

Trinity College Cambridge

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Picturing the Christian Life

Exodus 16: 11-18, John 6: 30-35

Chardin's *Jar of Olives*

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'Give us this day our daily bread'. I want this evening to talk about the idea of 'daily bread' in relation to Chardin's painting of 1760, *The Jar of Olives*. Since there seems, on the face of it, nothing complicated in that ancient plea for ordinary sustenance, so the painting – though it depicts greater abundance and diversity than is modestly hoped for in the Lord's Prayer – could be thought of simply as an illustration. Certainly, when Diderot saw it in the *Salon* of 1763, he took it literally: 'this porcelain vessel', he wrote, 'is made of real porcelain, these olives are really separated from the eye by the water in which they float; one has only to take these biscuits and eat them; cut open this Seville orange and squeeze it; take the glass of wine and drink it, pick up this fruit and peel it, cut this pie with a knife'. We too might well be struck by how vividly these ordinary things are assembled, as convincingly as in a snapshot, with the seeming evidence – in the knife casually projecting from beneath the pie, the wine half-drunk – of the real vestiges of one meal and the elements of

another: a view taken in the interval between one day and the next. It seems to face us directly with the familiar materials of a world of bodily appetites and their satisfaction – one in which one's needs are met (as *Exodus XVI* tells us) by 'in the evening flesh to eat, and in the morning bread to the full'.

Diderot sees the painting as in effect a concrete invitation, with the sense that to fill the spectator's eye as Chardin does is literally to feed him; and this corroborates the bodily need that is expressed and requited in the episode in the wilderness of our first reading. It seems to reverse the psalmist's injunction – we are not invited to 'taste and see' (*Psalms XXXIV*, 8), but pressed to agree that to see is to taste. However, we have listened to two readings. And in the second, the appetite to be satisfied is a different one: Jesus tells the people that 'the *true* bread of heaven' – in contrast with that given by Moses to the children of Israel – 'giveth life unto the world'. Between the two readings, bodily hunger is transformed into spiritual. The bread that, in a great Trinity poet's evocation of the manna, is 'congeal'd on Earth',

... does, dissolving, run

Into the Glories of th'Almighty Sun.

In 'On a Drop of Dew', Andrew Marvell's verse suggests how the heaviness of earthly appetite is lightened by the joyful recognition of a transcendent release. The 'Manna's sacred Dew' stands for the human soul, sojourning on earth but belonging, and destined to return, 'to God who gave it'. The manna of *Exodus* becomes poetically the gage of Christ's promise: 'I am

the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever’.

Now the infinite promise of these words may seem remote from the image of earthly bounty that Chardin’s painting offers us. Yet I will try to suggest something of how the painting, and the still life subject, transfigure common objects – and in doing so offer intimations of a reality that transcends the literal-seeming enticements that seduced Diderot. The painting, indeed, enacts the transformation that is performed between the two readings.

The French writer Francis Ponge, in his piece ‘On Still Life and Chardin’, speaks of ‘the drama ... that constitutes our encounter’ with the objects of still life – with ‘*their* way of occupying our space’. In doing so he suggests a more heightened engagement than the sense of *trompe l’oeil* conveyed by Diderot. Ponge’s understanding is one in which the presence of ordinary objects allows us to ‘begin to experience quotidian reality with religious feeling’. One aspect of this experience is indeed the opposite of Diderot’s: the painting is not made up of what the latter calls ‘the very substance of the objects’, but it presents those objects in a way wholly removed from ordinary experience. They are, indeed, objects of contemplation; drawing us to them by their familiarity, but requiring us to see them as though separated from the use we make of them. For the secret of ‘*quotidian* reality’ is that for the most part we take it for granted. What still life does is to bring us to *see* what we merely handle; what we reach for, pull apart, cut into, swallow and digest; whose identity is absorbed almost entirely in the operation of our appetite. The subjects of

this scene are not accessible to our wish to take them into ourselves: though our habitual designs on them cannot be forgotten, they are suspended, and we are compelled to allow that world of daily necessity to stand by itself. We are therefore divested of our capacity for a practicable appetite, and faced with objects inaccessible to our intention: they are merely and absolutely present. Their being present without us, as though immaculately, in a scene from which we are excluded, endows them with a mysterious self-sufficiency. Appetite is here subsumed to the purely visual: to see this reality 'with religious feeling' is to defer to the things they 'really' are – a sense of identity that precedes our use and design. The objects that we thought we knew are converted by the painter into a spectacle that separates them both from that supposed knowledge and our desire.

