

*Crying from chromatic waves*

HANDKERCHIEF, n. A small square of silk or linen, used in various ignoble offices about the face and especially serviceable at funerals to conceal the lack of tears.

—Ambrose Bierce, *Devil's Dictionary*

“If I wasn’t real,” Alice said—half-laughing through her tears, it all seemed so ridiculous—“I shouldn’t be able to cry.”

“I hope you don’t suppose those are real tears?” Tweedledum interrupted in a tone of great contempt.

“I know they’re talking nonsense,” Alice thought to her self: “and it’s foolish to cry about it.” So she brushed away her tears, and went on.

—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*

FRANZ WAS IN A FRENZY. It wasn’t at all the vacation he had expected. Here he was, finally arrived in Florence—the heart of the Renaissance, the very center point of Western culture—and he was at loose ends. He had planned his trip very carefully. He was a Bavarian bureaucrat like his father, and his father had always told him Bavarians are especially adept at organization. Franz had made himself a detailed itinerary, calculating each leg of the journey. He estimated the time it would take to get from his house to the train station, and then from the train station to his hotel in Florence. He mapped out each day, factoring in the time required to get to each day’s attraction, even estimating how long he would stand in line for tickets. But it hadn’t worked, and already he had fallen behind.

All because of that painting.

Yesterday, he had arrived at the Uffizi gallery punctually at 10:30 and gotten in fifteen minutes later, exactly as he had expected. He had begun his tour by going straight to the rooms with the earliest paintings. That way he could finish with the sixteenth century by lunch, and do the entire museum by closing time. Today he was supposed to be off on the other side of town, touring the Pitti Palace and the gardens. But here he was again, back in the Uffizi, a full day late.

On top of it all he didn't feel good. He was overexcited, his heart was pumping too fast. His head felt hot. When he had first seen the painting, about eleven-thirty yesterday morning, it hadn't registered. He had stopped for a minute and admired the figure's easy pose and the lovely wide-rimmed wine glass with its concentric ripples (see [colorplate 2](#)). A half hour later he was back, to see it again. And then again, several more times—he just couldn't keep to his schedule. Each time he looked into the figure's eyes—deep brown, nearly black—he felt more unsettled, and less sure about his own behavior. In the end he skipped lunch entirely, and stayed looking at the painting until ten minutes before closing, when the guard ushered him out.

That evening, at dinner, he had taken an outside table in the Piazza della Signoria, within sight of the museum. That was when the eyes came back to him. Deep, glassy eyes, with an astonishing confidence. The full lips, like a woman's, pouting just a little. One more time, he had thought: I'll see the painting tomorrow morning, on my way to the Pitti, and that will be an end to it.

Early in the morning he was upstairs in the Uffizi, ready for his last look. He rounded a corner and saw the picture. He slowed, and walked gingerly up to it until he stood just in front of the cordon, so that the dark, beautiful eyes were looking squarely into his.

*A visit to the hospital.* What a strange day! Who would have guessed such a thing could happen. But here he was, drenched in sweat, weak as a kitten, trying to explain to a doctor what had happened next.

"Do you have any family history of heart trouble?" she asked, turning to a new page in her notebook.

"No," he said, "my father is still healthy, even though he is over eighty years old."

"And what profession do you practice?" she asked, without looking up. She was a middle-aged woman, with sharp features and a soft voice.

"I am an official, a bureaucrat. As my father was, before he retired. We have lived in the same region of Bavaria for three generations."

"And you have never had an experience like this before?"

He looked at her. Her face was kind but impassive. He felt he should try again to convince her, to explain that what happened to him was really extraordinary, unprecedented.

"I didn't notice anything much the first few times," he said. "But I kept coming back, and each time I saw it I got more agitated. Twice I left just as soon as I saw it. I wandered up and down the long hall. I tried to get my mind off it, to look at the other things—the older pictures—"

"But you couldn't."

"Yes, I couldn't." He looked up and saw he had gotten her attention. "And then I started noticing the brightness of it, the shine. I suppose at that point I must have been straining my heart, because I felt very tired, as if I were going to faint. It affected my eyes, because I saw colors, waves of colors, coming toward me out of the painting. That's when I began to feel dizzy. When I looked, I

thought I could somehow see *beyond* the painting, that there was something *behind* it. I couldn't focus properly, my eyes were full of tears."

