weighs Floris Jespers in the balance and finds his work too light: *'he sought Modernism, but the Modernism he found was only too often not his own.'*

JEF LAMBRECHT
Translated by André Lefevere.

Michael Palmer, *From Ensor to Magritte: Belgian Art 1880-1940.* Brussels: Editions Racine, 1994; 230 pp. ISBN 2-87386-025-1.

What I Like about Vermeer

The phenomenally high artistic quality of Vermeer's paintings has been an accepted truth ever since Théophile Thoré's 'rediscovery' of Vermeer in the mid-nineteenth century. And judging by Goethe's laconic annotation in his copy of a guide to the Dresden Gallery *('No. 229: A young courtesan with a young man – Vermeer. Good.')*, this quality had been obvious to some viewers long before Thoré's masterly definition of Vermeer's oeuvre as different from all others.

Jean Cocteau's reaction to Vermeer's *Procuress* may serve as an example of a very personal response, a response, moreover, that is not based so much on issues of taste as on an artist's extraordinary encounter with art, a kind of instant recognition, articulated here in Cocteau's discussion with Louis Aragon (1956): *'At the sight of this astonishing painting by Vermeer one stands as if confronted by a postcard sent by someone who has died from a better world, or sent into the world of the waking from out of the abyss of sleep. Here something incredible is happening.'*

Asked to write an essay on why I like Vermeer, I cannot answer the question without first putting it in a biographical and, in this sense only, a historical perspective. Once upon a time I was an art pilgrim – by bicycle: from Bonn to Delft, The Hague and Amsterdam, to see the beautiful Vermeers. I was with a friend and this meant that equal amounts of time were spent in museums and in second-hand record stores in search of rare performances of Jazz and Blues. This dual pursuit of the rare and the beautiful framed the wish of writing, some day, something meaningful about Vermeer. Years later I had become an art historian – now travelling by plane and by train: to Berlin, Dresden, Braunschweig, Frankfurt, London, Vienna, Boston, New York and Washington, to see the beautiful but difficult Vermeers; and to other places, as different as Wolfenbüttel and San Antonio, to speak about Vermeer and the complex questions of interpretation his art raises.

More recently, however, I have begun to read and listen and look at how other, non-academic beholders respond to Vermeer, particularly artists. Liking Vermeer now also means trying to understand how and why, outside of sophisticated academic discourses, Vermeer's paintings continue to be so powerful. Why do they challenge the individual, as if they were contemporary works of art, works in which, *now, 'something incredible is happening'?* What follows here is a selection of such artistic responses and reflections on these. The different voices convey something about the actuality of Vermeer, and I will let them speak here for themselves and to each other. My selection begins with Marcel Proust and the famous interpretation of Vermeer's *View of Delft* by the novelist Bergotte, a character in *Remembrance of Things Past* (A la recherche du temps perdu): *'At last he came to the Vermeer which he remembered as more striking, more different from anything else he knew, but in which, thanks to the critic's article, he noticed for the first time some small figures in blue, that the bank was pink, and, finally, the precious substance of the tiny patch of yellow wall. His dizziness increased; he fixed his gaze, like a child upon a yellow butterfly that it wants to catch, on the precious little patch of wall. "That's how I ought to have written," he said. "My last books are too dry, I ought to have gone over them with a few layers of colour, made my language precious in itself, like this little patch of yellow wall." Meanwhile he was not unconscious of the gravity of his condition. In a celestial pair of scales there appeared to him, weighing down one of the pans, his own life, while the other contained the little patch of wall so beautifully painted in yellow. He felt that he had rashly sacrificed the former for the latter. "All the same," he said to himself, "I shouldn't like to be the headline news of this exhibition for the evening papers."'*

