the definition working. The plumber is not operating as an artist. The plumber's signature carries no weight. The market does not look twice. And the circularity—an artist is someone whose designations create art objects, an art object is something created by an artist's designation—is not a flaw. It is the same productive circularity that operates in every self-referential category. What is money? The thing that functions as money. What functions as money? Money. The circularity is not empty. It is just how real categories work. You can tell from the inside whether something belongs.



Music is art. An album is a work of art. But an album is not an art object in the sense that matters here, because an album exists as a work that gets instantiated in copies. You buy a record, a CD, a digital file. You are not buying the thing itself. You are buying an instance

of a type. Nobody owns a particular album the way someone owns a particular painting.

But then a rap group decides to make a single copy. One copy. They place it in an ornate box. They sell it at auction. A pharmaceutical executive pays two million dollars for it and locks it in a vault. The music—the tracks, the performances—is the same as it would have been if pressed onto a million copies. But the single copy in the box is not an instance of a type. It is the type. It is the only one. It has an author. It is unique. And it has a market price. The three criteria converged and the music crossed over from being a work to being an art object.

And the crossing reveals something important. The objecthood was not in the music. The music was always there, always the same sounds. The objecthood was in the singularity—in the act of making it one, of refusing the reproducibility that is the default condition of recorded sound, of imposing the logic of the painting onto the logic of the album. The scarcity was artificial. But the object that emerged was real.

This is why the definition is narrow, and the narrowness is the point. Most of the things that matter most in human life are not art objects. Music is not. Love is not. Air is not. The art object is a very specific kind of

thing—a made thing, a singular thing, a priced thing—and it deserves its own narrow definition rather than being collapsed into everything else we happen to find beautiful or important.



A philosophy can be an object. A philosophical system has an author. It is unique—there is only one object-oriented ontology, one Critique of Pure Reason, one Being and Time. And it has a market price in the philosophical economy, measured not in dollars but in citations, in engagements, in the time people spend arguing with it.

Objectivism is not quoted on the philosophical marketplace. The phrase is borrowed from Baudrillard, who used it about psychoanalysis and got the context catastrophically wrong, but the phrase itself is precise. Ayn Rand took the surface of Aristotle—naive realism, the primacy of existence, A is A—without entering into genuine dialogue with the tradition. She copied the surface the way a forger copies a Vermeer. And the philosophical marketplace never assigned objectivism a price of its own. Philosophers do not engage with it. It circulates entirely outside the discipline. It has been

around for seventy years and the market keeps coming back empty. That tells you something. The detection instrument has had plenty of time to find whatever is there, and it has not found enough to price.

Harman's work, by contrast, is quoted. People cite it, argue with it, build on it, push back against it. It has a market price in the philosophical economy. And the reason is not that Harman is smarter—though he may be—but that he is doing the thing. He is operating as a philosopher the way Duchamp was operating as an artist. He is in genuine dialogue with Heidegger and Husserl and Whitehead and Leibniz, and the market can feel the depth, the withdrawal, the fact that you can keep reading and keep finding more.

And Baudrillard—the man whose phrase we are borrowing—is an interesting case, because he is a philosopher whose work is quoted even though some of his specific moves were terrible. His attack on psychoanalysis collapsed the Real with reality, which is, in Lacanian terms, almost the worst error you can make. But his actual philosophical contributions—the stuff about simulation, about seduction, about symbolic exchange—those trade. Those have a market price. He earned his authorship in those domains even while failing catastrophically in others. A philosopher

can produce things that are not philosophy, the way an artist can produce things that are not art objects. Picasso's grocery list is not an art object. Baudrillard's critique of Lacan is not philosophy. The authorship does not transfer automatically to everything the person does.



This move—taking ontic facts and treating them as ontologically significant—is not a corruption of Harman's project. It is his project. The entire point of object-oriented ontology is to collapse the distinction between ontology and ontics, to take what Heidegger said about Being and hand it to beings, to stop treating the philosophical question as something that happens at a different level from the everyday question.

Heidegger thought the great error of philosophy was confusing beings with Being, mistaking the particular thing for the general condition that makes things possible. He reserved the deepest attention for Being as such—the clearing, the conditions of possibility, the transcendental framework. Individual things were ontic—mere furniture, philosophically interesting only as illustrations of the ontological question.

Harman reverses this. He says the individual thing is where the action is. The brick is not a derivative case. The brick is where the ontological drama is happening. The brick withdraws. The brick has an interior that no relation can access. Being is not above or beneath the beings. Being is what the beings are doing, each one, individually, in the brickyard, without help from the clearing or the transcendental framework.

And if that is true—if the ontological drama is happening at the ontic level—then ontic criteria are not a demotion of the question. They are the question, wearing work clothes. The museum placard is not the antithesis of metaphysics. The museum placard is metaphysics.



Objects resist. That is the simplest thing you can say about them and it is the most important. The word itself contains the verb: to object, to push back, to refuse the role assigned. A painting resists interpretation. A company resists its new owner. A philosophy resists summary. A forgery resists being what it pretends to be and then, when exposed, resists being dismissed as nothing.

The man is still standing in front of the painting. The museum is closing. The guard has shifted his weight and is now openly checking the clock on the far wall. The light through the high windows has changed—later now, the angle lower—and the painting looks slightly different than it did twenty minutes ago, the yellowed varnish catching the last of the afternoon in a way that shifts the whole temperature of the surface toward something warmer, something more golden, something that was not there before and will not be there again tomorrow at the same hour because tomorrow's light will be different and the painting will absorb it differently and the man, if he comes back, will be different too, older by a day, carrying whatever the night brings, and the painting will accommodate all of this without changing at all, because that is what objects do. They stay. They remain. The relations shift around them—the light, the viewer, the price, the scholarship, the century—and the object persists through all of it, being what it is, being more than what it is, withdrawing.

He does not have it figured out. He is not going to have it figured out. He has been here for twenty minutes and he could be here for twenty years and the painting would still have something he had not reached, some quality that retreated as he advanced, some depth

below the depth below the depth. This is not a failure of his attention. This is the painting succeeding. This is what a painting is for: to be more than you can get at, to reward your looking without completing it, to resist.

He will come back. Maybe next Tuesday. Maybe next month. He will stand here again, at the same distance, looking at the same surface, and the looking will not be the same, because he will not be the same, but the painting will be the painting. The woman pouring milk. The light from the upper left. The bread on the table. Something is there. Something is always there. He cannot say what it is and he does not need to.

He puts his hands in his pockets. He looks one more time. He turns toward the exit. The guard exhales. The room empties.

The painting stays.

