**Democratic light: phenomenology and the worldliness of painting**

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Painting situates us as does no other art. I stand before the painting as the painter has once stood, and what I find there – let’s call it a meaning, of a kind found in a direct encounter – may correspond to what the painter ‘meant’, though not in the sense of my retrieving from the work a specific expressive intention formed by the painter prior to, and independently of, the act of painting.1 Inherent in my situation, and in that of the painter, is the capacity to arrive spontaneously at a ‘meaning’ that may be found by others too, without this arising solely through the predetermined workings of culture and convention. In what I claim thus far, I betray an affinity with those art historians and philosophers whose preference it is to anchor enquiry in the bodily immediacy of one’s situation before the work. To enquire in this way means asking what the painting is doing: what is at work in the work? It is a question of a non-empirical kind which phenomenology in particular may seek to address – and indeed it is a phenomenological kind of question; anyone who asks it is doing phenomenology, in however informal a way. It is a question that need not be taken up in ignorance, but to attempt to answer it presupposes adopting a stance that is not, for present purposes, that of the scholarly specialist (though of course, as will be seen, I necessarily depend on the insights and findings of specialists).

Yet to be able to feel thus singled out before the work is surely historically recent and culturally specific. My seemingly immediate responses are actually mediated in complex ways. And so the findings of my enquiry before the work – and even, as might be shown, my stated premise - are not as freely arrived at as I might feel them to be. My situation, then, is divided, as between the spontaneous and the constituted, the first person singular and the third. I intend, though, to assert the validity of the former, and not simply collapse it into the latter. In wanting, however, to place my stress on the first in each pair of contrasted terms, I come up against a familiar problem: I cannot infallibly report on experience, say what I see, catch myself, as it were, in the act of looking, as I attend. In the very act of trying to seize hold of the attentive state, I would expel myself from it. My phenomenological enquiry is therefore set at a conjectural remove from the experience of viewing that I seek to portray. What follows, however, is not a distanced formal analysis, even if it needs to take account of convention, material means and so forth, but rather one whose terms are experiential, even existential. I am concerned with how the experience of painting may open towards a wide or fundamental apprehension of what phenomenology calls our being-in-the-world. It is a question of a - necessarily - historical and cultural opening towards primordial experience, in which the dividedness that I have evoked is rediscovered, as I hope to show, in an ambiguous apprehension of wonder and of strangeness. My discussion will focus historically first on two works by Pieter de Hooch and then – with reference to democracy – on a painting by Manet.

**Wonder**

Light, at once quotidian and unearthly, and as a concern of painters, lies at the heart of my enquiry. History enters at once, for while painting is of its essence the art of light, as music is of sound, painters only began to depict light, that is to say, portray its action, the phenomenon of light, at a particular time, in particular places. In the familiar narrative of European painting from the late middle ages through to the sixteenth century, the phenomenon in question is that of visibility, the action of light in making visible. (I would include in this northern artists’ traditional fascination with mirroring and scintillating reflection, as remarked on by Svetlana Alpers).2 What emerges only more gradually is an apprehension of light’s invisibility, and of its temporality: its phenomenality as such. This is a finding, decisively, of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, and also, I hope to show, of seventeenth-century painting. Isaac Newton distinguished the light and colours we see from the ‘rays’ he could define in scientific terms: were he to speak of light and rays as themselves coloured, he writes, ‘I would be understood to speak not philosophically and properly, but grossly … For the Rays to speak properly are not coloured. In them there is nothing else than a certain Power and Disposition to stir up a Sensation of this or that Colour.’3 Goethe, in his response to Newton, offered the positive corollary to Newton’s restriction: ‘The eye may be said to owe its existence to light, which calls forth, as it were, a sense that is akin to itself; the eye, in short, is formed with reference to light … the light it contains corresponding with the light without.’4 Whether or not Goethe conceived his ‘light without’ as comprising invisible rays, this was possibly the sense in which Stéphane Mallarmé wrote of light’s invisibility, in an article relating to Impressionism and Manet, to which I will make further reference later; he writes of ‘the natural light of day penetrating into and influencing all things, although itself invisible’.5

If I appear to contradict myself in associating the invisibility of light with its phenomenality – for must not the phenomenon be a visual one? – I must first stress that I am concerned here not with light as Newton understands it, but with light as we experience it. Everything I see is disclosed by the action of light, but light itself may not, unlike those things, become an object of vision. If, in common experience, as Bergson claimed, my perception locates itself out there, in the object itself, there where I see it,6 then light necessarily escapes my gaze, it is not *there*. In Pieter de Hooch’s *Cardplayers in a sunlit room*, dated 1658 (*Figure* 1), we find a pioneering attempt to depict a light that discloses the scene without attaching exclusively to its constituent parts: the painting imparts an awareness of light itself, independently of its role in modelling objects. What distinguishes his painting from an earlier work of which the same might plausibly be said, namely *The Arnolfini portrait* by Jan van Eyck,7 is that de Hooch, as I will contend, sets in play a duality of sight and feeling, measured space and lived time, a duality instrumental in letting light, in its not-thereness, paradoxically become manifest, as a presence felt, if not seen.

