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ÉTAT PRÉSENT
ENLIGHTENMENT HOSPITALITY: THE CASE OF
CHARDIN

JUDITH STILL

If classification is a necessary evil, its narrowing of the mind can be counterbalanced by regular examination of the criteria on which we base our categories. One particularly arbitrary form of classification is the division of intellectual work into centuries — a perverse fascination with the repeated zero, the abyss into which so much can easily fall. Many eighteenth-century scholars have approached this bizarrerie with appropriate flexibility: while they may shorten their period by ending it in 1789, they can also colonize others by referring to the ‘long eighteenth century’ (1660–1830).¹ Chronological cut-offs apart, what categories do we impose on the French eighteenth century? There are three biospheres that fascinate our gaze, to wit: the decadent social life of the aristocrat of the Ancien Régime; the life of the Enlightenment mind; the bloody politics of the Revolution. In this short piece, I propose a neglected figure as worthy of attention: the diamond merchant Jean Chardin, who, as Agha Chardin, represents the traveller and, as John Chardin, the refugee. His life-span and publications cross the 1700 boundary; the French, and French Studies, have shown him little hospitality.

There is considerable interest in this question of hospitality at present, fuelled by the writings of Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas and other philosophers, as well as by political responses to the arrival of asylum seekers and other migrants in Europe.² A range of academics within cultural and social studies (including French Studies) have been producing work focused on the representation and reality of State (in) hospitality, or on inter-personal hospitable relations within this context; although the vast majority of publications on hospitality, in this age of globalization, in fact deal with the economics of travel and tourism.

Both philosophical writings and political debate in France make repeated reference to two particular legacies of the eighteenth century. Derrida returns to Kant’s *To Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (1795) as a key reference point on universal hospitality. In the debate stirred up by

¹ Of course this does not help the significant minority of us who choose to work both in the eighteenth century and the contemporary period, believing that our work in the one area enriches our work in the other — a view not universally shared, I understand!

² I am presently engaged in a study of hospitality in the eighteenth century and the contemporary period funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

French politicians seeking to regulate immigration, the reference is more often to a tradition of revolutionary fraternity.³ It may, however, be useful to draw on other aspects of an ‘Enlightenment legacy’ in considering both the historical picture and the shaping of the parameters of many of the debates around, and practices of, hospitality today. The eighteenth century saw the classic formulation of an economic liberalism which is a powerful force in relations between individuals as well as in the national debates around immigration and asylum seekers today. In Rousseau, a great admirer of Chardin,⁴ we find an early statement of an anthropological theory of ‘man’, in terms of the play of sameness and difference, that would permit hospitality between individuals of any race — even while we have a theory of the self-sufficient nation state that does not encourage cosmopolitanism. State practices prior to the Revolution are of interest, as are inter-individual practices of hospitality in the eighteenth century — both at home and abroad, both worldly hospitality and more humble forms. These are enormous areas of research; here I shall just indicate some themes relating to one almost forgotten but fascinating figure. While Chardin may be a seventeenth-century phenomenon, his major publication, *Les Voyages en Perse* came out, just a couple of years before his death, in 1711,⁵ and had a significant influence on many Enlightenment thinkers — not only the obvious Montesquieu.⁶

Chardin was known as ‘The Traveller’, and was indeed a traveller in many different senses. He was a commercial traveller in the East,⁷ and then a refugee from France. He experienced the hospitality (and sometimes hostility) of many different nations as well as acting as guest and host with individuals in many different contexts. He brings out the critical role of religion, which must not be forgotten in contemporary analyses of hospitality — Derrida’s coinage, which reminds us of the peril to the host in any truly hospitable situation. The guest too, and

³ For the rhetoric of hospitality in the Revolution, see Sophie Wahnich, *L’Impossible citoyen: l’étranger dans le discours de la Révolution française* (Paris, Albin Michel, 1997).

⁴ In the important note X (on cultural similarity and difference and the placing of boundaries to the human) to the *Discours sur l’inégalité*, Rousseau wrote ‘Le joyaillier Chardin qui a voyagé comme Platon, n’a rien laissé à dire sur la Perse’, edited by Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (*Œuvres complètes*, III, p. 213) (Paris, Gallimard, 1959–95, 5 vols). This compliment is in the context of a generalized complaint about European ignorance with respect to other peoples — partly due to the fact that ideal observers such as Montesquieu or Buffon have not travelled, and that those who have travelled have done so uniquely for material gain and their accounts of their voyages focus on *things* rather than *people*.