"And did the colors stop when you sat down?"

"I couldn't stay sitting, I kept walking back and forth. I tried to close my eyes, like you do when you are a child and you want an imaginary monster to go away. I thought when I opened my eyes I would see just the painting, like everyone else saw it. I saw many people just walk by without giving it a second's notice. So I tried closing my eyes for a minute. It didn't work. After that, everything was worse."

He was reliving it now, seeing it happen all over again. "The colors were brighter, shining, scintillating, and they were strange colors, colors that I think have never been seen before, colors that are not part of the spectrum. I felt as if I were going blind. Chromatic waves were coming at me from behind the picture. My eyes just gave out."

"That is when you left."

"I was so tired, I felt as if I were going to faint. My head and my heart were on fire. I came out into the sunlight, and I realized I should check myself into the hospital, that I must be sick."

"You're exhausted," she said, putting down her pencil, "and you may have a virus. If you want, we can do some tests to see for certain."

Franz was bone-tired. If he could just go back to his hotel, he thought, things would be better.

"Perhaps rest and a little quiet will do you good. But just in case, I recommend you don't do much more touring on this visit. Perhaps you can return to Germany a few days early. And above all, I recommend you do not visit the Uffizi again."

Yes, he thought, that is exactly right. I need to go home. Back to familiar surroundings. Back to the old routine, where there is no rushing from place to place. Certainly away from that painting, with its horrible flaccid brown eyes.

*The Stendhal syndrome.* That is Franz's story of his chromatic waves, which I have adapted from an account written by the psychiatrist who interviewed him. His experience has some unique features (especially colors "never seen before"), but in outline it is typical of hundreds of other stories told by tourists whose long-awaited vacations became emotional disasters.

Tourists first started having experiences like Franz's around the second decade of the nineteenth century. They cried, they trembled, they fainted, they ranted, they ran fevers and got hallucinations. The most famous of the hysterics was the novelist Stendhal, who suffered from a kind of nervous exhaustion during his visit to Florence in January 1817: "I was in a sort of ecstasy," he confesses. "I had arrived at that emotional point where one meets the celestial sensations given by the fine arts and by passionate sentiments. I had heart palpitations leaving Santa Croce—what they call 'nerves' in Berlin—and the life was nearly drained out of me." It's clear

that Stendhal responded very emotionally to Italian art, but it's hard to know exactly what happened. Was he reacting to Santa Croce, or to his own over-heated imagination? It almost sounds as if he could have used the same words to describe one of his encounters with a beautiful young woman. The "passionate sentiments" of fine art are perilously close to the passions and sentiments he felt when he was in love: if a girl caught his eye, she could make him tremble and faint just as much as Santa Croce did. (His book *On Love* has a lot of the same rhetoric as his feverish letters from Italy.) Perhaps Stendhal didn't see any essential difference between women and buildings, or perhaps Florence was just another woman in his book. From what he says in this letter and elsewhere, it looks like Italian art put him on edge, sexually. Whatever he felt, his ecstasy, his palpitations, and his swoon were repeated many times by later visitors. His letter has become a classic in the history of tourist hysteria.

The tide of unbalanced tourists swelled in the 1850s and 1860s, when increasing numbers of Americans visited Europe with their guidebooks in hand, trembling in anticipation of Great Experiences. The charismatic preacher Henry Ward Beecher contracted an appropriately religious fever at the Palace de Luxembourg: he underwent an "instant conversion, if the expression be not irreverent," and found himself "absolutely intoxicated... so much affected that I could not control my nerves." He began shaking, laughing, and weeping, and became "almost hysterical, and that in spite of my shame and resolute endeavor to behave better." Nine years later, the critic James Jackson Jarves wrote about a time he had wandered in the Louvre, "oppressed, confused, uncertain, and feverish," making what he calls, with a certain lack of poise, "a convulsive effort to maintain equilibrium."

