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Article

# Transfigurations of the Commonplace: Hirst's Tumbler, Joyce's Tap

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**Abstract:** One reason why the concept of the quotidian has proved elusive to critics of literature and the visual arts is that the commonplace in art and literature so often refuses to remain untransfigured, not least because of its power to confront us with the material detritus with which we surround ourselves and which we will eventually join. It is not surprising, then, that contemporary artists share a preoccupation with finding both mortality and transcendence in what John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester called “the lumber of the world.” In this paper, I shall consider how an early Damien Hirst mini-installation, consisting of a glass tumbler of water and a ping-pong ball, takes its only partly mocking place in a still life tradition going back to Roman *xenia* and seventeenth-century vanitas paintings, and to a related literary tradition typified by Thomas Hardy’s *Under the Waterfall* and James Joyce’s great prose aria to water all its forms in the Ithaca section of *Ulysses*.

**Keywords:** Damien Hirst; death; poetry; vanitas paintings; conceptual art; still life; the art market

One reason why the concept of the quotidian has proved elusive to critics of the creative arts is that the commonplace in art and literature so often refuses to remain untransfigured; while a tendency to lump together Romantic and modernist paradigms of heightened perception: Wordsworth’s “spots of time”, Joyce’s “epiphanies”, and Virginia Woolf’s “moments of being”, risks reducing transfiguration itself to solipsistic exercises in the sublime. In addition, any consideration of the ordinary and everyday requires us to bear in mind Philip Larkin’s question, “Where can we live but days?” with its ominous answer which “Brings the priest and the doctor/ In their long coats/ Running over the fields.” (Larkin 1964, p. 27). In researching this paper, I have taken as my starting point the deliberately banal components of an early Damien Hirst mini-installation, in which a ping-pong ball and a mass-produced glass tumbler stand in for a human skull—something we normally encounter only as imagery although we all carry one around with us—and the essential element of life which we encounter every time we turn on a tap. These two metamorphic motifs, a skull and a glass of water, have enabled artists and writers to explore mortality and transcendence from antiquity to the present day. However, I want to begin the discussion with a book that might indeed illuminate the subject of transfiguration were it not for the fact that it exists only in a work of fiction.

When Muriel Spark chose to turn one of the sextet of Edinburgh schoolgirls in her novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* into Sister Helena of the Transfiguration, a nun in an enclosed order and author of a “strange book of psychology, ‘The Transfiguration of the Commonplace’,” (Spark 1965, p. 27), its title knowingly deploys an oxymoron which is almost a cliché. However, this is an idea that Rita Felski categorically rejects in her chapter on “The Invention of Everyday Life” in *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*. To Felski, everyday life is a secular concept “because it conveys the sense of a world leached of transcendence; the everyday is everyday because it is no longer connected to the miraculous, the magical, or the sacred,” (Felski 2000, p. 79), although she does suggest that to some theorists, “To contemplate something as art is to remove it, at least temporarily, from the pragmatic needs and demands of the quotidian.” (Felski 2000, p. 80). Robert



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Browning's Fra Lippo Lippi saw art as the necessary cure for Felski's "world leached of transcendence": "we're so made that we love/ First when we see them painted, things we have passed/ Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see." (Browning 1970, p. 576). When the art historian Arthur Danto, who "admired and coveted" Sister Helena's title so much that he eventually borrowed it, "wrote Muriel Spark of the takeover, curious to know what might have been the content of Sister Helena's book [...] she replied, to my delight, that it would have been about art, as she herself practiced it." (Danto 1981, p. v).

Danto's memories of reading the novel had clearly faded by the time he wrote *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* since he describes "Sister Helena of the Transfiguration, who once was Sandy Stranger," as "a Glasgow teenager, disciple, and rogue" (Danto 1981, p. v), on a par with calling the protagonist of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* a Belfast schoolboy. Despite his delight at the co-incidence of subject matter, he has little time for Spark's own art, commenting rather dismissively that "The practice, I suppose, consisted in transforming commonplace young women into creatures of fiction, radiant in mystery." (Danto 1981, p. v). In fact the plot of the novel concerns Miss Brodie's own failure to transform her young pupils into her fantasy versions of them. For Spark, who like Sister Helena was a Catholic convert who had once been an Edinburgh schoolgirl, transfiguration has both a religious and a psychological meaning. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus, knowing he is soon to die, takes three of his disciples up a mountain where "his face was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light." (Matthew 17: 2). Translated into the commonplace reality of everyday life, transfiguration for Spark is, literally or metaphorically, to do with the way the light falls, "as dark heavy Edinburgh itself could suddenly be changed into a floating city when the light was a special pearly white and fell upon one of the gracefully fashioned streets." (Spark 1965, p. 111). For the poet George Herbert, transfiguration—"The six-day world transposing in an hour"—which for him is brought about by prayer, means illumination in the sense of "something understood." (Herbert 2017, p. 67).

