

# T.J. CLARK, 2018, HEAVEN ON EARTH. PAINTING AND THE LIFE TO COME LONDON, THAMES & HUDSON, LDA

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JOÃO OLIVEIRA DUARTE  
IHA, NOVA FCSH  
joaooliveiraduarte@gmail.com  
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Ever since T.J. Clark published *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 revolution*, in 1973, his research has mainly focused on the relationship between modernism and politics – understood as an urge, as a utopian configuration. In his latest book, *Heaven on Earth. Painting and the life to come*, the political link remains a key issue. However, this political dimension is not subsumed into a modernist horizon. The paintings addressed in this book span from the thirteenth century to Picasso, conveying a much more pessimistic tone.

Divided into five chapters, starting with a text on Giotto and the frescos of the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua and ending with a mural by Picasso (*The Fall of Icarus*) made for the UNESCO building in Paris, *Heaven on Earth* includes a coda, a text T.J. Clark published on the *New Left Review* in 2012. Interestingly, this last text, which is a sort of political manifesto by Clark, quite distant from any art historical approach, gives a kind of emotional, more than theoretical, framework for the rest of the work. 'Utopianism, on the other hand – that invention of early modern civil servants – is what the landlords have time for. It is everything Carlo Levi's peasants have learnt to distrust. Bruegel spells this out. His *Cockaigne* is above all a de-sublimation of the idea of heaven – an un-Divine Comedy, which only fully makes sense in relation to all the others offers of otherworldliness (ordinary and fabulous, instituted and heretical) circulating as Christendom fell apart' (255).

This melancholic point of view – that something is falling apart, that the promise of salvation lies "on the other side of despair" (43) – points to a known twentieth century tradition that the historian Enzo Traverso called 'left-wing melancholia'. It is this particular angle, this almost Shakespearean tone – 'our Hamlet of Europe is watching millions of ghosts', as Paul Valéry said during World War I – uniting the disparity of times and the pictorial gestures, that constitutes the cornerstone of *Heaven on Earth*. In fact, what can possibly unite Giotto, Bruegel, Veronese, Pous-

sin or Picasso if not this feeling conveyed in some paintings, or, in Picasso's case, in a mural, of an 'experience of sterility and solitude'?

Central to Clark's argument is Bruegel and his *Land of Cockaigne*. Even if Giotto, in *Joachim's Expulsion* and, in a much less highlighted manner, in *Joachim's Dream*, points to a 'bleakness of vision' (32) in which the colour plays a fundamental part – Giotto's blue, says Clark, 'remains as cold as colour can be', so material and separated from earth as to constitute 'heaven's utter strangeness' (53); even if the woman on the left of Poussin's *The Sacrament of Marriage* is, in Clark's interpretation, 'the figure who stands outside the feast' (153), the figure of 'apartness, of that which always threatens the togetherness of the group' (153); or even if Picasso's mural remains a sort of 'bleak gaiety in the face of catastrophe', with a sinister, but also 'shapeless, weightless, insubstantial, silly, not really present in his black container' Icarus, it is in *The Land of Cockaigne* by Bruegel that heaven on earth realizes itself in all its paradoxical consequences.

'It is typical of Bruegel that his vision of things transfigured, when at last he allows himself one, should not be *The World Upside Down*. The hereafter in *Cockaigne* is the world as it would be if it became more fully itself, with its basic structures unaltered and above all its physicality, its orientation, intact'.

Contradicting art history's view of Bruegel, which sees him as a 'pessimistic and comically condescending, and at worst detached, moralistic, crisply repressive' (80) painter, Clark points to a kind of radical materialism in *The Land of Cockaigne*. This painting is not, according to Clark, a vision or a utopia, nor even a wish-fulfilment. In its 'unfathomable cynicism and materialism – including its cynicism *about* materialism, at least in utopian guise', – *Cockaigne* is about 'what being fully and exclusively in the material world could be like'.

This non-utopian peasant dream, in which the hereafter is a land of pure actuality, of the existing world's utmost completion – Clark's description recalls a famous political reading of Dante's *Divine Comedy* made by Auerbach in the 1920s –, functions as a sort of allegorical key through which we can establish a link between the diversity of paintings and our own time. Actually, this is one of the most interesting things about *Heaven on Earth*. Even if the five chapters are all about the paintings, and even if Clark denies the possibility of portraying linguistic propositions, all of them bear a sort of allegorical wisdom through which we can question our own time. As Clark underscores in the introduction, 'we need the wisdom – which includes the bitterness – of men for whom the *Massacre of the Innocents* and the smell of heretics' burnt flesh were commonplace'. However, that there's something connecting Veronese, Giotto, Poussin or even Picasso to the political agenda of the twenty-first century is not something straightforward.

Quite paradoxically, the key to understanding the relationship between those paintings and twenty-first century politics lies in their muteness and, strangely, in another paradox: this inherent muteness of painting, its deflection from language, gives way to long and detailed descriptions. One way of understanding this is to subsume it to a known rhetorical device often used when standing before a work

of art: the ekphrasis. However, that would be to miss the point of what T.J. Clark does – in a conversation with Jeremy Harding, contributing editor at the *London Review of Books*, Clark states: ‘every time I hear the word ekphrasis I pull out my gun’. Another way of coming to terms with this paradox would be to understand those long descriptions as a kind of allegorical thinking, in which paintings several centuries apart from us suddenly illuminate some aspect of it, without ever establishing a possibility of comparison, a clear and distinct liaison between them. Historical knowledge, therefore, does not provide us with the elements with which we could make sense of our time, nor those with which we could place ourselves in the political arena – these paintings are not political in such manner, they teach nothing. However, they carry with them a sombre wisdom, a ‘bleak gaiety’ that ultimately leads to a strange affirmation of life as it is, with, to quote Nietzsche, ‘the same logic and illogic of entanglements’ (18).