If anything, there are more such people now. Among the letters I have received, about 10 percent are stories of attacks people suffered during their European vacations. One woman wrote me about her son's astonishment when he saw Tintoretto's paintings in the Scuola di San Rocco in Venice. He was sobbing, she tells me, saying over and over, "Why didn't someone tell me about this? Why didn't someone tell me about this?" She knew his reaction wasn't unique, and as evidence she cites a passage from James Morris's book *The World of Venice*: "No collection of sacred pictures is more overwhelming of impact than the immense series of Tintoretto's in the Scuola di San Rocco...often dark, often grandiose, often incomprehensible, but culminating in the huge masterpiece of the *Crucifixion*, which Velázquez humbly copied, and before which, to this day, you may still see strong men moved to tears."

Tintoretto has played a large part in the history of hysterical tourism; his paintings have gotten the better of many people, including the nineteenth-century art critic John Ruskin. There are also histories of "convulsive" reactions to Michelangelo, Raphael, and Leonardo, and to the great public

spaces in Venice, Florence, Rome, Paris, and Jerusalem—a flood of overwrought tears, from the early nineteenth century up to the present.

Currently, the center of hysterical tourism is the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova in Florence. Each summer during the tourist season, it admits dozens of patients suffering from ailments brought on by the local art. In 1989 Graziella Magherini, head of the department of psychiatry, invented the name “Stendhal syndrome” to cover her patients’ miscellaneous complaints. She wrote a book on the subject, describing the syndrome and proposing it as a medical affliction. (My story of Franz is adapted from her book.)

For most patients, Magherini reports, the syndrome is not a serious illness. It is less like a mental breakdown than a bout of the flu: it may not be pleasant, but it goes away of its own accord. A few of Magherini’s patients weep; most sweat, swoon, suffer from vertigo, or vomit. She prescribes tranquilizers and advises bed rest, and she reports that most people recover as soon as they have spent some time away from the artworks.

In a few cases, the Stendhal syndrome is more serious. Some report delusional symptoms; one felt persecuted, and claimed the artworks were following him around. A patient named Brigitte suffered from prostration, tachycardia, depression, and vertigo. She had been overwhelmed by the “violent sensuality” of Fra Angelico’s colors. Kamil, a young man from Czechoslovakia, collapsed when he saw Masaccio’s paintings in the Brancacci Chapel. “I couldn’t move,” he told Magherini. “I was stretched out on the ground, and I felt as if I were leaving my body...as if I were leaking out of myself like a liquid.”

Magherini’s book, *The Stendhal Syndrome*, got wide media coverage both in Italy and America. Her critics alleged that she was describing a number of unrelated ailments and lumping them together under a dubious name. Some of her patients, it was said, were just lightheaded from jet lag or too little sleep, while others had longstanding mental problems. A few were clearly incipiently psychotic. When the media interest died down, the consensus was that there is no Stendhal syndrome, only a grab bag of complaints, from heat exhaustion to schizophrenia.

I wouldn’t disagree with that diagnosis, but the Stendhal syndrome is still a good name for a historical phenomenon that covers the period from 1817, when Stendhal thought he was having heart palpitations, to the present. Even if it is problematic as a medical phenomenon, it makes good sense as history. Its beginnings coincide well with the rise of bourgeois tourism. In the opening decades of the nineteenth century, people were writing the first guidebooks, called *ciceroni*, for neophyte tourists. By the last third of the century, the guidebooks had become more sophisticated, even telling people how and what to feel for an authentic experience of the old masters.

Early nineteenth-century *ciceroni* are the precursors of yesterday's Baedekers, and today's *Blue Guides* and *Fodor's*. Even *Let's Go!* and the *Rough Guides*, which affect such an air of no-nonsense traveling, help put people in the same places, in front of the same masterpieces. Guidebooks of all generations put Italian art on such a pedestal that people's hopes can rise to fever pitch before they have even crossed the Atlantic or the Alps.

