

'Et in Arcadia Ego': Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition

Eulogy
elegy - mournful
sad songs, poem
w/ certain
meter

[...] Poussin had come to Rome in 1624 or 1625, one or two years after Guercino had left it. And a few years later (presumably about 1630) he produced the earlier of his two *Et in Arcadia ego* compositions, now in the Devonshire Collection at Chatsworth. Being a Classicist (though in a very special sense), and probably conversant with Virgil, Poussin revised Guercino's composition by adding the Arcadian river god Alpheus and by transforming the decaying masonry into a classical sarcophagus inscribed with the *Et in Arcadia ego*; moreover, he emphasized the amorous implications of the Arcadian milieu by the addition of a shepherdess to Guercino's two shepherds. But in spite of these improvements, Poussin's picture does not conceal its derivation from Guercino's. In the first place, it retains to some extent the element of drama and surprise: the shepherds approach as a group from the left and are unexpectedly stopped by the tomb. In the second place, there is still the actual skull, placed upon the sarcophagus above the word *Arcadia*, though it has become quite small and inconspicuous and fails to attract the attention of the shepherds who—a telling symptom of Poussin's intellectualistic inclinations—seem to be more intensely fascinated by the inscription than they are shocked by the death's-head. In the third place, the picture still conveys, though far less obtrusively than Guercino's, a moral or admonitory message. It formed, originally, the counterpart of a *Midas Washing His Face in the River Pactolus* (now in the Metropolitan Museum at New York), the iconographically essential figure of the river god Pactolus accounting for the inclusion of its counterpart, the less necessary river god Alpheus, in the *Arcadia* picture.¹ ☆

① In conjunction, the two compositions thus teach a twofold lesson, one warning against a mad desire for riches at the expense of the more real values of life, the other against a thoughtless enjoyment of pleasures soon to be ended. The phrase *Et in Arcadia ego* can still be understood to be voiced by Death personified, and can still be translated as 'Even in Arcady I, Death, hold sway,' without being out of harmony with what is visible in the painting itself.

② After another five or six years, however, Poussin produced a second and final version of the *Et in Arcadia ego* theme, the famous picture in

the Louvre. And in this painting—no longer a *memento mori* in classical garb paired with a *cave avaritiam* in classical garb, but standing by itself—we can observe a radical break with the mediaeval, moralizing tradition. The element of drama and surprise has disappeared. Instead of two or three Arcadians approaching from the left in a group, we have four, symmetrically arranged on either side of a sepulchral monument. Instead of being checked in their progress by an unexpected and terrifying phenomenon, they are absorbed in calm discussion and pensive contemplation. One of the shepherds kneels on the ground as though rereading the inscription for himself. The second seems to discuss it with a lovely girl who thinks about it in a quiet, thoughtful attitude. The third seems trajected into a sympathetic, brooding melancholy. The form of the tomb is simplified into a plain rectangular block, no longer foreshortened but placed parallel to the picture plane, and the death's-head is eliminated altogether.

Here, then, we have a basic change in interpretation. The Arcadians are not so much warned of an implacable future as they are immersed in mellow meditation on a beautiful past. They seem to think less of themselves than of the human being buried in the tomb—a human being that once enjoyed the pleasures which they now enjoy, and whose monument 'bids them remember their end' only in so far as it evokes the memory of one who had been what they are. In short, Poussin's Louvre picture no longer shows a dramatic encounter with Death but a contemplative absorption in the idea of mortality. We are confronted with a change from thinly veiled moralism to undisguised elegiac sentiment.

This general change in content—brought about by all those individual changes in form and motifs that have been mentioned, and too basic to be accounted for by Poussin's normal habit of stabilizing and in some measure tranquillizing the second version of an earlier picture dealing with the same subject²—can be explained by a variety of reasons. It is consistent with the more relaxed and less fearful spirit of a period that had triumphantly emerged from the spasms of the Counter-Reformation. It is in harmony with the principles of Classicist art theory, which rejected 'les objets bizarres,' especially such gruesome objects as a death's-head.³ And it was facilitated, if not caused, by Poussin's familiarity with Arcadian literature, already evident in the Chatsworth picture, where the substitution of a classical sarcophagus for Guercino's shapeless piece of masonry may well have been suggested by the tomb of Daphnis in Virgil's Fifth *Eclogue*. But the reverent and melancholy mood of the Louvre picture, and even a detail such as the simple, rectangular shape of the tomb, would seem to reveal a fresh contact with Sannazaro. His description of the 'Tomb in Arcadia'—characteristically no longer enclosing the reluctant shepherd Daphnis but a no less reluctant shepherdess named Phyllis—

