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Review

Reviewed Work: *An Analysis of Poussin's "Et in Arcadia ego"*

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NOTES AND REVIEWS

AN ANALYSIS OF POUSSIN'S "ET IN ARCADIA EGO."

In his famous *Et in Arcadia ego* in the Louvre (Fig. 1), Poussin's classic order derives from his effort to show the different nature, or reason, of each person's response to a discovery which has turned the group to reflection. The center of the composition is the point of reference for the attention of each figure. It is the inscription to which the two crouching youths point. The composition consists of four figures symmetrically distributed to right and left of this center. The group may be divided in several ways. First, it may be divided into the group of the two inner crouching figures concerned immediately with the inscription, and the group of the outer standing figures concerned indirectly with it. Each of these groups may be subdivided according to significant symmetrical oppositions. In the inner group is a figure on the left bent over in intensive concentration and pointing to a single letter, thus indicating he is still engaged in deciphering the inscription, which means he has not yet apprehended its significance. Opposed to him is the crouching inner figure on the right who points to the inscription as a whole and looks up at his standing companion, thus indicating he has grasped its significance. The outer group may also be divided into a figure on the left who does not yet know the meaning, since he is concentrating on the crouching man who is still deciphering, and a figure on the right who does know the meaning, which she shows by her reflective calm and the gesture of reassurance in placing her hand on the shoulder of the troubled youth who looks up to her. This subdividing of each group permits a final regrouping, likewise symmetrically disposed about the center, of the two on the left who do not yet know, and the two on the right who already know the significance of the inscription *Et in Arcadia ego*, which, according to Félibien,¹ is meant to show that death is encountered even among the greatest felicities, since the inscription is the epitaph of a former dweller in Arcadia.

This differentiation between the right and left groups cannot be encompassed within a strictly closed system of oppositions, or a purely classic system, since the right group represents a higher stage than the left, and one through which the left group must inevitably pass. The differentiation is therefore marked by a complete subordination of the left group to the center, and an only partial subordination of the right group. The limited subordination of the right group is indicated by the fact that the crouching youth on the right points to the center, but looks up to his companion. She, in turn, is bound to him by her gesture, but he does not fully command her attention, as the other crouching man commands the interest of the standing youth. Her attention has, in fact, already been released from the center, the inscription, and she is freed for quiet, untroubled reflection. It is

1. Félibien, *Entretiens sur les vies et les ouvrages des plus excellents peintres anciens et modernes*, 2nd ed., Paris, 1688, II, p. 379.

she whom Poussin represents as the most highly developed person, in whom the light of reason is most manifest. By no accident she is the only fully erect figure, her attitude denoting independence and self-composure. She is thus not only a component part of a group subordinate to the center, but also half independent of it. In fact, she constitutes a new, a second center in the picture. This is accentuated by her difference in sex from the other three. A woman in whom reason holds sway over physical appetites, as indicated by the disposition of her costume as well as her attitude, she is able to face with composure the prospect of final dissolution, since that nearer death of the sexual life, so much closer for women than for men, holds no terror for her. Thus is heightened her maturity in youth.

It is the problem of rendering various types of human reactions (through which the historical picture is enriched and diversified) in terms of classic moderation, through a harmonious disposition in which the "reason" of each person's action is subsumed under a rationally ordered and tempered whole, that has led Poussin to adopt a pictorial structure of a dual character as the vehicle for his idea. Two opposed structural types are accommodated within this design, the planimetric, bilaterally symmetric, classically closed motive, and the motive of a progression² on the diagonal from left to right, with the figure of the woman as the culmination of this progression. (The reciprocal action of these two structural motives on each other is evident in the partial masking of the diagonal of the tomb by the figures, and in the subtle ambiguity of the figure disposition, at once planimetric and diagonal. The dominant centrality of the inscription is somewhat counteracted by the placement of the largest tree behind the main figure, the woman. Contributory to the same effect is the situation of the vanishing point in her half of the picture.)

A final consideration, on the genesis of this work, will throw additional light on its Poussinesque classicistic character, and the subtle interrelation of structure and idea. Werner Weisbach³ first pointed out the connection between Poussin's two versions of the theme (Figs. 1 and 2)⁴ and Guercino's picture in the

2. While the selection of different moments for the various participants in an action is a typical device of the classicist historical painter, and is considered by Lessing allowable within very restricted limits, Poussin follows no uniform pattern in the use of this time differential. Here he uses it as a unilateral progression—not so in his various versions of the Apollo and Daphne, in several of which there is a striking disregard for even a semblance of unity of time. The complex reciprocal action of temporal and ethical elements in the Israelites Receiving the Manna in the Louvre may also be contrasted with the simple progression in the *Et in Arcadia ego*.

3. *Et in Arcadia ego*, in *Die Antike*, VI (1930), p. 127.

4. O. Grautoff (*Nicholas Poussin, sein Werk und sein Leben*, Munich, 1914, II, pp. 70, 132) dates the first version 1632-35, the second 1638-39. The expansion of space on the second work is typical of a process continuous in Poussin's development. It is essentially an assimilation of Baroque space and its transformation into an extended, classically ordered configuration, this process receiving its highest expression in the landscapes produced from 1648 to 1665.

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