The same decades—the 1810s and 1820s—saw the flowering of Romanticism, where individual sensibility was valued above all else. Romantic writers from Schelling to Keats, from the prince de Ligne to Coleridge, promoted intense personal experiences over systematic knowledge, and propelled the cult of the artist-genius to medically inadvisable heights. In those days Romantic tourism could easily endanger a person's equilibrium. Today the Stendhal syndrome continues as a cultural fossil, sustained by an educational system that instills high expectations of high culture. Art has moved on—all the way to post-postmodernism, where high culture is mingled with low, and cynicism and detachment rule the day—but the tourist industry sticks to the old Romantic war-horses, treating people to a heady mixture of genius worship and expectations as inflated as they are unfocused. No wonder Magherini's wards are still full.

*Was Franz seeing things?* In the debate around *The Stendhal Syndrome*, both sides agreed that what happened to Magherini's patients didn't have much to do with the artworks they saw. Magherini treats her patients in proper medical fashion, by attending to their physical and mental complaints. The artworks aren't her concern, any more than a doctor might care about the cold evening that brought on a cold and flu. "Different people have strong reactions to the same work of art," Magherini said in an interview for *Art News*, "but the cases we have seen have more to do with the history and personal experience of the patient than with the object." In her account, the patients suffered because of jet lag, strange Italian food, or the trials of translating a new language, and not because of the works themselves. If they hadn't expected so much, and pushed themselves so hard, they might have had the calmness and presence of mind to attend to the artworks themselves. Then whatever reactions they felt would have been prompted by the art and not by their personal weaknesses.

Magherini and her critics agree on this general principle: it's the people's fault, and the masterpieces they saw aren't really relevant. Surely, though, that is a matter of emphasis. The tourists succumbed in Florence, while looking at particular artworks. They didn't faint at the airport, or in the taxis on the way to the museum. Further, the artworks that provoked their trauma were the most famous ones, not the minor works that fill the wall between masterpieces. Could the tourists' thoughts really have been entirely their own?

Take Franz, for instance. Magherini says he had problems with Caravaggio's *Young Bacchus* because he was a latent homosexual. She points out his delirium sounds distinctly sexual: his head and his heart were "on fire," he was beside himself with his attraction to the painting. He was unmarried, she says, and had difficulty realizing what he really desired. When he encountered the painting, he read his own life history into it and precipitated an identity crisis.

Not knowing Franz, I can't tell if this is a fair diagnosis. But even if it is, the painting is already a showpiece of homosexual desire. Franz's delirium is certainly beyond the pale, yet the tenor of his reaction is well in line with what Caravaggio intended. The painting was definitely meant to stir up a kind of passion in certain viewers: for people who knew how to read it, the painting was about homosexuality. Given the officially homophobic atmosphere of late-sixteenth-century Italy, Caravaggio would have known that his painting might also stir up a strong revulsion. Even so, he painted a half dozen such pictures, in which young boys look seductively out at their viewers. Some explicitly invite sodomy, and others play with suggestive props. (Several of his boys, as we would say today, are clearly underage.) Caravaggio was partly a *provocateur*, hoping for the best; and partly a purveyor, working for a specialized market. There is historical proof of the painting's wildness: it appears that the *Young Bacchus* was too much for its first owners, and they put it in storage, where it languished forgotten for three centuries until it was rediscovered in 1913. (Recently scholars have denied Caravaggio dealt with homosexual themes, and there has been an attempt to reinterpret the paintings as evidence of Counter-Reformation piety. There are certainly many pictures that have nothing to do with the ones I'm describing: but the early works, and especially the *Young Bacchus*, were seen as overtly pagan at best, and as openly sodomitic at worst.)

The clues are as apparent today as they were at the end of the sixteenth century. The boy holds the sash of his fake-antique robe (probably a bedsheet), as if to suggest he might just slip out of it. His eyelashes are darkened, his eyebrows plucked, his lips full. His flesh is as pink and soft as a boy's can possibly be. The fruit he is eating is overripe—one peach already has a spot of mold. The picture smolders with forbidden sex; even the wine trembles as he holds it out. One art historian noticed the wine in the carafe isn't level, and there are bubbles around the rim. Perhaps this "Bacchus" has just put it down, and it is still sloshing back and forth. The earliest viewers would also have realized he is an accurate self-portrait of the artist, so the painting is essentially a come-on in antique disguise.