Contrary to Bergotte's wish, his death and final insight into Vermeer's true art become famous. The filmmaker Jon Jost responds to both in his film of 1991: *'One other item: the French text referred to in "All the Vermeers in New York" is a passage from Proust's "Remembrance of Things Past". In it, an old man goes to visit an exhibit of Vermeer's paintings, seeking to see a little brushstroke fleck of yellow paint, as he thinks he remembers it, on a wall in one of the paintings. While there he has a gastrointestinal attack and sits down to recover. He then keels over dead. In "All the Vermeers", half this passage is read in French ...; the final part is the voiceover, in English, at the very end of the film, in which the striving of the artist to find a perfection is cast in doubt, as the voice notes that we scarcely know a thing about the painter, except for his name, "Vermeer".'*

Proust's scene of an existential encounter with Vermeer appears to be the foil of this gallery review of William Wilson's work, in 1992: *'In "Gathering: After Vermeer" (1991), Wilson takes as his subject one of Vermeer's paintings of women reading or writing letters. (...) Behind the seated woman hangs a body swaddled in a shroud, bound with ropes, and covered with monarch butterflies. (...) Wilson pumps male subjectivity back into the painting. Enunciating the heretofore secret content of Vermeer's serene and mysterious letter writer, he transforms her into a cunning murderess, evoking a mental state verging on male hysteria.'*

Exactly how Vermeer's compositions and painting techniques suggest such existential experiences is a question that has occupied earlier modern artists as

well. Here is Walter Richard Sickert's 'advice to young artists' (*The Daily Telegraph*, 4 October 1932): *'I have made a special study of Vermeer under, in the beginning, my father's influence, for just seventy years, in England, Holland, France and Germany, and elsewhere, and I came to the following conclusion: That Vermeer, like Canaletto, worked on the basis of the camera (my friend Clara Montalba told me she had seen "camera lucida" drawings of Canaletto). No models were ever so still as Vermeer's. The very curtains, and even the musical instruments, are asleep. The clearcut divisions between the mathematical ranges of tones are inconsistent with painting from what is called nature ...'*

Finally, the Proustian notion of a demanding dialogue between artists across time takes a very concrete shape in the work of George Deem, who wrote when working on one of his Vermeers, *Home* of 1977: *'"Home", the picture I used to think of as "The House of Vermeer", is coming together again. There are times when a painting cannot tell me anything. "The House of Vermeer" had been so silent I decided it was not here and I began to tell it what to do, and now it is telling me what should be done: "Blue top and Red bottom".* TODAY.'

These encounters with Vermeer, I believe, suggest that his art is at once quite specific and general; that it is historical and yet transcends history, speaking across centuries and renewing its presence and actuality in modern as well as postmodern times. This appears to mean less 'to invent' something entirely new and original than to search for one's (artistic) identity, to find one's specific way of transforming the familiar world into something 'incredible', 'hallucinatory', 'mysterious', 'extraordinary', etc. This is true as much for the moderns, like Proust and Sickert, as for the postmoderns, like Wilson and Jost, who in their 'citations' and 'appropriations' – or, as one might say less respectfully, their 'knock-offs' – of Vermeer's paintings take up the challenge to determine themselves. This, then, is something I have come to like about Vermeer; and again no one has given it a more poignant expression than Proust, towards the end of his novel: *'Thanks to art, instead of seeing one world only, our own, we see that world multiply itself and we have at our disposal as many worlds as there are original artists, worlds more different one from the other than those which revolve in infinite space, worlds which, centuries after the extinction of the fire from which their light first emanated, whether it is called Rembrandt or Vermeer, send us still each one its special radiance.'*

CHRISTIANE HERTEL

The first monographic exhibition of Vermeer's work will be held at the National Gallery of Art (Washington DC) from 12 November to 11 February 1995. The same exhibition can be seen at the Mauritshuis (The Hague) from 1 March to 2 June 1996.

Johannes Vermeer, *The Little Street*, c.1658. Canvas, 54.3 x 44 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

George Deem, *Home*. 1977. Oil on canvas, 92 x 72 cm. Collection Gerarda De Orleans-Borbon, New York.