None of that could have been on the painter’s mind at the time, his likely intention having differed little, fundamentally, from that of van Eyck, namely to paint a compelling illusion of the contemporaneous presence of his figures before the viewer. The new resources he brought to the task were, however, significant, and what he achieved in *Cardplayers*, and in other paintings of the Delft period, constituted a radical innovation. In earlier renderings by him of scenes such as this, the gestures of the figures are more animated, the characterisations more pronounced, the ethos more low-life, the settings darker and more vaguely defined, the pictures smaller in scale with the figures relatively larger in the frame. Merry company or guardroom scenes are typical of his earlier output – *Cardplayers* being a kindred subject – but in his Delft manner new, domestic subjects come into the foreground. While there are some transitional works, the change, when it comes, is comprehensive. De Hooch now prefers the relatively ample, clearly articulated and complex setting of the bourgeois house to those of, say, the rustic tavern or barn. There must be a strong source of daylight. There should be a view through from the principal space to another or others, and the space itself assumes new visual importance, relative to the figures. While not all the Delft paintings show all these features to the same degree, they together comprise a consistent set of requirements, and this consistency, through variations, is suggestive of an innovation born of insight.

*Cardplayers* is a perspectival composition. De Hooch’s first step, as in kindred paintings, was to establish the architectural setting, by placing a pin on the vanishing point and snapping a chalked string attached to it onto the painted ground to mark the orthogonals of the tiled floor, the ceiling, and other elements.8 Having worked out and established the setting, he placed his figures, sometimes altering their location or aspect as he proceeded, as is shown by occasional *pentimenti*. The concomitant – and, for me, important – difference in conception between these figures and those of his earlier paintings is that they are, to a new and greater degree, spatial entities, like the chairs, tables, doors and the rest of the material environment: notice the angles made by the three bent elbows of the men in the painting, the rhyme between the legs of two of the men and the legs of the furniture, the wide interval between the figure on the left and the other three. The reason for there being such affinity between figures and fittings is that, in presenting his figures as elements in a spatial illusion, it was necessary that de Hooch render their actions with more restraint than in earlier scenes of the same kind: perspectival illusion is, necessarily, static. Yet movement, or more exactly, temporality, is evidently indicated or aimed at. So there are actions, but – this is important – they are transitional, incomplete, independent and simultaneous, conceived in the present tense. The maid *is walking* through the courtyard, *bringing* the jug; the man in black *is raising* his glass to drain it; the men at the right *are poised* in possibly conspiratorial attitudes of suspended gesture, either side of the woman *studying* her hand of cards. That, however, is not by itself sufficient to impart the sense of duration. The light that floods into the scene from behind, by window and doorway, reflected in from the sunlit courtyard, to such complex effect, is not merely supplementary naturalism, but is integral to the portrayal, for it is this, I suggest, that lends temporality – that is, continuity, the sense of process – to what might otherwise be frozen attitudes and gestures.

The bodies, the furniture, the tiled floor, the door and the rest are substantial; the light incident upon these things is not and bears an accidental and inherently changeable relationship to them, and herein lies an affinity with the contingency of posture and gesture. It glints in the glass that the man in black is emptying, falls strongly on the hand extended by the man with the shaded face, catches the smoke from the long clay pipe held by the standing man. Yet light has a still more fundamental role in imparting to the painting a sense of what one might call the continuous present, and this is by virtue of its address to the viewer’s attentive gaze, a gaze that is therefore divided, as I want to suggest, between space and time.

The only mode of viewing acknowledged in the contemporary discussion of art concerned not time at all, of course, but perspectival spatial illusion. Dutch art theory translated *prospettivo* as *doorsien*, with innovative reference to the activity of the eye in plunging into illusory depth.9 It was De Hooch’s insight to realise that a setting in which the principal space opened views into others lent itself to suggesting that figures, rather than appearing as if on a perspectival stage, were in a more intimate communion with their settings, so as to convey the sense that they inhabit them. Hence his favouring, frequently, of domestic scenes with women and children. Yet perspective, however complex in construction, would not by itself have lent sufficient means to the desired end. In the case of *Cardplayers*, our sense that the figures we see inhabit the space as we look entails our sharing the present with them, and it is for this purpose that de Hooch’s painting affords an intense awareness of the sensation of light: the light that floods forward, light that is not *there*, but *here* – and *now*. Time unfolds in space, through light.