⁵ The first volume was first published in 1686 in London and Amsterdam; it was revised and expanded in the 1711 publication (Amsterdam, Jean-Louis de Lorme). The best edition to consult is perhaps the 1811 one edited by L. Langlès (Paris, Le Normant), as this restores some of the cuts made by the publisher in 1711 — for fear that those observations seemed anti-Catholic.

⁶ P. Vernière locates thirty-eight certain references to Chardin (and nine possible or probable references) in the *Lettres persanes* (Paris, Garnier, 1960, p. xx). No other source is anything like so frequent.

⁷ Unlike many contemporaries, Chardin did not see ‘the East’ (or ‘the East Indies’) as an undifferentiated mass, and insisted on the specificity of particular civilizations — I apologize for my own summary formulations!

more often, is at risk. Moreover, Chardin's life is a good example of the way in which the nation's 'guests' often act as host to other foreigners. As a Huguenot refugee in England, warmly welcomed and indeed ennobled because of his wealth and expertise in trade with the East, Chardin entertained many less fortunate French Protestants who sought asylum after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, and did not forget them even in his will. Finally Chardin contributes largely to what will become Orientalism; study of his work reminds us that that disciplinary designation encompasses knowledge, translation, affection, admiration — it is not only or not always a peddling of stereotypes.

There is no edition of Chardin's great work in print, and little secondary material to be found. In 2002, Ina Baghdiantz McCabe produced the first edition of *Du Bon usage du thé et des épices en Asie: réponses à Monsieur Cabart de Villarmont*.⁸ The only biography of Chardin is written by Dirk Van der Cruysse, who begins: 'Voici le premier livre jamais écrit sur Jean Chardin, l'auteur des prodigieux *Voyages en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient* dont la richesse et l'étonnante modernité ont émerveillé les philosophes des Lumières. Comment expliquer ce silence?'⁹ Van der Cruysse does not answer his own question (although he makes not only a scholarly but an heroic attempt to fill the gap he has observed); he refers his reader to René Pomeau's comment that 'un sort hostile' has marked Chardin's destiny...¹⁰

Du Bon usage has been firmly attributed to Chardin only since Van der Cruysse's detective work; I shall end with a few observations on this short 'user's guide' since it is the one work readers can easily acquire, and it gives a 'flavour' of Chardin. Chardin is explicit about his motives for travelling: first, to make a profit, and second, out of intellectual curiosity. These motives are intimately related in *Du Bon usage*, which is a series of answers to over a hundred written questions put to Chardin in 1671 after his first trip to Persia. McCabe asks: 'Esprit Cabart, chevalier seigneur de Villarmont (1628–1707), avait-il été chargé d'établir ce questionnaire?' (p.13). The influence of Colbert on Louis XIV meant state interest in overseas commerce — Chardin writes despairingly in *Voyages* of the amateurish attempts of the French Compagnie des Indes Orientales to rival the more established English and the Dutch East India companies. The French nobles sent to Persia and to India had no sense of oriental languages or cultures and consistently failed to behave as good guests. This lack of local knowledge or understanding of what is regarded as

⁸ Briare, *L'Inventaire*.

⁹ *Chardin le Persan* (Paris, Fayard, 1998), p. 7.

¹⁰ René Pomeau, *L'Age classique*, III, 1680–1720 (*Littérature française*, VIII, Paris, Artaud, 1971, p. 3). I have tracked down an American doctoral thesis that includes Chardin as a 'forgotten traveller', and a couple of articles apart from material listed in Van der Cruysse (three theses, seven articles plus general works that include reference to him).

courtesy in different contexts inhibits trade, as Chardin consistently points out. On the other hand, McCabe is of the view that Villarmont's questions smack of individual commercial espionage (as she puts it).

