

Of dappled things and stipple upon trout

Back in the 1950's I picked up a book for recreational reading compiled by Alfred Hitchcock. In it were stories he thought scary. And I must say, if you think *watching* a horror film is scary, just try *reading* one and expect to go to sleep afterwards. I remember turning out my light after a couple of short stories in Hitchcock's anthology and lying alert to every sound in the room. The images I retained literally *haunted* my imagination. I can't capture its scariness in an essay but the gist of one story went like this: an old aunt welcomed her nephew to dwell at her house while he attended college or began a job (I can't remember which). At some point she decided to take up painting – as an amateur. So every day, as he left for his occupation, she put up her easel, got out her pallet, oils and brushes and chose a subject to paint.

First it was an apple on the table. Concentrating hard, she drew its outline, focused on its details . . . kept at it for a few days – and then became impatient. The apple was beginning to lose its freshness, color . . . it was decaying. So she scrapped that effort and chose a second apple, which she enclosed in wax to keep it looking fresh. This pleased her. Then she wanted to do a tree in her front yard. She sat out doors working at its branches, leaves – but the tree wouldn't hold still due to the wind and even the play of shadows and sunlight upon its branches. The next day her nephew came home to find the tree had been cut down and placed upright in the living room where it made nary a move – and there was its picture on her canvas, leaves hanging limp but perfectly drawn. She then decided it would be a real challenge to paint her dog. After one day's effort, you guessed it! The nephew came home next day as the dog arrived from the taxidermist – just right for painting in record time. Once she had finished painting Rover she then turned to her nephew and asked if he would pose for her. He left town the next day.

I can actually identify with that story because around that time I was residing at a friend's summer cottage on Chesapeake Bay and decided to paint. The object was a vase, pretty but probably off the shelf of Woolworth's. I bought the watercolors, brushes, set up a blank pad and went to work. I was scrupulous about capturing everything visible, even minor fracture lines, flower images exactly, everything three-dimensionally correct, until there on my easel appeared the vase – a perfect copy. I had proved I could paint.

Actually all I proved was that I could copy not paint. To paint you don't stare at a thing from just the outside. You fall in love with what you're looking at in a way that makes the vase itself awaken, cease to be an object, reveal its often hidden charm, and oddly enough reveal to you your own hidden charm as if the vase were painting you. I don't know how to express that but the world out there is not passively waiting for you to copy it; it's there to tell you (as if it were the very voice of God) that *you* (odd though you may feel) are yourself a unique portrait of God – the greatest artist of all. Something the Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins – who painted in words – was aware of when he wrote:

*Glory be to God for dappled things - / For skies of couple-color as a brinded cow; / For rose-
moles all in stipple upon trout that swim; / . . . finches wings; / Landscape plotted . . . – fold,
fallow, and plough; . . . // . . . things counter, original, spare, strange; / Whatever is fickle,
freckled (who knows how?) / With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim; / He fathers-forth whose
beauty is past change: // Praise him.*