



Nicolas Poussin, *The Arcadian Shepherds* (Musée du Louvre, Paris; photo Giraudon)

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Toward A Theory of Reading in the Visual Arts: Poussin's *The Arcadian Shepherds*

This paper is an attempt at reading a single painting—Poussin's *The Arcadian Shepherds* (Louvre)¹—but such a tentative reading cannot be truly accomplished without being aware of the operations involved in the contemplative process, their implications on theoretical and practical levels, and the hypotheses which guide that process. My essay can thus be considered as an approach to a partial history of reading in the field of visual art. To put my undertaking in more general terms, I wish to test some notions and procedures elaborated in contemporary semiotic and semantic theories by using a specific painting as an experimental device, a paradigm or model to validate, refine, or question those notions and procedures when they are displaced into a domain for which they were not primarily constructed. Although the study of Poussin's painting (one of his best-known and most often discussed works) aims at constructing a theory of reading and determining the notion of *reader* in painting, the final result of the enterprise will also be a description of that painting as such, in its irreducible singularity—our aim being to discover the system that underlies the pictorial text, making it coherent and noncomparable to other pictorial texts, as well as to locate the viewer-reader

¹ *The Arcadian Shepherds*. 85 x 121 cms. Musée du Louvre, Paris (734). See A. Blunt, *The Paintings of Nicolas Poussin, a Critical Catalogue* (London, 1966), pp. 80-81, for the discussions about the date of the painting. A. Blunt's conclusion is the period after 1655. See also the exhaustive bibliography of the painting until 1966, as well as the catalogue of the 1960 Exhibition in Paris, p. 127, no. 99.

in a position that is also a specific one, I mean one appropriate only to this painting. It seems to me that all studies of pictorial and literary texts are exposed to such a tension between the pole of theoretical and methodological generalization and that of unique and individual description, an opposition I might rephrase as that between *the structure of messages* in painting in general and *the system of a pictorial text* in particular. The concrete reading-viewing of a painting and the practical position of its reader-viewer thus have a twofold nature, a bidimensional constitution: on the one hand, *competence*, whose structure is constructed from the messages produced by codes and received by the viewer in the process of reading that particular painting as an example among many others or as a cluster of visual "quotations" of several pictorial and extrapictorial codes; on the other hand, *performance*, whose system depends on that painting as a unique object of contemplation, which organizes it as an individual reading and is appropriate only for it in a unique situation of reception. The main problem such an approach encounters is the connection between these two dimensions, the determination of a level of analysis—and consequently a set of notions and relationships—intermediate between competence and performance, structure and system, messages and text, codes and individual reading-viewing. In a certain sense, the analyses that follow are attempts to construct such a level and to determine such relationships and notions.

METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

My main reason for choosing Poussin's painting as a model to deal with the questions I have just raised is that it combines in a single ensemble two semiotic systems: language—more specifically, writing—and painting. *The Arcadian Shepherds*—to call the work by its commonly accepted title—contains, visibly and legibly represented, the following words carved on a tomb: "Et in Arcadia ego . . ." The words inscribed on the tomb are a part of the pictorial representation—a represented epitaph—and constitute the central focus of the story that the

painter gives his viewer-reader to contemplate and to narrate.

Before coming to a more precise analysis of the painting, I must state the paradigms of my own reading, consequently my working hypotheses and basic presuppositions. My starting point will be the distinction made by E. Benveniste between discourse (*discours*) and narrative (*récit*).² I shall transfer this distinction from textual to iconic propositions, putting aside for practical reasons any doubts about the epistemological validity of that transference; considering, in other words, the spontaneous discourse *about* (representational) painting, the statements made by the reader in front of the painting: "It is a tree, it is a man, it is a tomb," as the immediate discourse of the painting itself. I can thus rewrite Benveniste's formulation in this way: a historical painting is a set of iconic narrative propositions which displays in its own language the narration of an event. By the latter term I refer to the domain of what Panofsky calls *motives* as well as that of what he calls *stories*. A motive implies a practical recognition of gestures, things, persons; a story implies literary knowledge. Although stories are carried by motives, both imply readings that are different but nonetheless integrated by practical experience and literary knowledge. The events of the story that the narrative proposition undertakes to tell are iconically located at the conjunction of motives and themes.³

The first preiconographical and iconographical references of the painting to the "story" imply a second reference to the very operation of narrating, whatever the medium used by this operation may be. But—this is the fundamental thesis of Benveniste—in the case of narrative as opposed to discourse, the specific modality of its enunciation is to erase or conceal the signs of the narrator in the narrative propositions. So the basic characteristic of the narrative enunciation is the exclusion of all "autobiographical" forms like "I," "you," "here,"

² E. Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1966), 237-50.

³ E. Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York, 1962), pp. 3-31.

"there," "now," as well as of the present tense. On the contrary, it uses a well-defined past tense, the preterite, and the third person "he," "she," "they."

When this specific narrative apparatus of enunciation is translated to the historical painting, we have to ask questions that are not very easy to answer: What are the levels and the modalities of enunciation in this kind of painting? What is its narrative agency? How could a painting narrate a story since, at least apparently, there is no verb, no temporal marker, no adverb or pronoun in painting as in language?

ICONIC STRUCTURES OF TIME

I shall try to answer these questions methodically by analyzing the iconic propositional content of the painting, since it is at this level that the references to the narrator are inscribed or not, and by first asking another question: What is the relationship between the time of the story and the time of the narrative? Is there actually a narrative time in a historical painting? This last question is relevant, since a painting is a piece of space totally and immediately exhibited to the viewer's eye: this may be an insuperable semiotic constraint of painting in general.

A painting is "read" by the viewer's eye, that is, its space is successively traversed by the viewer's gaze. However, in contrast to a written text, the eye's routes are much freer, and whatever may be the constraints of composition, distribution of values and colors, they do not exert their powers in a strictly determined way. So the question remains: If the story exists in time, how does the iconic proposition become a narrative proposition within the space of representation which is the "substance" of the representational painting?

