

Terse Graffito

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The obvious: the mouth and eyes. Edvard Munch howling in a wax beard? What, then? Simply a chance encounter, as in an ordinary snapshot, the photo taken without thinking, the right assumed, the cost unmeasured? Here's this already-frozen thing (lifted from its natural repose and placed), not fleeting at all. Vegetable-cum-totem. The unprepossessing object and the trite observation (face it). A reflection of our vanity to see in this wounded wax our image?

Let me tell you the story then: It was a simple dinner, no special occasion, nothing romantic; ordinary wine, the deep and familiar pleasure of a shared life, perhaps. Then, in the extinguishing of the candle, an errant bit of beeswax stiffening as it fell to the linen tablecloth, then cooling there in the afterglow of the warmth of yet another in a thousand dinners.

What follows? Accident or art, the mouth? And who noticed first? Who said: "Look, dear, a face!" Was it that careless? Or was it posed, like Cartier-Bresson was wont to do, the moment staged, the dull colour, the shape of the wax chosen, the mouth formed with an eraser on the head of a pencil (that word "head" again)? Do we care? A bit of wax, a few depressions, a title, what could be more straightforward?

Yet, now, having asked too many questions, I mourn. I am the champion of this personified blob. Already defeated by the assumption of a photo-happy age that nothing is sacred, that all must and shall be chronicled, that we are bound to complete God's work, that all shall be named in our image.

Too much, this last? Shall I quit now? (I don't remember where I was.) Ah, nature! Ah, the timeless warp of memory! Ah, the simple beauty of the lost and nameless! Ah, the shape of the mouth in awe or mortification! Scream, poor sad friend, scream for all the gloriously unimportant and ephemeral made subject to our vanity, made to carry meaning, the eternal trudge of the tagged, the branded, HEAD, the terse graffito. No solemnity, no apology.