Louvre
less
drama
more
intellectual

2
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from
memento
more to
poetic
melancholy

actually foreshadows the situation visualized in Poussin's later composition:

farò fra questi rustici

La sepoltura tua famosa e celebre.
Et da monti Thoscani et da' Ligustici
Verran pastori ad venerar questo angulo
Sol per cagion che alcuna volta fustici.
Et leggeran nel bel sasso quadrangulo
Il titol che ad tutt'hore il cor m'infrigida,
Per cui tanto dolor nel petto strangulo:
'Quella che ad Meliseo si altera et rigida
Si mostrò sempre, hor mansueta et humile
Si sta sepolta in questa pietra frigida.'⁴

I will make thy tomb famous and renowned among these rustic folk. Shepherds shall come from the hills of Tuscany and Liguria to worship this corner of the world solely because thou hast dwelt here once. And they shall read on the beautiful square monument the inscription that chills my heart at all hours, that makes me strangle so much sorrow in my breast: 'She who always showed herself so haughty and rigid to Meliseo now lies entombed, meek and humble, in this cold stone.'

These verses not only anticipate the simple, rectangular shape of the tomb in Poussin's Louvre picture which strikes us as a direct illustration of Sannazaro's *bel sasso quadrangulo*; they also conform in an amazing degree to the picture's strange, ambiguous mood—to that hushed brooding over the silent message of a former fellow being: 'I, too, lived in Arcady where you now live; I, too, enjoyed the pleasures which you now enjoy; I, too, was hardhearted where I should have been compassionate. And now I am dead and buried.' In thus paraphrasing, according to Sannazaro, the meaning of the *Et in Arcadia ego* as it appears in Poussin's Louvre painting, I have done what nearly all the Continental interpreters did: I have distorted the original meaning of the inscription in order to adapt it to the new appearance and content of the picture. For there is no doubt that this inscription, translated correctly, no longer harmonizes with what we see with our eyes.

When read according to the rules of Latin grammar ('Even in Arcady, there am I'), the phrase had been consistent and easily intelligible as long as the words could be attributed to a death's-head and as long as the shepherds were suddenly and frighteningly interrupted in their walk. This is manifestly true of Guercino's painting, where the death's-head is the most prominent feature of the composition and where its psychological impact is not as yet weakened by the competition of a beautiful sarcophagus or tomb. But it is also true, if in a considerably lesser degree, of Poussin's earlier picture, where the skull, though smaller and already subordinated to the newly introduced sarcophagus, is still in evidence, and where the idea of sudden inter-

Key - standard interp.
does not match picture

☆

ruption is retained.

When facing the Louvre painting, however, the beholder finds it difficult to accept the inscription in its literal, grammatically correct, significance. In the absence of a death's-head, the *ego* in the phrase *Et in Arcadia ego* must now be taken to refer to the tomb itself. And though a 'speaking tomb' was not unheard of in the funerary poetry of the time, this conceit was so unusual that Michelangelo, who used it in three of his fifty epitaphs on a handsome boy, thought it necessary to enlighten the reader by an explanatory remark to the effect that here it is, exceptionally, 'the tomb which addresses him who reads these verses.'⁵ It is infinitely more natural to ascribe the words, not to the tomb but to the person buried therein. Such is the case with ninety-nine per cent of all epitaphs, including the inscriptions of the tomb of Daphnis in Virgil and the tomb of Phyllis in Sannazaro; and Poussin's Louvre picture suggests this familiar interpretation—which, as it were, projects the message of the Latin phrase from the present into the past—all the more forcibly as the behavior of the figures no longer expresses surprise and dismay but quiet, reminiscent meditation.

Thus Poussin himself, while making no verbal change in the inscription, invites, almost compels, the beholder to mistranslate it by relating the *ego* to a dead person instead of to the tomb, by connecting the *et* with *ego* instead of with *Arcadia*, and by supplying the missing verb in the form of a *vixi* or *fui* instead of a *sum*. The development of his pictorial vision had outgrown the significance of the literary formula, and we may say that those who, under the impact of the Louvre picture, decided to render the phrase *Et in Arcadia ego* as 'I, too, lived in Arcady,' rather than as 'Even in Arcady, there am I,' did violence to Latin grammar but justice to the new meaning of Poussin's composition.