If, on walking into a room, I say ‘what wonderful light’, I am not describing something I can see in the way I might see an object. Yet de Hooch’s aims would certainly have been representational, and his distribution of light, shade and colour here fully satisfies the criteria intended by Dutch art theorists in their use of the term *houding*: a harmonious co-ordination of all elements in the painting so as to render an illusionistic space that one might virtually step into.10 What such specifications leave out of account, however – or take for granted – are the very qualities that might induce precisely such a feeling, namely the sense of the here and now, of the intimacy of a shared moment, of the inhabiting of a space. For such feelings to arise, the painting must call forth a subjective illusion to supplement the objective one. My contention is that de Hooch, in presenting scenes of human interaction in fulfilment of an objective spatial illusion, evokes just such a supplementary illusion at the same time, through a different operation of the same means. That is to say, the painting has two predominant and complementary aspects, and the viewer is doubly situated.

In its deployment of the *doorsien*, the perspectival view through into depth, the painting positions the viewer at a geometric distance, and invites the gaze to take measured steps across intervals, the voids that intervene between objects. What vision cannot directly seize upon, however, is that which is not objectively there at all, yet plays a crucial role. The painting opens itself for a second kind of gaze, which instead of gauging depth, may wander over the whole, and so may feel itself opening as if to let in the light. Suppose the gaze drifts up, as it might, to the window, to lose itself in its complex nuances, passing from the leaves against the pale sky to the attenuated red of the shutter outside and the thin orange of the transparent curtain within; and as these then signal to the other reds and oranges – including the woman’s red slipper possibly touching the shoe of the man in the black jacket, intervals collapse and attention shifts from what separates to what lies between. The manifest light that falls upon the figures also comes to rest on the table, between the black back and crooked arm of the nearest man and the three lit figures opposite; and so it conjures, together with the transitional gestures and postures, a common atmosphere, a bounded, inward-facing world comprised from fragmentary evidence of a complex of now responsive, now oblivious, now hidden glances and attitudes, modulated by the light. Outside this inner world, the light repeats its action of establishing a between, a here, as the gaze, wandering over the lit and shaded and half-lit surfaces of floor, walls and ceiling, meets the openings against which the inside, here, is to be felt as a habitation, returning, via the bright and gaping door, to the subtleties of the window, the soft red outside, the thin orange inside of the framed glass membrane. Between this felt perimeter and the human interplay, the house of light comes into being.

We may assume that the potential contemporary viewers of de Hooch’s paintings would indeed have let their gaze wander thus freely over the painting’s illusionistic play of appearances. While Dutch humanist literature on art in the early seventeenth century held it to be an inherent limitation of painting as such that it presented *schijn sonder sijn*, semblance without being, mere appearance, Dutch art theory subsequently pressed the claims of painting by actually vindicating the pursuit of illusion. As Eric Sluijter has shown, Philips Angel, the writer of ‘the only substantial text about painting’ in the period up to mid-century, converted what had been a disparagement of painting with respect to sculpture – the latter being considered a reality, not an appearance – into a means of praise.11 Later writers followed suit, most notably Samuel van Hoogstraten.12 In so doing, they answered to both the imperatives of practice and the demands of the market. By striving to deceive the eye through illusionistic renderings of material textures, transient colour effects and reflections, painters could satisfy what, by the mid-century, had come to be the tastes of a sophisticated and knowledgeable clientele.13

From the 1650s onwards, painters including Gerard ter Borch, Pieter de Hooch and Johannes Vermeer produced non-narrative paintings whose subjects show what in the case of works such as *Cardplayers* would have been described as ‘modern’ figures.14 The scenes tend to be generic and suggestive in character rather than pointedly signalling moral lessons, and therefore, in a diversity of aspects, ranging from their naturalistic visual qualities to their typical content, the paintings invite a peculiarly open and undirected mode of attention, albeit in markedly varying terms. Unlike ter Borch, whose dark settings offer a glimpse of scintillating action, de Hooch affords a dawning apprehension, as the gaze moves between the inner human scene and its lit perimeter, to make a world from what the painter had made.