In order to answer this question, we must define a few terms characterizing the space of a representational painting: first, the space of the painting as such, the representational *screen*, or the painting as a window open to the world and/or as a representational mirror; second, the representation of space on that screen, the illusory depth created by specific

means on the surface of the canvas or the representational *stage*; third, belonging to the stage, the loci where the various narrative propositions are situated, propositions which basically consist in the representation of human actions corresponding to the successive events of the story. The distinction between screen, stage and loci is useful insofar as it permits a structural organization framing in a complex way the narrative proposition. The reading of a painting would then consist in projecting the time of the story onto the stage (the representation of space) and in putting into order with respect to "before and after" the loci of the stage: that is, the hierarchical structure of the time of reading. However, we have to understand that the very time of the referential story regulates the order of the loci and finally imposes a reading order on the viewer.

Now the "classical" painting is characterized by the unity of its stage: there is only a single represented space in the space of representation, although the stage may be differentiated into, for instance, a foreground, a middle ground and a background. These planes are the loci of the stage where the narrative propositions or sequences may be located. Now, what happened to this clear-cut organization when the painter wanted to depict a narrative in which the same actors had to perform successively different actions according to the referential story? Painters attempted to elaborate various compromises, but theoretically just one possibility was left to them: to displace the temporal diachronic sequences of the narrative into a synchronic, atemporal order or into a structural organization of space based upon the rational connection of the parts in the whole. As LeBrun explained to the members of the French Academy in his lecture on Poussin's *Manna*, "the historical painter has only to represent one moment where simultaneous actions take place."⁴ The historical painting is a painting whose "tense" is present, whose time is the present moment when it is seen, and the only possible way of making the story understood by the

⁴ Félibien, *Entretiens sur les Vies et les ouvrages des plus excellents Peintres anciens et modernes* (London, 1705), 4: 111.

viewer, or "read" by him, is to distribute, all around this central represented moment, various circumstances that are logically connected to it by implication or presupposition. This is the reason why historical painting is considered as the most difficult and also the most prestigious genre of painting, because in the present presence of the pictorial representation, it has to express diachrony, temporal relationships, yet can do so only through the network of a whole that generates its parts logically or achronically by its own signifying economy. The time of the story, its succeeding parts related to the succession of events, is neutralized in the intelligible space of a model that represents only the logical relationships of elements subordinated to a center. This is the paradox of the classical painting of history. The representational process cannot "presentify" time except in terms of a model in all senses of the term: original, paradigm, absolute presence, pure rationality. The paradox consists precisely in the fact that time is definitely not a model. It cannot be a logical or metaphysical paradigm. It always admits a "before" and an "after," a "not yet" and an "already gone." It is this "truth" that classical painting dismisses and points out at the same time through its own process of representation. Far from being a remote application of the "classical *episteme*" in the domain of the arts, historical painting, because it necessarily presents in a spatial medium a model of time-intelligibility, is its ultimate paradigm.

Nevertheless, in front of the painting, the viewer tells a story to himself, he reads the painting, he understands the narrative messages. This means that he converts the iconic representational model into language, and more precisely into a story, thanks to the mimetic power, the fascinating likeness of the objects represented by the painting he looks at. On the one hand, a moment of representation is offered to our eyes as the center or the core of the intelligible structure of the whole. On the other hand, the reader narrativizes the model in a story which gives him logos, presence in a temporal form. Between these two poles characterizing historical painting and its reading, a "chiasmus" is operating: the

model is built on its perfect structural intelligibility in order to allow a story to be told: reading-enunciation. But such a reading, such an enunciation, has to be dismissed from the painting itself in order to posit the moment of representation in its objective and universal truth. In other words, the subject of enunciation-representation has to be at one and the same time present and absent. When he is absent, events are manifestations of being itself, pure and universal essences; when he is present, they exist in their actual temporal succession. The painting is at one and the same time an instantaneous moment of evidence in the Cartesian sense—when an eternal truth is presented—and an ontological proof in the same Cartesian sense when, from that essence, existence is analytically unfolded.

The instantaneous eclipse of the subject of enunciation can be rephrased in less metaphysical terms as the subject's negation (in the Freudian sense). He is at the same time articulated in and excluded from the painting: in Benveniste's terms, "In order for there to be narrative (*récit*), or story, it is necessary and sufficient that the author remain faithful to his enterprise as historian and banish all that is foreign to the narrative of events (discourse, personal reflections, comparisons)."⁵ The completion of this operation requires that the narrator be banished from the text as the subject of enunciation (discourse) or as the term of an enunciating reference, reflection, comparison. "The events are set down as they occurred, as they gradually appear on the horizon of the story. Nobody is speaking here. The events seem to tell themselves."⁶

REPRESENTATIONAL MODELS

It is not surprising to ascertain that such a narrative notion of language in general was, in the perspective of the classical *episteme*, the fundamental level, the basic truth upon which the various modalities of language—and more generally, the whole system of representation—were founded. I shall now

⁵ Benveniste, *Problèmes*, p. 241.

⁶ *Ibid.*

deal briefly with this general principle of representation in the very process of its constitution, using the Port-Royal *Grammar* and *Logic* as my main references. I shall distinguish, as the Port-Royal grammarians and logicians did—and we find that distinction in Benveniste as well—the level of signs from the level of discourse, or in contemporary terms the semiotic level from the semantic one.⁷

A principle we may call the principle of representation relates language and thought to each other: Mind is the mirror of things and it will not be the first time we find the mirror playing such a metaphorical and theoretical role in the classical *episteme*; ideas are things themselves within the mind, ideas represent things in the mind and for it. Language is the mirror of mind: signs—and especially verbal signs, words—are things that represent ideas. Signs represent representations of signs. To give an idea, a sign is to give the mind an idea whose object represents what constitutes the idea.

The principle of representation has a correlated principle which concerns the very structure of a sign or a signifying system. In a sign, there are two “subrelations”: a relation between ideas and signs, and between signs and things. But a sign allows a process of substitution to take place between its object and the idea of the signified object, a substitution that operates, in the case of language, from the thing to the sign: the idea of the signified object is substituted for the sign. Because of their arbitrariness, words are transparent to the primary relation of representation: they are necessary only to permit communication between minds and within the mind itself.