Clearly, Franz's delirium was a direct response to the central facts of the picture, as much as a trauma brought on by his repressed German upbringing. Historians prefer to be a bit more circumspect than Franz was, but it's hard to find a historical description that doesn't make reference to

the painting's disconcerting sexuality. One German art historian—a bit repressed himself—says the picture shows a “curious spiritual wantonness.” Others have called it disturbing, perverse, intimate, airless, and androgynous. Not everyone would want to say it's perverse, exactly; but it is unarguably perverse by the standards of Caravaggio's time. The *Young Bacchus* is willfully extravagant and overt. It has been pointed out, for instance, that the picture is a male version of a popular subject, in which a half-undressed woman offers her viewers wine and fruit. As such Caravaggio's “male version” couldn't fail to be aggressive and surprising, no matter what its first viewers thought about what we now call homosexuality. The painting's subject has never been a secret, and Franz's reaction was simply more intense than most. He was reacting to this particular painting: there are plenty of other paintings in the Uffizi with homosexual undertones, but this is one of the most powerful.

Each of Magherini's diagnoses can be reinterpreted the same way. Brigitte, the woman who was overcome by Fra Angelico, explained that she was from northern Europe, where everything is less colorful. She found Florence “intensely sensual,” and contrasted it with the restrained “spiritual life” of the north. “I had a puritanical, Protestant education,” she told Magherini, “which left me unprepared.” Like Franz, Brigitte felt a stronger version of something many people feel. Until this century, northern European art was markedly different from the art of Italy, and despite all the sensual experiments of the Baroque and rococo, the Italian Renaissance remained the example of moral and artistic freedom. Most people wouldn't say Fra Angelico is violently sensual, but he *is* sensual, and so was his place and time.

Even Kamil, the young man who melted in the Brancacci Chapel, was feeling an intense version of a common reaction. Such viewers are literally floored—thrown to the ground by paintings. (I'll have more to say about them later in the book.) Masaccio's frescoes are still presented as one of the seminal moments of Renaissance naturalism, and naturalism is still the *sine qua non* of Western art. The young Michelangelo studied in the Brancacci Chapel, diligently copying Masaccio's figures, and generations of art historians have put the Brancacci Chapel among the highest Renaissance achievements. It remains famous for its amazing realism: the feeling that the figures are standing, with us, in our space, breathing real air and walking on real ground. Again, historians would be more circumspect, and they would want to point out all the other things that happen in Masaccio's paintings that are specific to the early fifteenth century. But it's no wonder Kamil collapsed: the wonder is that more people don't.

It is not likely that the Stendhal syndrome will ever be listed in psychiatrists' manuals of mental disorders, but the phrase “Stendhal syndrome” got wide enough play in the media that it stands a chance of

becoming common in English usage. (There is already a “Jerusalem syndrome” for people who get religion by visiting Jerusalem.) Magherini’s book is valuable both as a contribution to the history of taste, and because it inadvertently demonstrates that even the most overexcited and unstable tourists, the ones most closely programmed by the tourist industry, are still feeling things that are incited by the works themselves. Or, to invert Magherini’s formula: their experiences have more to do with the history of the objects than with the history of the patients.

The funny thing about Magherini saying that Franz’s reaction has “more to do with the history and personal experience of the patient than with the object” is that it strips the artwork of its power just when its power is strongest. Franz’s bizarre hallucinations, the colors “never seen before,” and the chromatic waves shining out from behind the canvas, are way off the scale of normal responses. But they *are* responses, and they are responses to that particular painting. It is as if Magherini wanted people to have only moderate reactions to art, and not to get carried away. (She doesn’t exactly say that in *The Stendhal Syndrome*, but it seems that she would diagnose *any* strong reaction as an instance of the syndrome.) Where’s the room in that scheme for people who feel what everyone else does, but more strongly? Is it suddenly their fault that they are overwhelmed?

Caravaggio’s painting is about homosexuality. It is suggestive, and even lewd. Whether you’re homophobic or homophilic, the painting makes a sexual advance. And who doesn’t get a little dizzy when it comes to sex?

*The anti-Stendhal syndrome.* For every person who falls ill with the syndrome, there’s another who claims art has essentially no emotional effect. For every person who cries, there is another who claims not to feel anything at all. One person can’t stop gasping, and another can’t get his pulse going. The two are mirror opposites: they are both off the scale, in opposite directions.