Indeed, it was far from being the painter’s intention that viewers overlook the evidence of his making, for otherwise his achievement might go unnoticed. If we resume that wandering gaze whose possible itinerary I evoked just now, one that departs from and returns to the figural scene, we may notice de Hooch nudging us one way or another, be it through the distribution of reds and oranges that I noted, or, lest we ignore the painted surface, the small litter comprised by pieces of broken pipe and a playing card on the floor at bottom right. This trompe-l’oeil motif draws our attention to the floor itself, the classic chequerboard of perspectival illusion that demonstrates the painter’s skill in deceptively supplanting one surface, that of the canvas, with another, contrived through geometry and a painterly gradation of tones. In the gradation itself there is cunning as well as calculation, since the alternating tiles are differentiated only softly in tone, thus easing the apparent entry of light (and combining, of course, with the expanse of white wall on the right to contribute to the sense of a light-filled space). A different technical practice, notably the highly finished or ‘polished’ style of Gerrit Dou, could not have served to render this illusion of pervasive light. For de Hooch’s purposes, light needs to soften the edges of things, to which end the work of his brush must be readily apparent; and it is because no part is decisively closed off from any other that the gaze may find its own pulse in response to the painting’s internal transitions.

Yet by the same token, in order for the painting to assemble itself under the viewer’s shifting attention it must, however gently, come apart through the same agency; accordingly, a degree of fragmentation is inherent in de Hooch’s illusionism, and his paintings invite a gaze that objectifies along with one that dwells. Because de Hooch, in contrast to such a painter as Jan Steen, gave to his renderings both of persons and objects nearly the same quality of self-contained objectivity, there is, even in his most affecting paintings, the ever-present potential of a shift towards a moment of visual dissociation. In the case of the *Cardplayers*, attention might come to fix on, say, the coat-rack, or the lit spaces glimpsed through the legs and bent arm of the seated figure in black, the rungs of his chair. Comparably, in front of the Rijksmuseum’s *Woman with a child in a pantry* (Figure 2), attention may at times drift rightward towards a chair, an open window, and the triangle made by the lit underside of a stair. In rendering an illusion of a familiar scene (a maid hands a jug of beer she has fetched from the cellar to what is possibly, despite the clothing and hair, a young boy), de Hooch has reduced its elements to a set of fragmentary spatial relationships, with – both literally and figuratively – distancing effect. This means that viewers are obliged to find their way gradually towards the affective core of the subject, which is not spatial but temporal.

But don’t we rather see at once, and feel immediately, the touching exchange between woman and child, as similarly in kindred scenes? See, but not necessarily feel; it rather depends how deeply we dwell on these scenes of dwelling, since the interrelatedness of persons and place, which has long been recognized in de Hooch, is not, in affective terms, an immediate given. Or rather, our sense of habitation may deepen on acquaintance, for by inviting – as I suggest – a gaze that wanders from and returns to the figures, these paintings may give rise to a feeling of duration that we project back into them. I have referred already to the temporality of light, as contributing to a sense of the continuous present, and I note the aptness of Peter Sutton’s observation that it is always summertime in de Hooch:15 a permanent noon, as in the unending summers of childhood, deepened duration. What is additionally important is our recognition that these are invented scenes, which invite our inward reinvention of them. In this connection, it is worth noting the analogy Théophile Thoré draws between the novels of Balzac, which open, he observes, with a minute description of the setting in which the narrative will unfold, and ‘the paintings of Pieter de Hooch, where the domestic interior, the *home* of the English … has such importance.’ De Hooch’s figures, he continues, are no mere accessory but are integral to the setting: ‘Everything there is created for them, above all the light which animates and enlivens them. All is a harmonious milieu, where someone leads a life as at home, does something, or very little, perhaps nothing at all.’16 While it may be anachronistic to consider de Hooch’s images as home-like,17 the analogy with fiction is suggestive. What surely distinguishes de Hooch’s *Cardplayers* from different ‘merry company’ images, including earlier works of his own, is that they afford a sense of life proceeding, unfolding in time, through spaces designed to that end.

Appreciation of the painter’s design, and of his technical practice, combined with that receptive ‘wandering’ I described earlier, draw the viewer into an inward re-making of what the painter had first made. That is how the work works, and how, for the viewer, a world comes to unfold in time. In his greatest paintings, chiefly produced between about 1658 and 1660, de Hooch plays variations on his stable themes, not as if working to a formula, but rather in continually finding new affective possibilities. His particular sensitivity to the relationship between the interior scene and the outside has long been recognized, and we may note, as between the two paintings discussed, evidence of his ability to adjust this relationship to specific expressive ends. In the *Cardplayers*, where the shutters are all opened and the door ajar to create the most illuminated of his scenes, with a plunging perspective glimpse of the world beyond, male characters predominate; they are alert, and clothed for the street, a cloak hanging on the rack. In the Rijksmuseum painting, the exterior is glimpsed fragmentarily and the sources of daylight are oblique rather than central, the floor tiles in the near room black and terracotta, with dark and shadowed areas to both sides and above. We have views of no less than four spaces, each with a distinct light quality, and it is in shifting our attention – the wandering gaze, again – from the dark cellar to the light vestibule and the full daylight on the house seen through the window, that we apprehend the generation of an ambient half-light in the near room; this is principally lit, we may not at first notice, from our side of the scene – by a source whose presence we only sense. Small litter on the floor, again, cues our attention to the painted surface, so that, by way of changes in light, texture and colour, we may feel our way around the space. As we do so, we may unfold the scene in time, for not only are woman and child in the process of an uncompleted action, their position is evidently momentary and suggestive of passage, placed as they are between two open doorways. The woman has come from the dark cellar below, while the bright door wide open to the right holds an inducement the cellar does not, and the underside of the stair diagonally opposite the cellar is suggestive of potential movement upwards.