On the contrary, because of their mimetic nature, pictorial signs make the substitution operate from the sign to the thing: the pictorial sign (whatever it may be) is substituted for the thing or the idea of the signified object. This is precisely what seventeenth-century art critics and theorists called the pictorial deception: the fact that painting deceives the eye

⁷ See *Grammaire générale et raisonnée* (Paris, 1660), and *Logique de Port-Royal* (Paris, 1685; Lille, 1964), pp. 119ff. See also E. Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1974), 63-66.

constitutes its greatest aesthetic value. When Pascal questions the validity of painting and, perhaps, artistic values in general, he contests them precisely for that reason, taking for granted such a substitutive operation: “How vain is painting which attracts admiration by the resemblance of things the originals of which we do not admire.”⁸

An idea or a representation possesses, then, a double nature: it is a modification of mind and it is a representation of a thing; it has, in Cartesian terms, a formal reality and an objective one (that does not mean for Descartes that it has an objective validity). This “model” of representation can be developed by dividing the sign into two subrelations which permit us to take into account two varieties of signs, the verbal or oral signs and the written signs. The latter represent sounds, which in their turn represent, by combination, ideas. It is remarkable that pictorial signs are also divided into two parts, design and color. We may observe that this theoretical distinction, which has had an extraordinary importance since the Renaissance and certainly before, has remained in effect up to our own time (see for example the discussion about line and color in Pollock's work). Design, logicians and art theorists as well as painters have observed, is an essential component of the pictorial sign, but its most remarkable feature is that it remains invisible in a painting. It is the structure, metaphorically the “soul” of the sign; it constitutes the painting's intelligible, rational part. On the contrary, color is its visible component, its “flesh and body.” Color could not exist without design, like modes without a substance underlying them and giving them an ontological and axiological support. True experts in painting know how to recognize the formal qualities of design beneath the visible brightness of colors. It is interesting to observe that in such a model, there is an implicit valorization of sounds and voice compared to writing and an explicit but reverse valorization of design compared to colors, for the very reason that both sounds and design are almost immaterial. Line, the basic constituent of design, has

⁸ B. Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. L. Lafuma, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1952), no. 77.

only a "modal" reality as a limit of a body, Descartes observed. Generally speaking, that means that in a painting, the material elements of representation, and precisely the traces left by the painter's work—by his transformative activity in the painting—have to be erased and concealed by what the painting represents, by its "objective reality."

Now, at the level of discourse or the semantic plane in Benveniste's sense, the minimal unit is the sentence, and the heart of the sentence is the verb. We observe, in the famous analysis of the verb by the Port-Royal logicians, the same operations that consist in positing and erasing the subject of enunciation: "The verb is a word whose principal use is to express affirmation, that is to say, to denote that a discourse wherein the verb is employed is a discourse of a man who not only conceives things (that is, representations, ideas) but who judges and affirms of them."⁹ Developing this definition, Port-Royal logicians show: (1) that every verb can be reduced to the verb "to be"—Peter vivit: Peter est vivens; (2) that all uses of the verb "to be" can be reduced to the present tense: that means that every sentence can be reformulated in this way: Peter vixit: Ego affirmo: Peter est vivens (in the past); (3) that all uses of the verb "to be" can be reduced to the third-person singular. This last "reduction" compared to the two preceding ones is extremely important, because according to Benveniste's article on pronouns, the third person signifies in fact a nonperson (what he calls the co-relation of personality I-you versus he-she).¹⁰ Thus the result of the seventeenth-century grammarians' analysis of the verb—the central term of a sentence, the minimal unit of discourse—is a kind of general statement like "it is" connected to various determinations. By the first reduction, the copulative function of every verb becomes self evident: the copula "is" links two representations to each other. By the second reduction (to the present tense), the copulative function is related to a subject, an "ego affirmo" who utters the connection between two rep-

resentations as *his*, as one of his "manners" of thinking, a mode of *his* thought. By the third reduction to the third person, the subject of enunciation marked in the utterance by "I," "ego" disappears, and for this reason the representations connected to each other in the sentence by the verb "is" can ontologically appear as the things themselves that they represent, ordered in a rational and universal discourse, the discourse of reality itself. However, at the same time, by reducing verbs to the indicative mood and present tense, the sentence is related to a subject, a mind—or rather, since judgment is in Descartes' terms an act of will, the sentence is related to a power (or a desire) which, by making an assertion, appropriates things, reality as *his* things, *his* reality. The pervading notion of language as representation is thus founded on the three interrelated functions of the verb "to be": copulative—it connects representations to each other; existential—these connections are those existing between things represented; and alethic—the resulting discourse has a truth value. But we have to understand the two processes that produce such a notion: first, the position of a subject of discourse; but thanks to the first two reductions of verbs, such a subject is not located in time and space with all their determinations, but acts as a universal and abstract mind whose function is only to judge of things and to affirm them. And yet, by the very same gesture, this subject is erased: nobody is speaking; it is reality itself that speaks. At the same time, we understand better the significance of Descartes' profound conception of the "ego affirmo" as will: of course, the Cartesian subject of enunciation is a "theoretical" subject, but he is also a will, a desire. This means that he is a power of theory or a desire of representation. So, into the mirror model a quality of power is introduced that calls into question the very structure of the model, and in a certain sense my whole critical undertaking will consist in disentangling desire from theory, force from science. If we may define power as desire bound by and caught in representation, my critical attempt would be to explore representational systems as apparatuses of power.

⁹ *Logique de Port-Royal*, p. 138.

¹⁰ Benveniste, *Problèmes*, 1: 255-56.

To put it in slightly different terms, the representational system, through its use in the discourse, is made equivalent to things themselves; we may understand this process as one by which a subject inscribes himself as the center of the world and transforms himself into things by transforming things into *his* representations. Such a subject has the right to possess things legitimately because he has substituted for things his signs, which represent them adequately—that is, in such a way that reality is exactly equivalent to his discourse.

Now to come back to historical painting, which we have already defined as the paradigmatic model of the “classical *episteme*,” we can understand, after the analyses of the representational models built by the Port-Royal logicians, why in that *episteme* the fundamental mode of enunciation is the historical one, in which, to quote Benveniste, “Nobody is speaking. Events seem to narrate themselves from the horizon of the past.” And we can understand why, for that *episteme*, the autobiographical mode—that is, one in which discourse exhibits the markers referring to the subject who produces utterances—is only a kind of perverted or secondary form of enunciation. It may be of interest to note here that these statements are in agreement with Kuroda’s conclusions in his essay “On the Foundations of Narrative Theory,”¹¹ but from a completely different viewpoint, mine being more historical, his purely theoretical.