But if transfiguration can illuminate the commonplace, it can also make darkness visible through its power to confront us with the material detritus with which we surround ourselves and which we will eventually join, although this is a power that we struggle to evade. In an interview with Nicholas Serota, Damien Hirst described how becoming preoccupied with mortality from the age of seven eventually made him an artist:

I remember thinking, 'There's no way that you can just die of old age.' It just seemed totally wrong to me. Then once I'd realized that was a fact, and much more of a fact than God, religion, or any of those sorts of things, or Father Christmas, then I used to just perversely think about it all the time. And I still do. But in a way, it makes life brighter: you go into the darkness and then get the hell back and feel invigorated. I think all art is about that, really. I don't think there's art that isn't about death. That's the reason why artists do it. (Gallagher 2012, p. 96)

John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester confronted his own mortality by translating the last twelve lines of the speech from Act II of Seneca's *The Trojan Women* in which the Chorus denies the possibility (seen as anything but consoling) of life after death. Rochester was already suffering from the venereal disease which was to kill him a year later at the age of 33, and his subsequent death-bed repentance does nothing to diminish the power of his translation, which significantly adds a brilliant twist to the original text. In Seneca's play, the question, "quaeris quo iaceas post obitum loco?" [Do you ask where you will lie after death?] simply receives the answer, "quo non nata iacent." [Where the unborn lie.] (Seneca 2018, p. 176) Rochester's version introduces the material detritus we are doomed to join:

Dead, we become the lumber of the world,  
And to that mass of matter shall be swept  
Where things destroyed with things unborn are kept . . . (Wilmot 1968, p. 150)

In his valuable book on the history of still life, *Looking at the Overlooked*, Norman Bryson suggests that in the Europe of the *ancien régime*, luxury was “inseparable from ideas of prodigality and waste”. (Bryson 1990, p. 96). The prodigal Restoration poet, consumed by his own excessive consumption of drink and sexual pleasure, was a textbook example of the power, at once compelling and destroying, of this kind of luxury. Here, with the end in sight, he finds rational solace in the idea that “Devouring Time swallows us whole.” (Wilmot 1968, p. 150). It is probably no coincidence that the golden age Dutch vanitas paintings of Pieter Gerritsz van Roestraten, in which luxury goods are wryly portrayed as so much lumber, were popular at the court of Charles II. An example that is still in the royal collection features a mirrored glass ball suspended above an elaborate silver ginger jar and a human skull. By contrast, in the most haunting of Wordsworth’s Lucy poems, “the lumber of the world” is the inanimate stuff of nature, of which the dead girl is now an oblivious part, while the everyday, which Felski sees as “the ultimate nonnegotiable reality,” (Felski 2000, p. 77), becomes the axis on which the great globe turns through the poet’s use of a single Latinate word:

No motion has she now, no force;  
 She neither hears nor sees;  
 Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course,  
 With rocks, and stones, and trees. (Wordsworth and Coleridge 2007, p. 246)

It is not surprising, then, that conceptual and installation art, which derives many of its concepts from a preoccupation with finding mortality in the apparently commonplace, depends so heavily on the lumber of the world. Rachel Whiteread transformed the lived-in spaces of an ordinary house into the dead stuff of a monument that could never be entered again until its demolition reduced it to thin air. Cornelia Parker said of her installation *Thirty Pieces of Silver*: “All these silver objects that I’d bought from various places were united in one death”. (Howitt 2013). Christian Boltanski turned piles of tin boxes topped by bare light bulbs illuminating the black and white photographs of strangers into potent reminders of the Holocaust. However, when we think of the installation artist whose work is most blatantly preoccupied with death, the name that springs to mind is Damien Hirst, though the materials used in his best-known works, from the tiger shark floating in a tank of formaldehyde which first established him in the public imagination to the 8,601 pavé-set diamonds which encrust his replica platinum skull, have nothing whatever to do with “the pragmatic needs and demands of the quotidian”.

By contrast, *Relationships*, a mini-installation created in an edition of 125 to accompany *Internal Affairs*, Hirst’s first solo exhibition at a public gallery, ICA 1991, is made up of the most ordinary of components, a ping-pong ball and a glass tumbler, “which is to be filled with water to any height upon which the original ping-pong ball is meant to float (or not)”. (Artificial Gallery 2023). In his interview with Serota, Hirst followed up his declaration that there is no art “that isn’t about death” with the words “We love art from the past. And it’s not nostalgic, in some way.” (Gallagher 2012, p. 96). The title of his mini-installation ostensibly refers to the accompanying diagram showing the different heights at which the ping-pong ball can be made to float, but it also signals the relationships between this only partly mocking work and key artistic and literary motifs which date back at least to seventeenth-century vanitas paintings, the popularity of which, in an age of excess, may be reflected in Rochester’s Senecan translation.

Alan Chong suggests, in *Still Life Paintings from the Netherlands, 1550–1720*, that “Skulls, which often appear in still life of the early seventeenth century, were so obviously connected with death that their meaning can no longer be regarded as symbolic, there being no indirect or ‘hidden’ connection. A skull simply is death.” (Chong and Kloek 1999, p. 13). However, though these paintings may indeed make us reflect on time and transience, no one stands in front of them purged by pity and fear. We need to remember that Roland Barthes emphatically answers his own rhetorical question, “Are there objects which are *inevitably* a source of suggestiveness, as Baudelaire suggested about *Woman?*” in the negative, not

because of the misogyny of Baudelaire's suggestion but because "myth is a type of speech chosen by history" so "it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things." (Barthes 1991, p. 108).