**Strangeness**

If, however, in looking attentively at these paintings, the viewer enters into an inhabiting of habitation itself, of the familiar world of the present apprehended as a continuous flow, there arises a paradox: such a realisation is available only through art and not, ordinarily, in life itself. Thoré’s analogy with Balzac has a still greater aptness than he suggests, for the life that a work of fiction assumes for us as we read it has a forward-flowing continuity we actually experience rarely, perhaps only in circumstances of intense urgency. In rendering life as we live it, art makes manifest that which is, in actuality, missing from that life, specifically, the life of modernity: fiction, in its modern form, arose, as Foucault observed – as did Hegel before him – in a context of disenchantment.18 There is here a further parallel with de Hooch, since the light that comes invisibly to pervade the interior of *Cardplayers* is light of the present, secular light, as distinct from the eternal radiance of the sacred image.19 What may come to replace the sense of the sacred is a feeling of strangeness, even of the uncanny, inherent in our action in bringing life to a representation.

That the life of paintings does not inhere in the representation itself, but is imaginary, is an obvious truth, holding for the lively scenarios of Jan Steen equally as for de Hooch’s more restrained images. Yet in so positively asserting the spatiality of both figures and settings, de Hooch, unlike Steen, imparts traits of objective materiality that stand unchanging within, and as if resistant to, the imagined flow of time, like rocks in a stream. Not only does this hold for, say, the chair on which the nearest man in *Cardplayers* is seated, it is also true to a degree of this figure itself, and indeed of all the figures: picture them experimentally in isolation from their setting and they become relatively self-contained and almost doll-like; the same would hold for other Delft period works by de Hooch, including *Woman with a child in a pantry*. If, conversely, we picture the interiors without the figures, what we arrive at is indeed uncanny: a haunted house. This is particularly the case with the complex unseen spaces of the Rijksmuseum painting; were the figures to be removed, light would come to refer back to its remote exterior source, penetrating the interior as from that impersonal distance. The painter’s careful differentiation of material surfaces would lose its relatedness to habitation and use, to practice, and come to designate inert matter itself. De Hooch’s singular ability to interrelate interior and exterior spaces ought to alert us to an underlying principle, namely that the terms are interdependent. The moments in which, as I suggested earlier, attention may come to dwell on purely spatial phenomena, external and dissociative, are themselves constitutive for our transforming the perceptual evidence of inertly external, spatial objecthood into the temporal, the lived: from world-in-itself to being-in-the-world.

It is of undeniable relevance that de Hooch conceived his portrayals of human and social intimacy in the context of a commercial and scientific culture that set physical nature apart from human society and consciousness to a new degree, for purposes of exploitation or enquiry. Everything had been, as it were, invaded by distance, and as Svetlana Alpers has compellingly argued, the work of de Hooch and comparable painters may be seen as participating in a wider and prevailing cultural investment in modes of spatial investigation, manifest in the use of lenses, cartography, the camera obscura and other means and practices.20 More recently, J.M. Bernstein has revisited Alpers’s thesis that Dutch painting, like empiricist scientific enquiry of the same place and time, was engaged in ‘describing’ the world from within, in contrast to the (purportedly) external and rationalist perspective of Italian art, following Alberti. He proposes that, rather than viewing Dutch painting – and specifically that of de Hooch - as ‘an unrecognized form or extension of observational science’, as does Alpers, we consider it as affording in its own terms ‘a *model* for knowing’ that is ‘able to issue…a challenge to the claims of Cartesian enlightenment.’21 Yet even to speak of ‘a model for knowing’ is by definition to retain a parallel with observational science, however different from the scientist’s means be those of the painter. What we ought rather to consider is the point at which painting reaches the limit of representation, and indeed of ‘knowing’. While a trompe l’oeil still-life might present a wholly satisfying illusion of objective presence, in which sensory memory may supplement, and so complete, purely visual information, such cannot be the case with the portrayal of anything not externally present, either actually or – as with unseen sides or non-visual qualities – potentially. That this is so had been evident to portrait painters since at least the time of Raphael, when portraitists began to find means to suggest, beyond the data of resemblance, the traits of selfhood. De Hooch, and then Vermeer, brought a comparable insight to bear on genre painting. In de Hooch’s domestic scenes, the invisible dimension lies between the figures and around them rather than – as in portraiture – possessing their bodies. Yet all this happens by virtue of a new and greater degree of objectification, and herein lies the affinity with the observational culture Alpers evokes. In order to conjure the familiar and the sense of habitation, it was necessary to project its opposite, the non-human world of exterior space. The interplay between interior and exterior was not, on de Hooch’s part, a naturalistic discovery, but rather an expressive invention, his being an original portrayal of exteriority as such, a distancing estrangement that brings the familiar into relief.