THE READING PROCESS: Deixis AND REPRESENTATION

The first problem we are able to raise about historical painting in general is one that we may articulate as the “negation-structure” of enunciation in pictorial representations.¹² The

¹¹ S. Y. Kuroda, “Réflexions sur les fondements de la théorie de la narration,” in *Langue, discours, société: Pour E. Benveniste*, eds. J. Kristeva, J. C. Milner, and N. Ruwet (Paris, 1975), pp. 260-92.

¹² Cf. S. Freud, “Negation” [*Die Verneinung*, 1925], in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey et al., 24 vols. (London, 1953-74), 19: 236f.

problem is of the utmost importance, for it defines, by its very terms, the viewer-reader's position in front of the painting, the process of reading or the reception of the visual message emitted by the painter.

A possible approach to the problem resulting from the transference of the linguistic model of communication to painting is the study of the deictic structure of painting. Every linguistic utterance occurs in a determined spatio-temporal situation. It is produced by a person, the speaker (or sender) and addressed to another person (the hearer) who receives it. The *deixis* of an utterance is constituted by the orientational traits of language, traits related to the time and the situation where the utterance takes place. In language, these traits are personal pronouns, whose meaning is defined by reference to the deictic coordinates of the typical situation where the utterance is emitted, as well as adverbs of time and place. Moreover, we must notice that the typical situation of emission is egocentric, every linguistic exchange implying automatically the shift of the center of the deictic system when emission passes from one interlocutor to the other. Finally, we may add that the deictic system expands to include demonstrative pronouns, verb tenses, and ultimately frames the whole linguistic process. This should hardly be surprising, since a situation of communication implies that the linguistic system is actualized in a specific place and time, a place and a time that deictics refer to and whose structure is inscribed in the utterance.

Now, if the characteristic of the “historical” enunciative modality is that events narrate themselves in the story as if nobody were speaking, this means that the whole deictic network has to be erased in the narrative message. Is it possible to point out in Poussin's *Arcadian Shepherds*, say in its narrative content, the “negation” of iconic deictics? Does such a question make sense in the iconic domain? My hypothesis is the following: except for the very existence of the painting and the fact that we are looking at it, nothing in the iconic message marks its situation of emission and reception; that is to say, no figure is looking at us as viewers, nobody ad-

dresses us as a representative of the sender of the message. As viewers-readers we just catch the figures performing their narrative functions. Apparently they do not need us in order to narrate themselves. We are only the distant spectators of a story, separated from it by a "spectacular" distance that is the insuperable distance of the painter-narrator from the story he narrates. A comparison with portrait painting may illuminate the point. It has been observed that a full-face portrait functions like the "I-You" relation which characterizes the discursive enunciation, but with an interesting difference that I shall only mention here: the sitter of the portrait appears only to be the *represented* enunciate "ego," who nonetheless defines the viewer's position as a "Tu" he addresses. The sitter portrayed in the painting is the representative of enunciation in the utterance, its inscription on the canvas screen, as if the sitter here and now were speaking by looking at the viewer: "Looking at me, you look at me looking at you. Here and now, from the painting locus, I posit you as the viewer of the painting." In a word, the typical situation of reception is equivalent to the typical situation of emission, through the "representation-representative" who plays the role of a shifting operator of the center of the deictic system.

What is remarkable is that we find in Alberti's *Della Pittura* a clear articulation of the problem we have just raised, in the figure he called the "commentator." Sometimes, Alberti explains, it would make a historical painting more emotionally effective to introduce in the "istoria" a character who, by his gestures and emotional expression, points out the important part of the story to the viewer at whom he looks, and thus establishes a link between the scene represented and the viewer.¹³ The fact that in Poussin's painting nobody is looking at us allows us to state, according to our hypothesis, that the represented scene operates in its propositional content the "negation" of all marks of emission and reception of the narrative message.

¹³ L. B. Alberti, *Della Pittura*, trans. J. R. Spencer (New Haven, 1956), p. 78.

THE READING PROCESS: THE SYNTAX OF VISIBILITY AND ITS SELF-REPRESENTATION

I would like to go a little further and rephrase in a more formal way, on a syntactic level one might say, the problem of iconic *deixis* (its system, properly speaking) as it works in classical representation. What corresponds here to the equivalence between painter and viewer that we find in the particular example of the full-face portrait? As in the case of the historical locus for the shifting operator in Alberti's "commentator," the equivalence between painter and viewer, eye and vision (to use Lacan's terms)¹⁴ was structurally established, within the representational system historically determined as the optico-geometrical network of the Renaissance, by a kind of experimental device built by Brunelleschi; this device, an optical box whose description is given by Brunelleschi's biographer Manetti, may be used in our analysis as a paradigmatic model pointing out the elements of the problem we have just raised. Brunelleschi pictured the church of San Giovanni and its surroundings directly in front of him on a small panel about half a *braccio* square.

He assumed that it had to be seen from a single point which is fixed in reference to the height and the width of the picture, and that it had to be seen from the right distance. Seen from any other point, the effect of the perspective would be destroyed. Thus, to prevent the spectator from falling into error in choosing his viewpoint, Filippo (Brunelleschi) made a hole in the picture at that point in the view of the church of San Giovanni which is directly opposite to the eye of the spectator who might be standing in the central portal of S. Maria dei Fiori in order to paint the scene. This hole was as small as a lentil on the painted side, and on the back of the panel it

¹⁴ J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire (livre XI) Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (Paris, 1973), pp. 65-109.

opened out in a conical form to the size of a ducat or a little more, like the crown of a woman's straw hat. Filippo had the beholder put his eye against the reverse side where the hole was large and while he shaded his eye with his one hand, with the other he was told to hold a flat mirror on the far side in such a way that the painting was reflected in it. The distance from the mirror to the hand near the eye had to be in a given proportion to the distance between the point where Filippo stood in painting his picture and the church of San Giovanni. When one looked at it thus, the perspective of the piazza and the fixing of that point of vision made the scene absolutely real.¹⁵