A recent auction catalog offering a van Roestraten still life for sale sums up the ambiguity that lies at the heart of vanitas paintings, both in their own time and the present day, in two unashamedly contradictory sentences: "The vanitas still life is . . . the easiest to understand, clarifying the futility and transience of the human pursuit of wealth and fame. In the competitive art market of the Netherlands, it was important for the artist to achieve an unmistakable style and an immediately recognizable signature." (Lempertz 2020). Vanitas paintings, in other words, displayed the wealth and taste of their purchasers under cover of an apparent resignation to the loss of those things—and in the case of King Charles II and his courtiers, not even that. While van Roestraten pairs his skull with a decorative silver jar, which references the luxury ingredient it contains, the vanitas paintings of Pieter Claesz display his skill as a painter by contrasting the venerable-looking bone of the skull with a shining green glass Roemer, a Dutch drinking vessel with a thick stem studded with prunts: small decorative knobs which ensure a safe grip for the reveller. The glass is always shown lying on its side to indicate the end of worldly pleasures, but its engagingly reflective surface is pristine, with no cracks or chips, and no spilled residue of wine or beer. Like van Roestraten's silver jar, it is an object of desire and reappears temptingly filled in Claesz's banquet pieces, in which the only hint of the bitterness of life is a half-peeled lemon with a curl of rind.

Hirst's mini-installation, which simplifies Claesz's Roemer and skull into a plain glass tumbler and a ping-pong ball, was made in the same year, 1991, in which Charles Saatchi funded his creation of the famous shark in formaldehyde, to which he gave the title, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*. Hirst's own 2007 attempt to turn the replica of an eighteenth-century skull into the most expensive artwork ever made might seem to confirm that impossibility. Chong points out that, for seventeenth-century vanitas painters, "Skulls permitted a certain degree of artistic license. For example, a painter could decide how many teeth were required, or even whether to include the jaw bone." (Chong and Kloek 1999, p. 143). In still life paintings by both Claesz and van Roestraten, missing front teeth and absent molars underline the vanitas theme, while also distancing the skull from the viewer by suggesting that its former owner has been a long time dead. By contrast, Hirst's diamond skull, with its supposedly original teeth, required a great deal of careful work by a skilled prosthodontist (Smith 2016) to recreate the disconcertingly healthy-looking grin which distances the viewer even more effectively. Maev Kennedy's description of an encounter with a work intended to be the ultimate memento mori demonstrates the fallacy of Chong's idea that, in the context of a work of art, "a skull simply is death".

In the innermost sanctuary, the diamond skull is at head height, in a crystal clear glass case lit by four sharp narrow beams of light. The room's walls, ceiling, and floor are painted black, so black that those entering from the bright corridor immediately crash, blinded, into one another.

Like the crown jewels in the Tower, which it bizarrely resembles, it is hard to see the object itself behind the dazzle of light. An unemployed photographer—only the gallery's own supplied images are permitted "for security reasons"—looked in delight at the pinpoints of light dancing across his T-shirt. "It's a disco ball, innit?" he said happily. "A £50m disco ball." (Kennedy 2007)

While Hirst's attempt to discover "the maximum you can throw at death" (Gallagher 2012, p. 98) continues to live on as a meme, the work itself, which he predicted "is going to be out there somewhere doing something," "even if it's in a robber's handbag," (Gallagher 2012, p. 98), has in fact been locked away unsold for years in a strong room in Hatton Garden, London's jewelry district. Yet the question remains why human skulls so often disconcert us by failing to be transfigured into genuine reminders of death. Although not

exactly commonplace objects, we do encounter them in museums, often with associated grave goods, but they form no part of our lived experience of death and bereavement. Unlike Hamlet, we are unlikely ever to hold a skull in our hands and say, “I knew him, Horatio,” (Shakespeare 1982, p. 386), and in any case, the combination of revulsion and black comedy in the graveyard scene, which Shakespeare rightly expects the audience to relish, is a far cry from the philosophical contemplation ostensibly demanded by memento mori painting and sculpture. The play’s first performances in the newly opened Globe Theatre probably used a real human skull as a prop, but nowadays a flourishing market for death’s head imagery on biker jackets, knuckle rings, tattoos, and joke shop replicas, among which Hirst’s *For the Love of God* conspicuously features, has made Hamlet’s black comedy response to Yorick’s skull into our default reaction.

N.F. Simpson, in his absurdist farce *One Way Pendulum*, strips away for a moment the comedy mask which conceals our uneasy relationship, based as much on embarrassment as fear, with the symbolism of death. In the first act, Mabel Groomkirby asks her daughter Sylvia to remove the “small replica of a skull” which stands on the mantelpiece “where a clock might normally be,” (Simpson 1960, p. 11), commenting that “It isn’t exactly an ornament to have about the place.” (Simpson 1960, p. 25). Sylvia replies that the skull, a gift from her boyfriend Stan, is actually a memento mori, explaining that “It’s supposed to remind you of death.” (Simpson 1960, p. 26). When asked if it does, she casually replies, “Not all that much,” making her mother suggest that she had “better tell Stan he’s been done over.” (Simpson 1960, p. 26). The audience laughs at the absurdity of this, secure in their shared imperviousness to any such reminder. However, when, in the second act, Sylvia suddenly catches sight of the mantelpiece in the mirror and covers her face in horror, the audience’s laughter is not only because this is a sight gag they should have seen coming. There is a special kind of piquancy in being wrong-footed into laughing in the face of death, though the discomfort is quickly alleviated when Sylvia’s reproach to Stan: “It wasn’t working when you gave it to me,” (Simpson 1960, p. 77), restores the certainty that this is all just a joke.