Just as Schools of Management today profess an interest in linguistic and cultural difference in order to train students for business, so the enlightened jeweller Chardin immersed himself in the cultures of the places where he traded — and when he settled into retirement in England published his accounts of his travels to benefit others (and with the hope of making money from publication). His answers to Villarmont are written in 1680 during the long sea voyage home from his second journey to the East, a necessary interstice in trading when he can reflect on his acquisitions in terms of knowledge or science. He is doing a favour to someone who served overseas for the King and may represent many interests at a time when a Protestant merchant, however well received by Moslems and Hindus, feels anxious about the welcome he will find in Paris.

Chardin's greatest expertise as a merchant lies in precious stones, but he can turn his hand to most substances that can be exchanged for a profit — and Villarmont is particularly interested in the trade in spices and drugs such as tea, pepper, cinnamon, ambergris, musk, cannabis or cloves. I shall briefly note some of Chardin's remarks on betel. He devotes several pages (pp.75–81) to betel leaves in response to four questions from Villarmont, who wonders if it would be possible and interesting to import them if they were dried or made into pastilles; the fresh leaves do not survive the long journey to Europe. In India, betel leaves are chewed, mixed with various other substances such as cloves and, most frequently, with the nut from the palm tree *Roysontea Regia* (*l'Areque*) (Chardin has brought a sample home) or, the aromatic resin catechu (*Caat*), which sweetens the breath. Chardin explains that both men and women, both Indians and Europeans who have lived in India, find chewing betel, and the substances it is combined with, a useful and healthy practice not only because it encourages spitting (to get rid of phlegm from the stomach) but because it has the effect:

De tenir la bouche fort nette, l'haleine douce, les dents blanches, les levres rouges merveilleusement, de fortifier les gencives, et d'en exterminer des vers, et d'autres saletez qui s'y engendrent. Aussy n'y a t'il rien de plus net, et de plus doux que la bouche des Indiennes, tant par le grand soin qu'elles ont de se nettoyer tous les matins les levres, les dents, et la langue, que par l'usage perpetuel de ces drogues, il faut dire la mesme chose des hommes, et je souhaiterois pour cela que cet usage s'introduisit chez nous, je m'assure qu'il gueriroit, et previeudroit bien des maux de dents. (p. 77)

Chardin is the scientific observer and the prudent economist — not sure of the practicalities of importing betel and needing to investigate further to discover whether the Dutch have cracked the problem of conservation during transport. His consistent interest in health and hygiene is allied

not only to self-preservation and commerce, but also to his fascination with cultural difference in relation to climate and diet (and so the greater production of phlegm in Hindu vegetarians for instance). Alongside his measured interests, there is, however, also a touch of the fascination with the erotic and the lethal we now consider typical of Orientalism. Packets of betel are frequently given as presents when entertaining — the guest who is aware of local custom knows that these must be consumed without hesitation or else the host will be mightily offended. Hence, they are an excellent way of poisoning your guests ... On the other hand, when it is a woman who offers a packet of betel to a man, his imagination will be enflamed (at least this is Chardin's materialist explanation of the magical belief in love potions):

C'est dans ce paquet dit on que les femmes donnent le philtre aux gens qu'elles veulent captiver ce qui fait qu'une honeste femme n'en presente que tres rarement, car c'est une declaration d'amour, et une offre de soy mesme, et parcequi ce seroit faire un affront mortel a celles qui la presentent dans les pays nommez de ne le pas manger a l'instant, et sans l'ouvrir, dela vient que bien des gens s'imaginent qu'il y a dedans quelque chose de caché qui charme, et enchaisne, j'ay toujours cru pour moy que tout le charme de ces boucons est le Caat Cheiroso avec les appas de la personne qui le presente. (pp. 78–79)

Our picture of eighteenth-century France does not have much room for figures such as Chardin, who have a flavour of the modern about them. The Protestant venture capitalist who drives a hard bargain is also charitable, and, most significantly, the kind of Orientalist scholar who is comfortable with other languages, clothes and customs — not seeking either similarity or inferiority in other peoples. His theories of environmental determinism (in particular the determining power of climate) are interpreted in an open-minded spirit — ready to see different diet, sleeping or travelling habits as appropriate rather than odd or inferior. He condemns what he sees as cruelty and abuse of power, but revises any hasty judgement should events later seem to prove it wrong. From the perspective of the twenty-first century, I should like to see Chardin's ability to translate himself as a mark of his modernity — although at times it seems as if we are in fact less able to act as respectful guests (or hosts) abroad than he was.

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