Brunelleschi's optical box established the equivalence between the eye of the spectator and the vision of the painter—the reception point and the emission point—through the identification of the viewpoint and the vanishing point actually operating in the panel, and its reflection in the mirror the spectator holds in front of it. In other words, the mirror in which the viewer's eye looks at the reflection of the scene represented on the panel acts as if to endow the painting itself with vision: the painting looks at the viewer-painter like an eye. Brunelleschi's device provides a model or an experimental metaphor of the theory itself. I emphasize the fact that it is only a metaphor: it refers to a specific representational structure among others equally possible. The viewer is positioned in the system as a spectator; he is immobilized, caught in the apparatus as a peeping Tom. It is as if what the viewer looked at through the small hole in the panel was the painting's vision, the mirror being the operator of that "as if." But this function does not appear as such in Brunelleschi's device, since what the spectator looks at is a scene represented on the panel. He forgets the very fact that he is looking at a picture, he is fascinated by his own "scopic" desire (or drive).

¹⁵ A. Manetti, *Vita di Ser Brunelleschi*, quoted in *A Documentary History of Art*, vol. 1, *The Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. E. Gilmore Holt (New York, 1957), 170-73.

We may provisionally conclude that the apparatus of iconic representation constituted by the perspective network is a formal apparatus that integrates the propositional represented contents, the "discourse" of the painting, according to a theoretically reversible process which constitutes the space represented by the painting. In a less abstract way, we may theoretically consider that in the vanishing point, in its hole, the things represented gradually disappear (reception-process) or that from the viewpoint they gradually appear to be distributed in the represented space (emission-process). And the reversibility which constitutes that space theoretically neutralizes the temporal and successive scanning of the painting by the viewer's eye in a kind of permanent present of representation.

Before coming back once more to Poussin's *Arcadian Shepherds*, I would like to emphasize the paradigm of the specular image in the pictorial representational model since the Renaissance. In this paradigm the painting, a window opened onto the world, functions—in its theoretical and even technical constitution—as a mirror duplicating the world. The actual referent of the picture is present on the canvas as an absence, that is to say as its image, its reflection, its shadow, scientifically built in its perceptual reality (an assumption whose universality can be questioned, as Panofsky has shown in his essay on perspective as a symbolic form).¹⁶ More generally speaking, these are the contradictory axioms of the representational system: (1) the representation screen is a transparent window through which the spectator, Man, contemplates the scene represented on the canvas as if he saw the real scene in the world; (2) but at the same time, that screen—actually a surface and a material support—is also a reflecting device on which the real objects are pictured.

In other words, the canvas as a support and as a surface does not exist. For the first time in painting, Man encounters the real world. But the canvas as a support and as a surface does exist to operate the duplication of reality: the canvas as

¹⁶ E. Panofsky, "Die Perspektive als 'Symbolische Form,'" *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg* (Leipzig / Berlin, 1924-25), pp. 258-330.

such is simultaneously posited and neutralized; it has to be technically and ideologically assumed transparent. Invisible and at the same time a necessary condition of visibility, reflecting transparency theoretically defines the representational screen. We find here, in the iconic field, the same process we encountered in the Port-Royal reductive analysis of judgment.

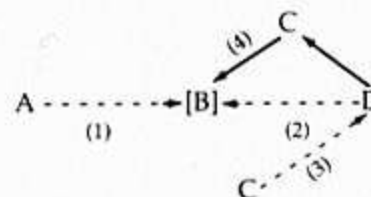
A READING OF *The Arcadian Shepherds*

The Three Levels of Analysis

Now we can come back to Poussin's painting, equipped with the models we have just built on various levels of generality, to observe that the relationships which do not appear on the plane of representation—I mean those we analyzed between the painter, the viewer-reader, and the representational screen—are precisely the "subject" or the "istoria" told by the painting: Three figures, one on the left, the two others on the right, are "exchanging" gestures and gazes, an exchange that concerns a fourth figure, a man who is kneeling in front of a tomb. Such a dialogue is entirely iconic, since its manifestations (gestures, gazes) are visible either directly (gestures) or indirectly (gazes that are recognizable through the positions of heads and the orientation of eyes). Three figures exchange a message whose referent is what the fourth figure is doing. We may observe, in particular, that the shepherd on the extreme left has nothing in common with the two figures on the right except the fact that he is looking at his kneeling companion. Iconically, he emits the kneeling man as a visual object while the shepherd on the right points to that same man and the woman beside him "receives" that object by looking at him. At the same time, by his gaze directed at her, the shepherd on the right obviously asks her a question concerning the kneeling man he is pointing to.

We may sum up the scene represented according to the various functions of a communicational exchange as defined

by Jakobson: emission—message—reception—reference—code.¹⁷ The shepherd on the left visually emits a message, which the woman on the right receives, while the man on the right refers to the kneeling shepherd, and by his interrogative gaze toward the "shepherdess," designates the code: What does it mean? What is he doing?—the kneeling man being the message whose "code" or meaning is in question. We may represent schematically the iconic dialogue in this way (straight arrows are gestures, dotted arrows, gazes):



A = shepherd on left
B = kneeling shepherd
C = shepherd on right
D = shepherdess

A few remarks about this analysis, which transposes the Jakobsonian model of communication to the painting not as an explanatory sketch, but as the very subject matter of the story the painting tells us: First, in a sense, the painting is the pictorial representation of that model. Second, the painter and/or the beholder occupy the metaiconic/linguistic position of the linguist who constructs a model about a communication process. Third, the scheme is oriented from A to D for pictorial reasons (the balance and composition of the painting) and nonpictorial ones, following precisely the reading orientation of a written text in our culture, which implies a starting point on the left, an observation that is particularly relevant to our painting since a legible text is carved on the tomb. Four, when D is looking at B, we may interpret her

¹⁷ R. Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," in T. Sebeok, ed., *Style in Language* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), p. 353.

gaze simultaneously as a way of closing the model and as an enigmatic answer in the dialogue that the figures are involved in. Five, a single figure—C—condenses two functions: C is overdetermined.