However, acknowledging the impossibility of death in the mind of someone living may be the acceptance of a mystery rather than a denial of it. Sixty years ago, when I myself was an Edinburgh schoolgirl, I was part of a theatre audience moved and sobered by Alec Guinness’s performance in the British premiere of *Exit the King*, an English translation of Eugene Ionesco’s *Le Roi se meurt*. In the final speech of the play, as Queen Marguerite leads all that is left of King Berenger towards the throne on which he will die alone, she fends off the hallucinations which might try to hold him back: a phantom, a wolf, rats and vipers, a beggar, and lastly an old woman who comes towards him holding out a glass of water. The dying man has “no need to quench his thirst,” (Ionesco 1963, p. 91), and Marguerite orders “the imaginary old woman” (Ionesco 1963, p. 91) to vanish. At the end of the speech she vanishes herself, and the entire scene dissolves into “a greyish light” (Ionesco 1963, p. 93) in which the King gradually fades from sight. He has died, as the audience has known all along that he will, “at the end of the show”, (Ionesco 1963, p. 26), and his unexpectedly slow and silent descent into darkness acts as a potent symbol. As I filed out of the upper circle behind two middle-aged women who, even in 1963, would have fitted into the world of Miss Jean Brodie, I overheard one of them saying quietly to the other, “And even when the dear Minister was dying, he said it was very strange to be going”.

The apparitions which try to detain the dying Berenger from taking his final breath are all symbols of pity—the phantom, the beggar—or of fear—the wolf, the rats and vipers—except for the imaginary old woman. In the context of the play, her glass of water signifies life itself, to which the King, in his role as Everyman, must bid farewell, as we all eventually shall. However, unlike a human skull, whose obvious symbolism we are primed to resist, a glass of water is almost endlessly metamorphic. For Philip Larkin, its transfiguration, like that of Spark’s Edinburgh, is to do with the way the light falls. In his poem, “Water,” in *The Whitsun Weddings* (Larkin 1964, p. 20), the agnostic Larkin at first surprises us with the idea that if he were “called in/ To construct a religion” it would involve the use of water,

since surely most, if not all, religions already do just that. However, rather than ritualized aspersion or immersion, this would be water as we encounter it in everyday life, in which wading through a ford, or being soused or drenched, requires “dry, different clothes”; and it is the everyday laws of physics which cause “any-angled light” to “congregate endlessly” in a glass of water raised to an east window, yet we feel at the end of the poem that we have been shown something transcendent.

One of the relationships which lie behind Hirst’s mini-installation, with its tumbler to which water must be added to complete the work, is a very different attempt from Larkin’s to transform a glass of water through the power of religion. Hirst has said of Michael Craig-Martin’s *An Oak Tree*: “That piece is, I think, the greatest piece of conceptual art. I still can’t get it out of my head.” (Connolly 2007). The Tate Gallery’s summary tells us that “*An Oak Tree* consists of an ordinary glass of water placed on a small glass shelf of the type normally found in a bathroom, which is attached to the wall above head height”, while an accompanying text informs us that “the actual oak tree is physically present but in the form of a glass of water.” (Tate Gallery 2023). The Dublin-born artist, who served as an altar boy in his youth, draws on the Catholic idea of transubstantiation, in which the wafer and the wine, without changing their physical form, become in real earnest the body and blood of Christ, to transform the glass of water into an imperceptible and inconceivable oak tree. The viewer’s likely skepticism is addressed in courteous detail in a text with which we may still find ourselves arguing long after we leave the gallery.

The Tate’s example of the installation, on long-term loan from a private collection, is not on display, but then it hardly needs to be. Unlike Hirst’s shark, which requires an audience to experience its ominous presence if it is to be more, in Hirst’s own words, than “just a big aquarium with a dead fish in it,” (O’Hagan 2012), Craig-Martin’s oak tree is conceptual in the purest sense. It continues to exist simply because, after more than fifty years, we can’t get it out of our heads. He has described himself as “less interested in magic tricks and more in showing how the trick is done” (Adams 2015), and in the case of *An Oak Tree*, he has taken care to demonstrate his working process. Michael Daley’s objection that the installation does not feature “a hard-won, skillful depiction of a glass and a shelf” (Daley 2002) is more than countered by Craig-Martin’s subsequent body of work, in which everyday objects, drawn with elegantly simplified precision, are defamiliarized through the use of flat planes of vibrant color.

Craig-Martin has “always thought that access to everything important is right in front of your nose. We often look for the special in special objects or special events but actually, if we understood the quality of ordinary things, we are closer to the substance of life.” (Adams 2015). However, his glass of water, even if we grant for the sake of argument that it is now, in fact, an oak tree, is vital to the genesis of the work, as we can confirm by performing the thought experiment of replacing it with another of the everyday objects—a shoe, a metronome, an open book, a light bulb—which he depicts so skilfully. Nor can we fill either his glass or Larkin’s glass with holy water without reducing them to conventional symbols. Whether or not his transparent magic trick works for us, Craig-Martin’s attempt at transubstantiation depends on the fact that an ordinary glass of water really does contain the substance of life.

Craig-Martin shares his “sense that things that are very important exist within ordinary things,” (Craig-Martin and Gross 2020), with an earlier Dublin-born artist, though the stylized minimalism with which he restores to us the familiar objects that surround us contrasts sharply with James Joyce’s exuberant delight in over-abundance. Felski, quoting from Henri Lefebvre, talks of “the encyclopedic scope of *Ulysses* as an ‘inventory of everyday life,’” but she sees Joyce’s attempt “to redeem the everyday by rescuing it from its opacity, defamiliarizing it and making us newly attentive to its mysteries,” as in fact a failure to grasp the true nature of “the very dailiness it seeks to depict. Literature’s heightened sensitivity to the microscopic detail marks its difference from the casual inattentiveness that defines the everyday experience of everyday life.” (Felski 2000, p. 90). In fact, in the passage from which Felski quotes, Lefebvre advances the opposite objection, telling us that

in *Ulysses*, “the inventory of everyday life implies the negation of everyday life through dreams, images, and symbols even if such a negation presupposes a certain amount of irony toward symbol and imagery.” (Lefebvre 2000, p. 24).