This *felix culpa* can, in fact, be shown to have been committed in Poussin's own circle. His friend and first biographer, Giovanni Pietro Bellori, had given, in 1672, a perfectly correct and exact interpretation of the inscription when he wrote: '*Et in Arcadia ego*, cioè, che *il sepolcro si trova ancora in Arcadia, e la Morte a luogo in mezzo le felicità*'⁶ ('*Et in Arcadia ego*, which means that the grave is to be found [present tense!] even in Arcady and that death occurs in the very midst of delight'). But only a few years later (1685) Poussin's second biographer, André Félibien, also acquainted with him, took the first and decisive step on the road to bad Latinity and good artistic analysis: 'Par cette inscription,' he says, 'on a voulu marquer que *celui qui est dans cette sépulture a vécu en Arcadie et que la mort se rencontre parmi les plus grandes félicités*'⁷ ('This inscription emphasizes the fact that the person buried in this tomb has lived [past tense!] in Arcady'). Here, then, we have the occupant of the tomb substituted for the tomb itself, and the whole phrase projected into the past: what had been a menace has become a

language
issues

speaking
tomb



Key



remembrance. From then on the development proceeded to its logical conclusion. Félibien had not bothered about the *et*, he had simply left it out, and this abbreviated version, quaintly retranslated into Latin, survives in the inscription of a picture by Richard Wilson, painted at Rome in 1755: 'Ego fui in Arcadia.' Some thirty years after Félibien (1719), the Abbé du Bos rendered the *et* by an adverbial 'cependant': 'Je vivais cependant en Arcadie,'⁸ which is in English: 'And yet I lived in Arcady.' The final touch, it seems, was put by the great Diderot, who, in 1758, firmly attached the *et* to the *ego* and rendered it by *aussi*: 'Je vivais aussi dans la délicieuse Arcadie,'⁹ 'I, too, lived in delightful Arcady.' His translation must thus be considered as the literary source of all the later variations now in use, down to Jacques Delille, Johann Georg Jacobi, Goethe, Schiller, and Mrs. Felicia Hemans.¹⁰

Thus, while—as we have seen—the original meaning of *Et in Arcadia ego* precariously survived in the British Isles, the general development outside England resulted in the nearly universal acceptance of what may be called the elegiac interpretation ushered in by Poussin's Louvre picture. And in Poussin's own homeland, France, the humanistic tradition had so much decayed in the nineteenth century that Gustave Flaubert, the great contemporary of the early Impressionists, no longer understood the famous phrase at all. In his beautiful description of the Bois de la Garenne—'parc très beau malgré ces beautés factices'—he mentions, together with a Temple of Vesta, a Temple of Friendship, and a great number of artificial ruins: 'sur une pierre taillée en forme de tombe, *In Arcadia ego*, non-sens dont je n'ai pu découvrir l'intention,'¹¹ 'on a stone cut in the shape of a tomb one reads *In Arcadia ego*, a piece of nonsense the meaning of which I have been unable to discover.'

We can easily see that the new conception of the Tomb in Arcady initiated by Poussin's Louvre picture, and sanctioned by the mis-translation of its inscription, could lead to reflections of almost opposite nature, depressing and melancholy on the one hand, comforting and assuaging on the other; and, more often than not, to a truly 'Romantic' fusion of both. In Richard Wilson's painting, just mentioned, the shepherds and the funerary monument—here a slightly mutilated *stele*—are reduced to a *staffage* accentuating the muted serenity of the Roman Campagna at sundown. In Johann Georg Jacobi's *Winterreise* of 1769—containing what seems to be the earliest 'Tomb in Arcady' in German literature—we read: 'Whenever, in a beautiful landscape, I encounter a tomb with the inscription *Auch ich war in Arkadien*, I point it out to my friends; we stop a moment, press each other's hands, and proceed.'¹² And in a strangely attractive engraving by a German Romanticist named Carl Wilhelm Kolbe, who had a trick of constructing wondrous jungles and forests by magnifying grass, herbs or cabbage leaves to the size of bushes and trees, the tomb

elegiac
eulogy

and its inscription (here, correctly, *Et in Arcadia ego* although the legend of the engraving consists of the erroneous 'Auch ich war in Arkadien') serve only to emphasize the gentle absorption of two lovers in one another. In Goethe's use of the phrase *Et in Arcadia ego*, finally, the idea of death has been entirely eliminated.¹³ He uses it, in an abbreviated version ('Auch ich in Arkadien') as a motto for his famous account of his blissful journey to Italy, so that it merely means: 'I, too, was in the land of joy and beauty.'

Fragonard, on the other hand, retained the idea of death; but he reversed the original moral. He depicted two cupids, probably spirits of departed lovers, clasped in an embrace within a broken sarcophagus while other, smaller cupids flutter about and a friendly genius illumines the scene with the light of a nuptial torch. Here the development has run full cycle. To Guercino's 'Even in Arcady, there is death' Fragonard's drawing replies: 'Even in death, there may be Arcady.'

Nice!