A reporter who covered the Stendhal syndrome for the *New York Times* gave the nerveless affliction a name: the Mark Twain malaise. It was an apt choice, because Twain and Stendhal were themselves opposites, even down to their pen names: Stendhal took his in honor of the very serious connoisseur Johann Winckelmann, who had been born in the town of Stendal; Twain took his from a Mississippi River boatman’s call, meaning water two fathoms deep. Stendhal was enraptured by music, poetry, plays, and painting; Twain was a self-confessed ignoramus about art. In many ways they were dead opposites, but they shared at least one thing: they both made art pilgrimages to Italy. Stendhal’s trips were fervent and pious; Twain’s was a no-nonsense trip he almost didn’t make: if it hadn’t been for the flood of American tourists, I wonder if he would have even thought of it. The episode that prompted the *Times* reporter to coin the term “Mark

Twain malaise” happened when Twain visited “the mournful wreck of the most celebrated painting in the world”—Leonardo’s *Last Supper*.

“We don’t know any more about pictures than a kangaroo does about metaphysics,” Twain says happily, “but we decided to go anyway.” The painting was a big disappointment. “It is battered and scarred in every direction,” he complains, “and stained and discolored by time, and Napoleon’s horses kicked the legs off most of the disciples when they were stabled there more than half a century ago. So, what is left of the once miraculous picture? Simon looks seedy; John looks sick, and half the other blurred and damaged apostles have a general expression of discouragement about them. To us, the great uncultivated, it is the last thing in the world to call a picture. Brown said it looked like an old fire-board.”

At first Twain pretends not to be able to see anything but stains and scars, and then he looks a bit closer and says he recognizes the Lord’s Supper. It’s not much of a revelation, he says, and he declares he has “got enough” of the old masters; he has “shook” them. “You wander through a mile of picture galleries,” he concludes, “and stare stupidly at ghastly old nightmares done in lampblack and lightning, and listen to the ecstatic encomiums of the guides, and try to get up some enthusiasm, but it won’t come—you merely feel a gentle thrill when the grand names of the old kings of art fall upon your ears— nothing more.”

Over and over, he claims he tries to feel something, and gets nothing more than a little laugh and a “gentle thrill.” His letter, written in 1867 and later adapted for *Innocents Abroad*, has been quoted with admiration from his time down to the column in the *Times*. The reporter dubs this show of studied indifference a malaise, and proposes it as the American antidote to the Stendhal syndrome. Twain would have loved it: if you’re suffering an attack of the syndrome, take two tablets of the malaise and you’ll feel better right away. A dose of American pragmatism will cure any cultural virus you might pick up in Europe.

Now I don’t believe Twain for a minute. He compares himself to a kangaroo, and numbers himself among the great uncultivated, but he makes the pilgrimage anyway. He looks, and he sees *absolutely nothing*. Oh yes, he says, now I see it, there’s a painting there: the whole thing is a ruse. It sounds as if he’s terribly anxious not to feel anything. And the ruse doesn’t quite work, because there are definitely legs there, and parts of apostles. So he thinks, Better make another joke! He keeps insisting the painting is ruined—it’s scarred, he says, a mournful wreck, battered, blurred and damaged, stained, discolored, just another ghastly old nightmare. In the end, he protests too much. He really does have a malaise: he is so rigidly determined not to feel anything, so anxious to fight free of the European cult of culture, that he can’t see anything. He blinds himself with Yankee bravado.

Like the Stendhal syndrome, the Mark Twain malaise isn't a proper medical discovery, but it also exists as a historical phenomenon. I have gotten some delightful letters from people who have "suffered" from it. One woman wrote that she had seen a film of Michelangelo's work while at Cornell University in the 1950s. She was overcome, and she cried, on and off, through the whole film. "Swore I'd return to Florence after graduation," she says, and eventually she did. It was a terrible experience. "I nearly wept for despair. The statues were not as great as the *photographs* of them!" She wonders if she would have cried over Michelangelo's works if she had seen them for the first time in Italy, and she comes close to saying that Michelangelo might need a good cinematographer to bring his audience to tears. If I were diagnosing patients, I would say she had a mild case of the malaise. She isn't quite as cynical about art as Twain was, but she is not about to fall for one of the "old kings of art."