Joyce’s great comic novel is indeed encyclopedic in the literal sense: we can enquire within about almost anything, and one of the best ways to combat both of these critical positions is to do just that. Richard Ellmann famously declared that by endowing “an urban man of no importance with a heroic consequence,” Joyce shows us that “the ordinary is the extraordinary,” (Ellmann 1984, p. 5), and this insight can be extended from his hero’s own, frankly described, internal plumbing to the plumbing of his kitchen. The Ithaca section of the novel is encyclopedic in another way too, since it is arranged as a series of questions and answers, so when Leopold Bloom, who has returned home from the wanderings of the day, turns on the faucet to fill the kettle, Joyce enquires: “Did it flow?” (Joyce 1993, p. 623). We take it for granted that, in a novel, water will flow when somebody turns on a tap, but not that, as in real life, it will require a named reservoir, and “a subterranean aqueduct of filtre mains of single and double pipeage,” (Joyce 1993, pp. 623–24), in order to do so. Moreover, when the following question, what it was about water that Bloom admired, is answered by a tour de force prose aria listing all of water’s attributes and geographical manifestations, starting with “its universality: its democratic equality and constancy to its nature in seeking its own level” (Joyce 1993, p. 624) and ending with “lacustrine marshes, pestilential fens, faded flowerwater, stagnant pools in the waning moon,” (Joyce 1993, p. 625), we might suppose that the subject has been thoroughly exhausted. However, the little domestic detail of the neglected flower vase brings us back to number 7 Eccles Street, where Joyce pinpoints the essential nature of water in a moment of transcendence, introduced so casually that it would be easy to miss:

Having set the halffilled kettle on the now burning coals, why did he return to the stillflowing tap?

To wash his soiled hands with a partially consumed tablet of Barrington’s lemon-flavored soap, to which paper still adhered (bought thirteen hours previously for fourpence and still unpaid for), in fresh cold neverchanging everchanging water and dry them, face and hands, in a long redbordered holland cloth passed over a wooden revolving roller. (Joyce 1993, p. 625)

Joyce’s “neverchanging everchanging water,” like Larkin’s “any-angled light,” is as universal and as necessary to us as the air we breathe, and for that very reason we are usually inattentive to it, a fact which Joyce highlights by placing it where we encounter it every day, between a cake of soap and a towel. However, the “microscopic detail” in the passage causes a kind of synesthesia, in which we experience the lemonflavored soap through taste as well as smell, and the redbordered kitchen towel by feel as well as sight. This heightening of our senses recreates the thing that Joyce doesn’t need to describe because we know it so well: the physical sensation of rinsing our hands in fresh cold water.

In his 1914 poem *Under the Waterfall*, written eight years before the publication of *Ulysses*, Thomas Hardy connects a related physical sensation, that of plunging an arm into a basin of water, with an intensely personal memory of love and loss. The starting point for the poem is a little anecdote about their courtship in 1870 which his first wife Emma noted down in her old age, and which he discovered after her death in 1912:

often we walked down the beautiful Valley to Boscastle harbor where we had to jump over stones and climb over a low wall by rough steps, or get through by narrow pathways to come out on great wide spaces suddenly, with a sparkling little brook going the same way, into which we once lost a tiny picnic-tumbler, and there it is to this day no doubt between two small boulders. (Hardy 1961, p. 57)

At the time, Hardy drew an affectionately comic sketch of Emma, crouching awkwardly on hands and knees with her sleeves rolled up as she gropes inside the little waterfall, “searching for the glass.” (Hardy 1961, pp. 56–57). A tumble of curly hair con-



ceals her face, but the outline of a breast is lovingly delineated. Between the loss of the picnic-tumbler and Hardy's rediscovery of it in Emma's *Recollections*, their marriage had soured into long years of estrangement, followed by the unexpected anguish of her sudden death which inspired the elegiac outpouring of *Poems 1912–13*.

Although we discover at the end of the poem that Emma is the speaker, both lovers try to plumb "the little abyss/ With long bared arms," (Hardy 1976, p. 336), and Hardy, longing to believe that his dead wife had secretly continued to love him, may well have given her a recovered memory experience of his own. Present-day assumptions about women's lives in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century have robbed the poem of this ambiguity. Carol Rumens suggests that "although we don't learn the main speaker's gender until the end . . . most readers would associate the plunging of an arm into a basin of water with feminine domestic activities or personal ablutions," (Rumens 2011), although it would have been the maidservant who was ordered to straighten her collar when she summoned Hardy to his wife's deathbed, rather than Emma herself, who did the laundry and the washing up, while the leafy pattern on the china tells us that the basin is part of a bedroom washstand set. Moreover, although the paintings of Edgar Degas have made us subliminally think of "personal ablutions" at this period (far more sensuous ones than Hardy's poem describes) as uniquely female, we have just seen Bloom return to the stillflowing tap to wash his soiled hands.