**Democracy**

Such spatial distanciations are constitutionally absent from the work of the most notable later interpreters of everyday modernity, namely Manet, Degas and the Impressionists. In Manet’s *Laundry* (*Figure* 3), whose subject closely resembles one of de Hooch’s,22 the figures of woman and child partake in an overall field of colour relationships that the viewer may see as an immersive luminous atmosphere. Light is now the acknowledged and embracing subject, its non-objectivity expressly recognized by the painters themselves and by their critical protagonists, in their use of such words as ‘sensation’ and, of course, ‘impression’. This particular painting, to which Mallarmé gave a central place in his essay, ‘The Impressionists and Edouard Manet’, is relatively exceptional in the painter’s work. There is a degree of interaction between the figures, and even – for Manet - a rare expressiveness, in the woman’s gaze at the child. It is also a scene of practical activity, something that Impressionist technique does not readily accommodate, and indeed Manet is unable to convey the physicality of the act of wringing wet cloth, because his means do not permit the tonal articulation needed to that end. To create the sense of what Mallarmé refers to as ‘a flood of summer morning air’, Manet had needed to override the contours of physical reality, as in impressionist practice generally. Rather than defining and differentiating material texture, as in de Hooch, Manet’s paint subsumes the things depicted within a fabric of hues. The ‘invisible’ presence that Mallarmé terms air or daylight ‘struggles’, he writes, ‘with the figures, the dresses, and the foliage, and seems to take to itself some of their substance and solidity.’23 What Mallarmé evidently sees, but is unable exactly to say, is that Manet has generated an overall materiality, a strange compound of the painted surface and the invisible and pervasive ‘flood of summer morning air’, a pictorial tapestry of the scene. Mallarmé does, emphatically, recognize that here the whole precedes the parts: ‘air … despotically dominates over all else.’24 Absent, therefore, is the lucid gauging of spatial intervals we find in de Hooch. The illusion Manet generates is instead one of immersion, a suggestion of a surroundingness inherent in the town garden location, which he enhances by placing the figures amid a profusion of high-growing flowers, and by making them fill the foreground of a canvas of relatively large scale.

At first sight, then, there is neither the need nor the opportunity here for the viewer to attain a sense of the invisible whole by way of the objects, as with de Hooch, for the whole is an immediate given, the objects effaced or submerged. What I referred to earlier as not seen to be externally ‘there’ but felt as being subjectively ‘here’, the temporality of sensation itself, is Manet’s immediate subject. Yet we may experience a perceptual instability nonetheless, for Manet does not simply abolish the sense of objecthood, of thereness. The woman’s dress is blue, bearing obvious reference to the sky but also being simply a blue dress. The vegetation is the green we might expect, the flowers red, yellow, pink. The sheets on the line, however, are not in their actuality the sky-blue they now appear, and they have a visual prominence consistent with the subject, particularly the sheet that hangs above the child. It is not as securely ‘there’ as, say, the child’s hat; it is at this point, however, with the child, that the instability I describe comes into play most pointedly. The child grips the tub that rests on the chair, and Manet renders both the action itself and the material things with particular firmness, in surely deliberate contrast with the object of the child’s gaze, namely the drips of water falling from the cloth the woman is wringing, which catch the sunlight as they fall: invisible light momentarily appears. *The Railway*, of 1873,25 which Mallarmé also mentions, has a comparable motif: a young girl, her back to the viewer, grips a railing – definitely there – as she gazes, apparently, towards a cloud of steam that condenses the light. These are unlocatable objects, tied inseparably to a rapt attention, yet externally manifest. Manet here captures a paradox that haunts Impressionist practice and, much later, came to preoccupy Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who wrote that a painter ‘must affirm … that the same thing is both out there in the world and here in the heart of vision.’26 While his remark is meant for painting in general, it presupposes familiarity with the principles of Impressionism and, as is well-known, his specific discussions of painting focused especially on the work of Cézanne, the pupil of Pissarro.