The Stendhal syndrome and the Mark Twain malaise are two sides of a single coin. For each tourist who is looking for a revelation, there is another who is hardened against anything disorienting. The one is soft; the other jaded. The one wants to feel everything; the other insists on feeling nothing. Stendhal's tourists throw their arms wide and are overcome. Twain's put on dark glasses and sneer. Yet they both look, and they both react to the works, and not just to their own frayed emotions.

Let's say they are two extreme cases of ordinary viewing. Most of us look at paintings and feel a little something as the images sink in. Magherini's patients are nearly drowned by tidal waves of emotion. People who suffer from the malaise know there's something to be felt, but they won't let themselves. It is a matter of degree, not of kind. Who is to say that Magherini's patients didn't feel *better* as well as more, and that they didn't get *more* from the works than we do?

The moral I take from the histories of the syndrome and the malaise is that even outlandish experiences in front of paintings need to be taken seriously, because they are part of the spectrum of human response. I wouldn't feel comfortable if I were on a trip with Franz, Brigitte, or Kamil, but I don't see any reason why people should be in full control of themselves when they look at artworks.

There is no reason looking should be easy, because pictures are not just decoration. They are peculiar objects that pull at us, tugging us a little out of the world. A picture will leave me unmoved if I don't take time with it, but if I stop, and let myself get a little lost, there's no telling what might happen. Caravaggio put Franz into a sexual frenzy. Fra Angelico, the sweetest of the pious Florentines, made Brigitte dizzy and gave her an irregular heartbeat. Masaccio melted Kamil into a helpless puddle. Their experiences must have been embarrassing, but they are part of the risk of really looking. Who among us (besides Mark Twain) is so stable that we can say no painting could move us?

And who among us is so superficial that we don't *want* art to affect us? What exactly would paintings be, if they didn't have the power to hit us where we live? The experience of looking can be, should be, hard to manage.

Another of my letters is from Rob Klinkenberg, an editor and translator who works in Amsterdam. He cried once looking at Anselm Kiefer's gloomy landscapes, and he has an open mind and a good eye for the kind of attention paintings need. Kiefer is one thing, he says, but Rothko is another. He wouldn't cry in front of a Rothko—but once, he felt a nearly irrepressible urge to clap. It happened in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He was walking by a side room when he felt as if something had pushed him. He says it was like the feeling of sleeping on a train, when “you suddenly have to open your eyes because you feel someone is staring at you.” He looked into the recess, and saw a painting of Rothko's. “Its presence was so unmistakable,” he writes, that “I nearly wanted to step forward and warm my hands on it. That was when I lifted up my hands in an involuntary gesture, because I wanted to applaud. But I immediately felt ridiculous, and refrained. The sound of two hands clapping does not go well with paintings.”

Now *that's* crazy, clapping for a painting—or is it? The history of the Stendhal syndrome shows that tears aren't the only litmus test of a heartfelt encounter. Our thoughts and feelings are too wayward for that. Rob isn't sure about clapping, and neither am I. (It would certainly attract the attention of the guards.) But that feeling of sleeping, and knowing you're being stared at, that feeling of being tapped on the shoulder, being pushed from behind—those are sure signs that something unusual is happening.

The syndrome and the malaise are like the two tail ends of the bell curve of human response. On the far left are Magherini's wild patients. (Rob is in there somewhere, too.) On the far right are the stolid people who suffer from the malaise. They're the cold fish. Some are perverse, like Twain, and others are just cynical or so hardbitten by postmodern irony that they can't let themselves feel much of anything. The bell curve runs from hot to cold: from the heat of impulsive crying or clapping, to the frigid decorum of the silent museumgoer. Both tail ends are interesting in their own right.

Sadly, most of us huddle under the middle part of the curve, where we feel about the same amount: not too much, not too little, and pretty much what everyone else feels. We're not quite sure how to behave, so we look around to see how other people see. Those other people are mostly silent. They whisper politely, they smile, they make gentle decorous gestures. Naturally we look askance at people like Franz.