Like Joyce's *Ithaca*, the poem is structured around questions and answers, but we are given no clue as to who the questioner is. Depending on how we interpret "the thickening shroud of grey," (Hardy 1976, p. 335), it could be Emma herself, questioning in old age a memory that remains emotionally vivid even as her mind is losing its clarity, or Emma's ghost being questioned by a husband eager, too late, to listen to her and understand her. The poem contains no overt reproaches, but the fact that the persistent song of the waterfall is the only "real love rhyme" which "leaves no smart" (Hardy 1976, p. 335) tells us that everything that has happened between them since has been a source of pain. Either way, the end of the poem is a moment of transcendence, but it is a heart-piercing one. The drinking glass has become a chalice that no lips have touched since theirs, keeping intact a lost love simply by being lost itself and therefore inviolate, preserving it under the waterfall from the bitter years to come. Yet we have already been told that "Jammed darkly, nothing to show how prized/ And by now with its smoothness opalized," (Hardy 1976, p. 336), the glass itself is ceaselessly subject to time and change.

Norbert Schneider, discussing the Pieter Claesz *vanitas* in the Mauritshuis, with its skull and "overturned wine glass," (Schneider 1990, p. 86), suggests that "nearly all still lifes include—to a greater or lesser extent—the aspect of *vanitas*, a lament about the transience of things," (Schneider 1990, p. 86), just as Hardy's poem laments the transience of what it attempts to preserve. E.H. Gombrich, the author of *Art and Illusion*, offers not transience but *trompe-l'oeil* as a reason why the props which symbolize time and mortality in golden age Dutch paintings are "not really needed," since "every painted still life has a *vanitas* motif 'built in' as it were, for those who want to look for it. The pleasures it stimulates are not real, they are mere illusion. Try and grasp the luscious fruit or the tempting beaker and you will hit against a hard cold panel." (Gombrich 1963, p. 104). Gombrich's essay on "Tradition and Expression in Western Still Life" was written in response to the classic book, *Still Life Painting from Antiquity to the Present Time*, by the art historian Charles Sterling, based on his great 1952 Paris exhibition. Antiquity here, for Sterling, means the art of classical Greece and Rome, though that was far from when still life painting began. The 2022 exhibition, *Les Choses: Un histoire de la nature morte*, which celebrated the seventieth anniversary of Sterling's exhibition, traced the genre back to prehistoric times. However, as the glass engraver, Laurence Whistler tells us, although "glass of a primitive sort was being made in Mesopotamia at least four and a half thousand years ago [ . . . ] it was in the days of Imperial Rome" that "some unhonoured initiator conceived that this curious substance could be dipped from a fiery pot and blown by mouth into a bubble of red-hot treacle at the other end of a tube; then, as it cooled, be cut, shaped and molded into a circular vessel—all

manner of vessels.” (Whistler 1992, p. 18). Surviving examples of still life frescos featuring those Roman glass vessels mark the start of the two millennia of art history which led to Hirst’s mini-installation and Craig-Martin’s oak tree, and they also allow us to consider the role of illusion in a theory of art very different from our own.

Although the name “still life” would not be coined for over a millennium and a half—it derives from the mid-seventeenth-century Dutch term *Still-leven*, describing paintings with motionless subject matter—still life images of foodstuffs, of which many examples survive from the ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum, were known as *xenia*, after the ancient Greek term for the hospitality offered to guests. The plates in Sterling’s book begin with three of these, including the image, captioned “Peaches and Glass Jar half-filled with Water,” (Sterling 1959, plate 2), which he refers to as “the famous *Peaches* of Pompeii.” (Sterling 1959, p. 15). The same black and white photograph appears in Norman Bryson’s book *Looking at the Overlooked* (Bryson 1990, p. 58), although he makes the point that we should not see “the Campanian *xenia* as free-standing images, sliced out from the walls and larger schemes to which they belong.” (Bryson 1990, p. 57). In those decorative schemes—of which the cubiculum from Boscoreale, reconstructed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, is a complete example—the viewers’ simple pleasure at discovering they have been beautifully fooled (a pleasure which nowadays we tend to associate with performance rather than painting) gives way to the sophisticated pleasure of reading a complex of images in which the artist “selects the objects for depiction in order to designate them as ‘shifters’ in a narratological sense—transition points between different levels of reality and artifice.” (Bryson 1990, p. 57). The trompe-l’oeil which is a vital component of this, far from causing the disappointment suggested by Gombrich, was admired as one of the marks of a consummate artist, as in Pliny’s famous story (Pliny 1952, pp. 308–11) of two rival painters, one of whom exhibited a picture of grapes so lifelike that birds flew up to peck at them, only to be fooled himself into trying to pull back the convincing linen curtain which did not cover, but actually was, his competitor’s painting.

Sterling’s “famous *Peaches*”, which Bryson too, despite his reservations, illustrates as a free-standing image, is part of a panel of three *xenia* from among the over sixty frescos which once decorated the corridor surrounding the peristyle garden of the House of the Deer in Herculaneum. A central image of a silver dish containing dried fruit and a gold and silver coin, plus a glass goblet with elaborate handles, is flanked by two non-identical studies of the same curving branch of five green peaches, although only the left-hand one includes the water jar which, if repeated, would simply have been a decorative detail. The single jar persuades us that, like the trompe-l’oeil fruit bowl in the Boscoreale bedchamber, it has just been put down on a convenient ledge, its apparent contingency drawing the eye to the matching transparencies of glass and water.