The third level of our analysis concerns the "message." What is in question on this level is B, the kneeling figure: That shepherd is looking at a written line, pointing at it with his forefinger, reading it or rather trying to read or to decipher it. Moreover he is visually saying the written sentence since the three first words, "Et in Arcadia," are inscribed just out of his open mouth in a modern version of the medieval phylactery. So B sees, points at, reads, says a written message whose signification he attempts to grasp. In other words, the figure B clusters all the semantic functions we already recognized represented by the other figures, but now related to the text at the very center of the painting, a text about which we as readers-beholders of the painting may ask, exactly like the kneeling shepherd, Who has written it? What is its meaning? What is the name of "ego"?

Unfortunately we cannot enter any further into the painting: our vision is stopped by the wall of the tomb. The only thing we can say is this: somebody has carved its opaque and continuous surface, has written a few words on the stone, somebody whose name is *ego*.

Now if we relate the three levels of our analysis to each other, we ascertain two missing terms at the extreme poles of the descriptive sketch: on the first level, the fact that nothing indicates the painter and/or the viewer; on the third one, the fact that nothing in the inscription gives the name of its writer. Two missing terms that, once related to each other, reveal a relationship between the painter-viewer and the writer, the indication of the viewpoint of the whole painting and the name, the signifier of the vanishing point at its center.

However, at the same time, the question concerning a missing term at the "origin" of the painting and another one at its end allows us to acknowledge another function of the

kneeling figure B: for, exactly like us who behold, read, "speak" the painting, the shepherd beholds, reads, "speaks" the written text on the tomb.

The Syntax of Legibility: Displacement

What is in question in this painting is finally what is in question in all paintings: What does it mean "to represent"? How is such a representational process articulated in and by its product, a painting that is a surface and a material support, geometrically defined, limited, and framed, in which the depth of another world is made visible? Here it would be useful to recall the results of our previous analyses:

1. The distinction between semiotics and semantics.
2. The distinction between discourse and story (narrative).
3. The transference of the first distinction to iconic representations:
 - a. the legitimate perspective as a metaphor of the formal apparatus of enunciation;
 - b. the contradictory postulates regarding (the mimetic representation displayed by) the representational screen as a transparent window open onto the world and as a mirror reflecting it.

Now my working hypothesis concerning the transference of the distinction between discourse and story to historical or narrative iconic representation is the following: The denial (in the Freudian sense) of the representational apparatus consists in the displacement of the vanishing point to the central movement of the story represented, and in the "lateralization" of the depth dimension from the level of *enunciation* (representation) to the level of what is *enounced* (the story represented).

I would like to emphasize this last point in our example: The whole critical literature devoted to *The Arcadian Shepherds* has underscored the contrast between an earlier version called the Chatsworth version¹⁸ and the Louvre version. The

¹⁸ *The Arcadian Shepherds*. 101 x 82 cms. The Chatsworth Settlement,

change consists precisely in the lateralization of the depth structure of representation by situating the figures represented, the *istoria*, in a frieze parallel to the representational screen. The change has always been interpreted historically as a move from a baroque organization to a classical one.¹⁹

But it seems important to analyze the operations implied by such a move. They consist in: (1) displacing the vanishing point from the deep visible structure of perspective (i.e., the horizon of the represented space) to the central point of the legible foreground of the story represented (i.e., a lateral structure); (2) operating a ninety-degree rotation of the network of optical rays (whose poles are the viewpoint and the vanishing point) in order to locate them in a plane parallel to the representational screen, a plane which is scanned by the frieze disposition of the figures in two symmetrical groups where the equivalence of the viewpoint and the vanishing point appears simply reversed.

The viewpoint of the formal representational network becomes the starting point and the final point of the represented story, and the vanishing point becomes the central event, the moment of representation that is the focus of the story.

As J. Klein observed in his 1937 article,²⁰ the starting point of the story, the fact that A is looking at B, is reflected symmetrically by D looking at B and this is the end of the story, while the vanishing point is displaced to the central part of the scene, the two hands, the two forefingers pointing out

Chatsworth, Derbyshire, before 1631. Cf. A. Blunt, *Paintings of Nicolas Poussin*, p. 80, no. 119.

¹⁹ See E. Panofsky, "Et in Arcadia ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition," in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City, N.Y., 1955). See also W. Weisbach, "Et in Arcadia ego: Ein Beitrag zur Interpretation antiker Vorstellungen in der Kunst des 17. Jahrhunderts," *Die Antike* 6 (1930); J. Klein, "An Analysis of Poussin's *Et in Arcadia ego*," *Art Bulletin* 19 (1937), 314ff.; A. Blunt, "Poussin's 'Et in Arcadia ego,'" *Art Bulletin* 20 (1938), 96ff.; W. Weisbach, "Et in Arcadia ego," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 2 (1938), 287ff.; M. Alpatov, "Poussin's 'Tancred and Erminia' in the Hermitage: An Interpretation," *Art Bulletin* 25 (1943), 134.

²⁰ J. Klein, "An Analysis," pp. 315-16.

the locus of the event, the reading of an inscription—and even more precisely, the place of a cleft in the wall of the tomb and the place of a letter in the epitaph.

What is at stake in the "transformation" is to make representation escape its own process of constitution, which it nevertheless requires; to posit representation in its "objective" autonomy and independence, which it gets only from a subject who constitutes it in constituting himself through it.

But the story set on the stage by Poussin in this painting—the "event"—is not a historical event. The event here is the story of enunciation, or of representation. What is represented is the very process of representation. It is the enunciative *Aufhebung*, the negation-position of discourse, its self-referentiality, which is set on the stage by Poussin, who reverses the reference to the world into a reference to the subject-ego.

Spatial Structures and Iconographical Inferences

The three next stages of my analysis will be the following: (1) the spatial structure of the painting constituted by the disposition of the figures, the iconographical inferences concerning these figures and at the same time the hypotheses about the significance of the space that the location of the figures displays; (2) the semantic problem posed by the inscription and the implications of that problem concerning the painting itself; (3) the question of the central locus of the picture: text and icon, and its implications concerning the representational negation.