‘World’ in that sentence of Merleau-Ponty’s denotes external reality, but elsewhere and more generally he employs the term in a more integrative or dialectical sense in his efforts to define perceptual and embodied being-in-the-world. Writing on Cézanne’s rendering of pictorial space, he observes that, as depicted, ‘the world is a mass without gaps, a system of colours’.27 This, he argues, is true to experience: as he writes elsewhere, I do not see space ‘according to its exterior envelope; I live it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is all around me, not in front of me.’28 Yet the ‘world’ in this phenomenological sense needed to be understood in a context of mundane actuality that Merleau-Ponty also addressed in the essay on Cézanne. The artist is not, as in Paul Valéry’s account of Leonardo, ‘a monster of pure freedom’, untouched and unimpeded by determining circumstance: ‘it was in the world that [Cézanne] had to realize his freedom…It was on the approval of others that he had to wait for proof of his worth.’29 The theme is Hegelian, Hegel having addressed the themes of freedom, determinism and modernity in his lectures on aesthetics, in broad terms and also with reference to Dutch painting. The modern world, for Hegel, is one in which individual action is subject to complex determinants, which he characterises as ‘the prose of the world’,30 comprising ‘external influences, laws, political institutions, civil relationships’31 that constrain the social subject. Yet he employs the very same metaphor in his positive characterisation of seventeenth-century Dutch painting and society. The Dutch are able successfully to make art ‘out of their own life in the present’ because they have wrought their own freedom from both natural constraints and political domination and have obtained ‘a sure footing in the prose of life’.32

In addressing the present, de Hooch and, later, Manet, situate their practice in the prosaic world, and their paintings situate the viewer in turn, imparting a sense of surroundedness, of habitation, of being-in-the-world. Instrumental to that end is their intimation of invisible, secular light: the light as we apprehend it in the continuous present, light of the world. I have suggested that, with both painters, an internal dividedness affords the viewer a comparably divided or unstable perception, such that the feeling of light and habitation, the sense of ‘here’, is not attained at once. Inherent in the attainment is a feeling of spontaneity, of discovery, a sense thereby of freedom. Yet that is not all that we see, or feel, for the insistent presence of the intractably external, of what Hegel calls the prose of the world, modernity, is a crucial limiting – but also, I would say, enabling – factor.

In de Hooch, as I have sought to show, we may find evidence both of ‘prose’ in Hegel’s invidious sense – he might, aptly for painting, have added commerce to his list of ‘external influences’ - and of the painter’s having set it to work and gained a ‘sure footing in the prose of life’. The spontaneously present unfolds from within the determining and external. In the Rijksmuseum painting, the light entering from the street outside grazes a patriarchal portrait, redolent of the social norms governing domestic conduct.33 The world impersonally looks on, as life freely and unmomentously proceeds. Painting is itself the most prosaic and worldly of the arts, and not least is this true of Dutch genre, and of de Hooch in particular. Hegel celebrates the ‘spiritual’ transformation of ‘prosaic reality’ into ‘pure appearance’ in Dutch painting,34 yet de Hooch works to retain, as far as possible, the texture of the workaday.

Painting is work. The democratic connotations of work are a familiar motif in nineteenth-century art and thought, and Mallarmé sounds this note in his essay: ‘the transition from the old imaginative artist and dreamer to the energetic modern worker is found in Impressionism.’35 The association of Dutch painting with popular self-determination, first stated by Hegel, was reasserted by Théophile Thoré and later, in different terms, by Alois Riegl, now with emphasis on the participation of the viewer. Eugène Fromentin’s great study of Dutch painting, *The Masters of Past Time* was published in the same year as Mallarmé’s article. It had been only in the previous year, 1875 that the Third Republic had been had been constitutionally confirmed , and Mallarmé refers to ‘the participation of a hitherto ignored people in the political life of France.’36 He associates this political change with the Impressionist embrace of the everyday: ‘today the multitude demands to see with its own eyes.’37 He is, I think, too quickly dazzled, the uncertainties of creative work, the recalcitrance of prose overlooked, as if democracy were an assured possession. If we look again at Manet’s entranced infant, we may re-enter the painting’s insecure moment of modernity, mortal and secular. These painted worlds are as temporal and temporary as ourselves, and in looking at them we may apprehend our own strangeness and fragility. Mallarmé concludes on the capture in painting of the fleeting, of that ‘which only exists by the will of Idea.’38 I prefer Merleau-Ponty’s more grounded concluding note, in his essay on Cézanne: ‘We never see our ideas or our freedom face to face.’39 Work is in that sense blind. De Hooch and Manet, in painting these paintings entered creatively into the work of the world: that is what is at work in these works.