The significance of the central image is explained by Ovid, who in his poem *Fasti* [The Calendar], questions the two-headed god Janus about the tradition of marking the New Year with gifts of “dates and wrinkled figs . . . and honey glistening in a snow-white jar.” The god tells him that these are given “for the sake of the omen . . . that the whole course of the year may be sweet like its beginning,” but offers a more cynical answer when questioned about the coins which accompany the sweetmeats: “how little you know about the age you live in if you fancy that honey is sweeter than cash in hand!” (Ovid 1931, p. 15). The peaches and water jar originally also combined sweetness with monetary value: “In questi affreschi . . . la preziosità del vetro era messo in relazione con la rarità del frutto, in particolare con le pesche e le albicocche, la cui coltivazione all’epoca era da poco cominciata.” [In these frescos, the value of the glass is associated with the rarity of the fruit, in particular the peaches and apricots whose cultivation at that time had only recently begun.] (Ciarallo 2004, p. 89). The green peaches here may have lost their original ripeness. A nineteenth-century guidebook to the National Archaeological Museum of Naples warns visitors to its collection of over a thousand frescos that “these paintings, when discovered, had vivid and beautiful colours; they looked as of a recent date; but after a short time they were more or less altered, which no doubt depends on the colours used, or on the earth

more or less damp mingled with the ashes and the bituminous matters of the volcano.” (Monaco 1883, p. 2).

The art critic Tom Lubbock points out the economy with which the anonymous artist solved the problem of depicting “one transparent element inside another” in creating the curves of the water jar. As “an image made purely from highlights, streaks of white,” (Lubbock 2009), it shines out from the dark background of its larder niche, despite its deficiencies in perspective. Lubbock was already suffering from the brain tumor which was robbing him of words, and would shortly kill him, when he spared the valuable time to include this unassuming, two-thousand-year-old still life by an unknown painter in his brilliant *Independent* column on great works of art. Like Bryson, he shows us that it is no easy matter to read this apparently simple image: “Is this the work of a plodding, jobbing pub-sign painter? Or a playful first-century Hockney? Unless more Roman paintings turn up, to allow comparison, we’ll never be able to tell.” (Lubbock 2009). Either way, that shining flask, “beautiful and puzzling” (Lubbock 2009) in its combination of technical skill and artistic naivety, invites us to grasp, not Gombrich’s luscious fruit or tempting beaker, but a version of the quotidian which we recognize but can never quite share.

The complete panel of which it forms a part offers us a version of still life very different from the melancholy one suggested by Schneider. The figs and dates and the honey in the goblet, which will sweeten the start of the year, and the water in the jar, ready to rinse fingers sticky with peach juice, speak enticingly of time present and time future, not regretfully of time past. The dwellers in that grand seaside villa with its view of the green mountain could not have known that, after only twenty or thirty years, its frescos would remain unseen until hacked from their buried walls by eighteenth-century treasure hunters tunneling under the hardened volcanic ash.

A still life painted in about the same year as the Pieter Claesz *Mauritshuis vanitas*, Francisco de Zurbarán’s *A Cup of Water and a Rose*, also refutes Schneider’s suggestion by taking us outside time into a contemplative space, although again we need to question the apparent simplicity with which this is achieved. Lubbock says of Zurbarán that he “painted the light of God” in “images of saints and martyrs, visions and crucifixions.” (Lubbock 2011, p. 19). His austere portraits of St. Francis show the saint holding a skull which is not a reminder of sin and human frailty but a precious aid to contemplative prayer and religious ecstasy, while his visionary paintings of the immaculate conception (not the virgin birth but the doctrine that Mary herself was born without sin) show the Virgin floating in a golden sky with a bubble cloud of cherub heads under the hem of her robe. Yet, in the words of Gabriele Finaldi, the director of the National Gallery in London which now owns this particular example, “every now and then he turned to still life and created images of a searing, lyrical beauty.” (Finaldi 2022). Transfiguration here is partly a matter of religious iconography: both the thornless rose and the purity of the delicate white cup symbolize the Virgin Mary, while the silver plate on which they have been placed resembles the paten used to hold the Eucharist, as Mary herself contained the body of Christ. Yet all of these objects have been painted with a loving realism which makes them completely believable as things in the world. Jonathan Miller, in *On Reflection*, notes that “The matt surface of the cup scatters and diffuses the incident light from the left, whereas the polished silver reflects a curved highlight and an almost perfect image of the blossom *and* the pottery,” (Miller 1998, p. 19). What he doesn’t mention is that Zurbarán compels the viewer to complete the image by reading the slightly darker ellipse inside the rim of the cup as the just visible transparency of water.

A hundred and thirty years later, the great French still life painter Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin produced two paintings using the same image of a glass of water. The first of these pairs the glass with a workaday brown coffee pot, and the second with a basket holding a pyramid of wild strawberries, and both share the contemplative nature of Zurbarán’s *Cup of Water and Rose*. In Gabriel Josipovici’s short story, *A Glass of Water*, inspired by the 2000 Royal Academy Chardin exhibition, we are shown three ways of responding to Chardin’s *Glass of Water and Coffee Pot*:

Someone next to us was informing his companion that the painting was all about hierarchy and inversion, and pointed out that the handle of the pot appears to be both turned towards us and seen in profile, “a veritable feat of the painter’s art.” My own thoughts were concerned rather with the strange feeling of peace and well-being the picture gave me, even in a crowded gallery on a surprisingly hot Spring morning. Ken just said: “That glass—the water is always fresh, isn’t it?” (Josipovici 2002)

Chardin’s glass is as realistic as Zurbarán’s cup, but it is more loosely painted. If we look carefully at the deliberately imperfect ellipse that creates the rim, and the few brushstrokes and thin wash of white paint which denote the related translucencies of glass and water, we can see that Chardin, like Zurbarán, is relying on the synaesthetic response of the viewer to create what strictly speaking cannot be painted. The water in the glass is always fresh because we have put it there ourselves. Like Zurbarán, who combines his white cup with a rose made almost spherical by its reflection in the rim of the silver plate, Chardin places three white garlic bulbs in front of the coffee pot, and two white carnations next to the basket of strawberries. The garlic bulbs, especially, bring us close to Hirst’s ping-pong ball, and they also perhaps contain a distant memory of the vanitas painter’s skull.