We may forget for the moment the figures in the foreground to describe the stage and the setting of the story: a wild and rustic landscape, an Arcadia according to Polybius' *Historiae*,²¹ a desert—as people called it in the seventeenth century—quite similar to landscapes we find in some of

²¹ Polybius, *Histories*, iv. 20. On the relation between Arcadia and death, see Pausanias, *Græciæ Descriptio*, vol. 8, chap. 36, and the analyses of Rochholz, "Ohne Schatten, Ohne Seele, der Mythos von Körperschatten und vom Schattengeist," *Germania* 5 (1860), reprinted in *Deutscher Glaube und Brauch* 1 (1867), 59-130.

Poussin's other paintings: *The Israelites Gathering Manna*, for example, whose "desert" had been discussed in the Royal Academy.²² That wild nature is displayed in an amphitheater setting, a curved space enclosing the tomb, whose bulky and heavy volume neutralizes all transitions between the foreground and the background, a technique which Poussin masters in his "ideal" landscapes. Such an opposition between the landscape setting and the tomb is here a radical one, since compared with the tomb in the Chatsworth version, the tomb in the Louvre *Arcadian Shepherds* is located in a plane almost parallel to the plane of the screen.

However, the fact that the tomb is presented in a slightly oblique position creates a dynamic stage-space on which the scene is represented, and at the same time emphasizes the two still and static figures standing at the front corners of the tomb. The woman on the right and the shepherd on the left in a sense play the role of the corner statues of the tomb, living statues such as one finds often in Poussin's paintings, but monumental and static enough to possess a particular significance in the narrative groups they belong to. The fact that the tomb is obliquely located on the representational stage places the man behind and the woman in front and gives them the function of the virtues found traditionally in the funerary art of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which protect the deceased and exalt his attributes.²³

It may be useful to explore such a reading hypothesis for a moment. With these two figures, as we have already seen, the narrative begins and ends by coming back to its central sequence through their two gazes. With them the narrative action finds its beginning and its end in two attitudes of rest and stillness, which nevertheless underlie the central moment of the story. But considered as Tomb-Virtues, these two figures somehow go beyond the mere narrative level: as symbolic figures or allegories, they illustrate in some way what Poussin meant by *delectatio*, the very end of painting. As

²² Félibien, *Entretiens*, p. 98.

²³ See E. Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture: Its Changing Aspects from Ancient Egypt to Bernini* (New York, 1964).

A. Blunt has pointed out: "Diletto or delectatio had a very specific sense for the art critics at the end of the sixteenth century, for whom allegory was the essential part of poetry. For them, the genuine delectatio was produced by the intellectual beauty of allegory."²⁴ However, in *The Arcadian Shepherds*, Poussin integrates allegories into the story in so very subtle and almost indiscernable a way that as readers of the painting we cannot give demonstrative evidence of the significance of the figures, but only what we imagine or dream about them. For example, if we compare the attitude and the appearance of the shepherd on the right with the Apollo in *The Inspiration of the Epic Poet*, we may think of him as a symbolic figure of history, the prose epics, with the difference that in the *Inspiration* the poet is going to write under Apollo's dictation, while in *The Arcadian Shepherds* the man he beholds only attempts to read something that is already written. On the right side, the "shepherdess" (the interlocutor of the shepherd whom she taps gently with her hand but whose silent question she seems to ignore; the woman who contemplates the kneeling man with a peaceful aloofness) makes the beholder-reader dream of a figure of Mnemosyne who remembers an enigmatic meaning, the meaning of the epitaph by an ineffable anamnesis. Her monumental stature, her presentation in profile, the position of her left arm and hand on her hip, her statuelike eye without vision, all these traits evoke a Cartesian admiration, the originary passion for knowledge without any bodily effects, the memory of an originary loss. Is not the sense of the question silently asked by her companion: "What is the name of the written ego in the inscription that the reader tries to decipher?" And the sense of her answer: "You, reader, are condemned to decipher, and nevertheless, you will not know anything. You remember only one thing: that you have always already forgotten everything." A silent dialogue without any anxiety: decipherment, the fate of an endless interpretation, is in its very indecidabil-

²⁴ A. Blunt, ed., *Nicolas Poussin: Lettres et Propos sur l'Art* (Paris, 1964), pp. 162-64, n. 18.

ity the way in which living people neutralize the anxiety of an originary loss and liberate themselves from death.

We may now come back to the narrative and to its two loci occupied by the two "active" figures of the two opposed groups on the left and on the right (Figures B and C), two figures symmetrically distributed in complementarity, reversed in relation to a central axis, the first one spelling out the inscription through his gaze and gesture, the other pointing out the tomb and/or his companion and questioning the "shepherdess" Memory, his memory. Subtle differences make this symmetry more sophisticated: the counterpoint of a dominant movement spreads out from the left to the right, that is, in the reading orientation of the painting and of the inscription, an orientation emphasized by the gaze of the shepherd toward the woman. That movement is combined with another compositional line, a zigzag diagonal which is broken in the middle of the painting at the very center of the architectural "chiasmus" that the two groups of figures exhibit: a focus point that is the geometrical center of the whole painting, just between the right and the left hands of B and C. Superimposed upon this complex compositional articulation, the shepherds' staffs trace a vigorous network of straight lines. And if A. Blunt can read the Heraclitean bow and lyre (objects which are represented in the painting as Apollo's and Cupid's attributes) in the composition of Poussin's last work, *Apollo and Daphne*,²⁵ why should I not read in *The Arcadian Shepherds* an enigmatic ideogram, or better still a monogram, M, as the first letter of *Mors* inscribed by the very organization of the painting as well as by what it represents, a tomb and an epitaph?