There is a quality in Chardin's late still lives that seems to knit this mysterious otherness into the very construction of the painting. It is created by his idiosyncratic use of multiple glazes. For Diderot this quality was a 'vapour'; for his contemporary Garrigues de Froment a 'haze'; for the Goncourts a 'faint prismatic mist'; for Cézanne a 'dust of emotion'. We see it in *The Jar of Olives* in a seeming indeterminacy, an ambiguous occlusion, of form; a thickening of the air that is impossible to describe, in which the presence of the objects seems vivid and veiled at once. It realises for us the way that, left as they are, they escape us, facing us with the simultaneous familiarity and unfamiliarity of things we rarely 'see'. 'Come close', Diderot wrote, 'and everything becomes blurred, flattened, and disappears; stand back, and everything is recreated and restored'. Here he seems to qualify

his earlier literal-mindedness; for this points to the necessarily intermediate status of the painting, one in which its objects cannot belong to the world of ordinary experience. The glass vessels are particularly expressive: their obscurity and cryptic quality delude the eye; their combination of opacity and transparency ambiguates their surfaces. A touch of white on the shoulder of the jar, two vertical strokes on the glasses, create a sense of volume that is at the same time mysterious. The painter's touch makes the jar and its contents all interior, all surface, at once. In being so they both belong and cannot belong to the world of experience. Looking at what is both central and unregarded in a domestic interior, what is most banal yet most necessary, we are confirmed in our sense of inhabiting; yet we also find ourselves contemplating the transcendent strangeness with which these objects face us – in solidarity not with us but with themselves. This essential ambiguity may remind us of the manna of Marvell's poem, which seems destined for our use and yet cannot belong to us. What light might the painting now shed on a Christian understanding of 'daily bread'?

'In the morning bread to the full': the sense of an appetite requited could scarcely be more frankly stated. The Jewish blessing over bread, with which I myself have grown up, correspondingly addresses the Lord 'who bringest forth bread from the earth'. I say 'correspondingly' since the literalness of what is evoked brings up the way in which Judaism – though it may school the appetites with complex and numerous prohibitions – at bottom *sanctifies* them. In that sense this Jewish blessing, redolent as it is of the materiality of appetite, has always seemed to me too merely earthy for a Christian table. I am reminded of Simone Weil – my deeply

reluctant co-religionist – who felt in the end unable to enter the Christian Church either, because she believed that it was in some sense too Jewish. She ascribed to Judaism a deadly attachment to material appetites that – by their *pesanteur*, their gravity – attached its adherents (and by extension the Church) too strongly to the earth. Our reading from St John, in its deliberate contrast with the gift recorded in *Exodus*, and following on the miracle of the loaves and fishes, points us to the way in which – at least in principle – Christianity *spiritualises* appetite and, in the Eucharist, takes the primary elements of the Sabbath meal (the object of the devout Jew's preliminary blessings) and turns them into a *redemptive* nutriment, one which prefigures the soul's eventual liberation from what the Book of Common Prayer calls 'the burden of the flesh'. We are far, here, from that seventeenth-century German Count who, according to C.V. Wedgwood, provided his people for their Holy Communion with 'the toughest possible bread', so that they 'should have no doubt whatever of the material nature of what they were eating'.

And perhaps we may also say that Miss Wedgwood's German Count was himself far in his view of the world from Chardin's *Jar of Olives*. For the image of the fruits of the earth put beyond the ambition of earthly appetite, existing only in the mysterious stillness and remoteness of the painting, might figure out for us something of the *numinous* quality to which 'the bread of heaven' bears witness; to the way in which the bread itself is not 'material' but a sacrament. The *painting's* intermediate status, its taking the objects of common life and placing them in a changeless and ideal state is itself (in a weaker sense) numinous. It is so in part simply as

art – which always defeats the ambition to translate its subject into the merely ‘real’. But its characteristic putting together of the substantial and the insubstantial has here a particular resonance. As it seduces the eye with its delicious surfaces, its simulacra of corporeal life, it puts these things beyond our reach. What in the painting depends on our knowledge of the familiar repetitions of every day is idealised, and disclosed to us like a revelation received without foreknowledge. It reminds us of how the world provides for us, yet endows that provision with the impenetrably mysterious quality of the sacrament itself.

Such is the spiritual quality of these things, and of this scene. As the solid things that remind us of our corporeal reality dissolve into something that is neither here, nor there, so the Christian bread is literally substance and yet, in that same sense, no earthly substance at all. It is in this way that the painting might help us to understand the meaning of ‘daily bread’. Both stand not as a material reality but as a promise: that of something that transcends its banal material familiarity in a form that defies speculation. What is familiar is transfigured. What is most redolent of fleshly appetite is strangely transcended. It is thus that we are fed; thus that we may be able to say of ourselves, with another great Trinity poet, George Herbert, ‘So I did sit and eat’.

Readings: *Exodus* XVI, 11-18; *St John’s Gospel* VI, 30-35