Vermeer, the Art of Meditation, and the Allegory of Faith

Aneta Georgievska-Shine

[...] and thus the least things in the universe must be secret mirrors to the greatest.

Thomas de Quincey

And as for the symbolism of the triple sphere, of that globe which the Church, seized by her high ideal, tramples under foot, of that culpable fruit, which she has rejected, scarcely tasted, and of that perfect and transparent truth which her desire contemplates—what could be simpler to interpret?

Paul Claudel

One of the most admired aspects of Vermeer’s approach to representation is the open-endedness of his visual constructs. This is true both of his slice-of-life images of Dutch interiors featuring contemplative, solitary figures, or those that address recognizable or codified narratives, such as his early biblical or mythological inventions. This open-endedness is almost invariably a function of the subversion of conventions: a young woman playing her harpsichord under the watchful gaze of her male teacher appears instantly relatable to compositions by the artist’s peers such as Metsu or Van Mieris, yet infinitely

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1 De Quincy I., Autobiography, The Collected Writings of Thomas de Quincey (Edinburgh: 1889) 129.

removed from their concern with music-making as a foil for amorous intrigue. A woman holding a balance may call to mind the negative connotations of the gold-weigher iconography, only to undermine that reading by its counter-allusion to the Virgin Mary.

This subtle mixing of codes makes almost all of Vermeer’s compositions feel both like carefully observed instances of ‘being’ and highly self-conscious allegories. Nor is this a matter of mere visual wit. Rather, his double perspective on the world as a reality comprising observable things-as-such and signs of something beyond themselves reflects a broader cultural concern with the relationship between the material and the metaphysical. Nowhere is this duality more emphatically expressed than in the Allegory of the Catholic Faith from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York [Fig. 16.1]. Here, the artist not only straddles the optically-knowable and the symbolic, but highlights the tension between these two modes of knowledge in order to create a meditative painting whose allegorical content depends on the intensely visual and palpably real presence of its constituent elements.

Most scholars have judged the highly staged quality of this late work as an ‘anomaly’ motivated by a particular program or the wishes of a certain patron—tasks perceived as alien to Vermeer’s sensibility. Admittedly, there have been some more generous views as well. Valerie Hedquist, for instance, has cogently argued that for all its artifice, the Allegory of the Catholic Faith is a sophisticated visual discourse on sin and redemption. Another sympathetic

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