In Josipovici’s haunting little story, the unnamed narrator, having lost first his friend and then the woman they both loved, finds that he can no longer stir the dust with a finger or see his face in the mirror, but there are advantages for an art lover in becoming a ghost. “In a crowded gallery, even on a hot day, I feel no discomfort, experience no constraint. I can concentrate totally on each painting, oblivious of the people jostling round me.” (Josipovici 2002). He is now able to experience Chardin’s paintings as if from the inside, and learn from “that glass of water which is always fresh and always present” how to accept the transience of things without lamenting. “Everything passes, it tells me, everything passes, including ourselves, and everything is always present.” (Josipovici 2002).

That moment of pure contemplation in a crowded gallery contrasts starkly with Sean O’Hagan’s preview glimpse of Damien Hirst’s 2012 Tate Modern retrospective:

Inside, in the massive Turbine Hall, flanked by security guards, will sit a relatively tiny piece entitled *For the Love of God* (2007), the most expensive work of art ever created in terms of its materials: a human skull cast in platinum and encased in diamonds. A modern vanitas piece about death and money, but mostly about money. (O’Hagan 2012)

It comes as something of a shock to be reminded that the serene art of Chardin, relegated in his lifetime to the lowly position occupied in France by the still life genre, is now also effectively about money. In March 2022, his *Basket of Wild Strawberries* made news by selling to a New York dealer for 24.4 million euros, the highest sum ever paid for a French Old Master painting.

This commodification of art is not, of course, something new. Prince Albert declared in 1851 that “works of art, by being publicly exhibited and offered for sale, are becoming articles of trade, following as such the unreasoning laws of markets and fashion; and public and even private patronage is swayed by their tyrannical influence.” (Driscoll 2009). However, his civilized regret over a phenomenon which his Great Exhibition of the same year would help to encourage is dismissed as aristocratic by Ian Driscoll who, in a 2009 article in the *Financial Times*, claims the fact that “top-notch art” now “oils the wheels of lending” as a victory for modern democracy:

Collectors still buy fine art for its aesthetic qualities but have long acknowledged its role as a store of value or as a commodity to be sold for a gain. Others, aided by their bankers, have gone a step further: they treat their collections as working assets. (Driscoll 2009)

Of course, it is still possible for artists themselves to locate the value of their work elsewhere. Cornelia Parker has said, “For a long time I made work that was ephemeral and

didn't survive, basically because I didn't want to be even thinking about commerce when I was making work", although even she gradually "realized that collectors are custodians of your work." (Howitt 2013). It goes without saying that hers is not a philosophy shared by Damien Hirst, whose 2017 show for the Venice Biennale, *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable*, consisted of "hundreds of objects in marble, gold and bronze, crystal, jade, and malachite," (Cumming 2017), all of them for sale. However, the ubiquity of the tumbler and ping-pong ball which make up *Relationships* raises the question of how objects too common to be copyrighted can nevertheless be monetized. The description of an example recently offered for sale tells us that the answer is provenance, packaging, and state of preservation:

Titled 'Relationships', the four-piece complete work consists of the center-piece drinking glass which is to be filled with water to any height upon which the original ping-pong ball is meant to float (or not). The work is also accompanied by the original hand-signed and numbered certificate from the very small edition of only 125 examples, showing the different ways one can display the work. The original cylindrical encasement used to contain each element is also present. Considered a very early, vintage Hirst edition, rarely seen with all four parts present and perfectly preserved. (Artificial Gallery 2023)

If we read the wording carefully, we will be able to infer two things: that the "perfectly preserved" ping-pong ball may just possibly be a substitute, the "original" which was "meant to float" having succumbed to decay like Hirst's original tiger shark, and that in either case, this particular ping-pong ball has never been in contact with water.

Water is the substance of life, but it is also the insidious enemy of art, feared by conservators and collectors even more than theft or fire. Water means mold, it means foxing, it means glass "with its smoothness opalized": the apparently decorative iridescence which "is actually a sign that the glass is slowly dying." (L. 2011). Along with ultraviolet light, water speeds up the "deterioration over time" to which celluloid objects such as Hirst's ping-pong ball are "inherently subject." (C. 2014). All in all, it is unlikely that the remaining examples of this "very early, vintage Hirst edition" will ever be removed from the safety of their "original cylindrical encasement." The relationship between the collector and the packaging has become a deliberate part of the installation, not so much a cynical marketing exercise as a piece of art that casts a cynical eye on the nature of the art market of which it is a part. Yet to restore its power to be transfigured, all we need to do is to take Hirst's tumbler or any tumbler, Larkin's glass, Chardin's glass, Zurbarán's cup, over to Bloom's "stillflowing tap" and fill it with "fresh cold neverchanging everchanging water".

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