Notes

1 I gloss Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1987),

chapter 2, p. 45.

2 Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 44 and n. 38, p. 244.

3 Isaac Newton, *Opticks: or, a Treatise of the Reflections,Refractions, Inflections*

*and Colours of Light* ,1704 (New York: Dover, 1952, based on 4th edn. of 1730),

pp. 124-5.

4 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Zur Farbenlehre* (*For a theory of colour*), 1810,

Introduction. Translation from *Goethe’s Theory of Colours*, tr. Charles Lock

Eastlake (London: John Murray, 1840), p. xxxvii.

5 Stéphane Mallarme´,‘The Impressionists and Edouard Manet’, *The Art Monthly*

*Review and Photographic Portfolio*, 30 September 1876, pp 117-122. Only this

English translation survives. Reprinted in Penny Florence, *Mallarmé, Manet and*

*Redon: Visual and Aural Signs and the Generation of Meaning* (Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 11-18. This passage on p. 14.

6 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, tr. of 1908 edn. by Nancy Margaret Paul & W.

Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1988), p. 43.

7 National Gallery, London

8 Peter C. Sutton, *Pieter de Hooch, 1629-1684* (London: Dulwich Picture Gallery/

Yale University Press, 1998), p. 40. For de Hooch, se also Sutton, *Pieter de*

*Hooch, Complete Edition* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1980). These are the sole – and

invaluable – current monographs on the painter.

9 See Martha Hollander, *An Entrance for the Eyes: Space and Meaning in*

*Seventeenth-Century Dutch art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001),

Chapter 1.

10 Paul Taylor, ‘The concept of houding in Dutch art theory’, *Journal of the Warburg*

*and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 55 (1992), pp. 210-32.

11 Eric J. Sluijter, ‘Didactic and Disguised Meanings? Several Seventeenth-Century

Texts on Painting and the Iconological Approach to Dutch painting of this Period’,

in Wayne Franits (ed.), *Looking at Seventeenth-century Dutch art: Realism*

*Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp 78-87,

quotation, p. 79. Philips Angel, *Lof der schilder-konst* (*In praise of painting*),

1642.

12 See Celeste Brusati, *Artifice and Illusion: The Art and Writing of Samuel van*

*Hoogstraten* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995).

13 Wayne Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting, its Stylistic and*

*Thematic Evolution* (New Haven & London: Yale University press, 2004), p. 99.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

15 Sutton, *Complete*, p.19

16 W.Bürger (Théophile Thoré), *Musées de la Hollande*, vol. II (Paris: Jules

Renouard, 1860), p. 58-9. ‘Home’ in English in the text.

17 See Heidi de Mare, ‘Domesticity in dispute, a reconsideration of sources’, in Irene

Cieraad, ed., *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space* (New York: Syracuse

University Press, 1999), pp. 13-29; also Hollander, *An Entrance*, p. 177 ff.

18 G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol. I, tr. T.M. Knox (Oxford:

Clarendon Press, 1975) p. 196.

19 On which, see Paul Hills, *The Light of Early Italian Painting* (London: Yale

University Press, 1987).

20 Alpers, *Art of Describing*, Chapter 2 and *passim*.

21 J.M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of*

*Painting* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 28-9.

22 *Two Women and a Child in a Courtyard*, c. 1657-8, The Toledo Museum of Art.

23 Mallarmé, in Florence, *Mallarmé, Manet, and Redon*, p. 14

24 *ibid.*

25 National Gallery of Art, Washington; and see T.J. Clark, ‘Modernism,

Postmodernism, and Steam’, October, vol. 100 (Spring, 2002), pp. 154-74, in

particular pp. 158-9.

26 Merleau-Ponty, ‘Eye and Mind’, in *The Primacy of Perception*, tr. James M. Edie

(Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p.166.

27 Merleau-Ponty, ‘Cézanne’s Doubt’, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty,

*Sense and non-sense*, tr. Hubert Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus,

(Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 15.

28 Merelau-Ponty, ‘Eye and Mind’, p. 178.

29 Merleau-Ponty, ‘Cézanne’s Doubt’, p.25.

30 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, p. 150. Merleau-Ponty planned a book to be entitled ‘The Prose

of the World’; Claude Lefort edited the manuscripts, published posthumously as

*La prose du monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969).

31 *ibid*., p. 8.

32 *ibid*., p. 598.

33 I disagree with the interpretation of this detail, in a closely related painting, given

by Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, p. 32.

34 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, pp. 162-3.

35 Mallarmé, in Florence, *Mallarmé, Manet, and Redon*, p. 18.

36 *ibid.*

37 *ibid*.

38 *ibid.*

39 Merleau-Ponty, ‘Cézanne’s doubt’, p. 25.