A last remark about the distribution of the figures: through the way in which B and C are joined to A and D, the corner statues of the tomb, they may be viewed as their figurative emanations but with a reversion that allows, in spite of the shallowness of the stage, for the opening of a spatial and semantic depth. The Apollo-like figure on the left produces

²⁵ A. Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, Bollingen Series 35: 7 (New York, 1967), 348-50.

the shepherd who reads the inscription, while on the right the man who asks what is its meaning and *ego's* name, turns to the Memory figure, who seems to know the answer. Such a reading, which springs out of the formal and compositional organization of the representation, may be substantiated by a piece of iconographical evidence: the roughly squared rock, a plastic metonymy of the tomb upon which the right group is connected, appears, from Raphael to Ripa, as one of the attributes of Clio, the Muse of History, a sign of her correct remembrance of past events;²⁶ hence that movement from the back to the front which is reversed at the very place of the inscription. From history to its decipherment and from the question about meaning to Memory, the space of the representation is unfolded through the represented figures by a twist in the center area, while at the same time the narrative sequence is articulated—or more exactly, the discourse by which the story is articulated is allowed to take place.

"Et in Arcadia ego": A Semantic Problem

Once more our reading is led to that central locus, a syncope or break between the two groups of figures, a locus and a moment of the narrative transformation which is filled up by the inscription "Et in Arcadia ego." We have now come to its grammatical and semantic analysis, which was the subject of Panofsky's remarkable study. How are we to translate the inscription: "Even in Arcady, I am" or "I too was born or lived in Arcady"? In the first case, it is Death itself that writes the inscription on the tomb; in the second, it is a dead shepherd who has written his epitaph. Panofsky builds his essay on a cross-argumentation: If we choose the first translation, we do not take into account the elegiac meditation that gives the Louvre version (as compared to the Chatsworth one) its specific atmosphere. With the second translation, we are faithful to the nostalgic mood of the painting but we make a

²⁶ See, for instance, an engraving after Raphael by Marcantonio Raimondi: *Clio and Urania*, and E. Wind's commentary in *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (London, 1958), p. 127; or the painting by Le Sueur: "Clio Euterpes and Thalia."

grammatical mistake, since "the adverbial *et* invariably refers to the noun or the pronoun directly following it and this means that it belongs, in our case, not to *ego* but to *Arcadia*."²⁷ The way in which Panofsky poses the problem is perfectly consistent with his philosophy of art history as a constant displacement of motives and themes, forms and legends, vision and iconography—connections and displacements that point out the iconological level of cultural symbols. For some years, a very fruitful controversy has taken place between Panofsky, Weisback, Blunt, and Klein, a discussion that was initiated, as Panofsky observed, in the seventeenth century with the diverging interpretations of Bellori and Félibien.²⁸

However, the question of the translation and meaning of "*Et in Arcadia ego*" does not seem to me correctly raised by Panofsky in his apparently rigorous philological analysis: "The phrase *Et in Arcadia ego* is one of those elliptical sentences like *Summum jus, summa injuria, E pluribus unum, Nequid Mimis, or Sic Semper tyrannis*, in which the verb has to be supplied by the reader. This unexpressed verb must therefore be unequivocally suggested by the words given, and this means that it can never be a preterit. . . . it is also possible though fairly unusual to suggest a future as in Neptune's famous *quos ego* ("These I shall deal with"); but it is not possible to suggest a past tense."²⁹ It seems to me that the key question lies in the difference between a phrase like *Summum jus, summa injuria* and Neptune's *quos ego*. Do we have a nominal sentence (*Summum jus* . . .) or an *oratio imperfecta*, an incomplete sentence? If it is a nominal sentence, then, according to Benveniste's study,³⁰ its basic characteristics would be the following: (1) it is a sentence that cannot be reduced to a complete sentence whose verb "to be" would be absent; (2) it is a nontemporal, nonpersonal, nonmodal sentence, since it bears upon terms that are reduced to their basic semantic con-

tent; (3) such a sentence cannot relate the time of an event to the time of discourse about the event, since it asserts a quality appropriate to the subject of the utterance without any relationships to the speaker (the subject of enunciation); (4) the inventory of its uses in Greek and Latin texts shows that it is always employed to state permanent truths, and it assumes an absolute and nontemporal relation expressed as an authoritative proof in direct speech. What seems to me to make difficult the interpretation of *Et in Arcadia ego* as a nominal sentence is the presence of *ego* in the phrase, *ego* which designates the speaker. In *ego*, a present is here and now implied and not a nontemporal present of a general assertion: "I (who speak here and now to you) lived in Arcadia." The past is referred to as past, but in relation to the present moment when I articulate the sentence.

So I am inclined to interpret the sentence as an incomplete one, *oratio imperfecta*, some parts of which have been erased. It lacks its verb, but also the proper name corresponding to *ego*. We may compare it, for instance, with one of the iconographical referents of the painting, Virgil's *Fifth Eclogue*, in which we find this epitaph of the shepherd Daphnis:

*Daphnis ego in silvis hinc usque ad sidera notus
Formosi pecoris custos, formosior ipse.*

"Daphnis ego in silvis . . . notus (sum)": *ego* is twice determined by the proper name, Daphnis, and by a verb in a past tense "notus sum." And we know that the identifying presence of the proper name is a permanent feature of funerary poetry.³¹

These last observations do not, however, solve all the questions raised by a statement written in the past tense and including an "enunciative" *I* and a proper name. In memoirs or autobiographical narratives, the *written I* is at one and the same time "I" and "he-she," "I—as he (or she)," I as another whose identity is nevertheless assumed by the writer beyond

³¹ Cf. E. Galletier, *Etude sur la poésie funéraire romaine* (Paris, 1922); and John Sparrow, *Visible Words* (Cambridge, 1969).

²⁷ *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, p. 306.

²⁸ See note 19 above, as well as G. Bellori, *Le Vite dei pittori, scultori et architetti moderni* (Rome, 1672), pp. 447ff.; and Félibien, *Entretiens*, p. 71.

²⁹ *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, p. 306.

³⁰ *Problèmes* 1: 151ff.

the temporal gap marked by the past tense. In this case, "I" possesses, through writing, the status of a permanently divided *ego*, but one whose scission is constantly reinscribed and neutralized by the writing process. With an epitaph, the paradox of the writing "I" and the written "I" is insuperable, since the writer inscribes here and now—that is, *after* his death—his *ego* as a dead man.

My hypothesis would be to leave the inscription to its indiscernible meaning, an indeterminability which may be the sense of Poussin's painting: I mean a self-reflexive writing of history. The fact that *ego*'s name has disappeared makes *ego* a kind of "floating signifier" waiting for its fulfillment by our reading. The absence of a conjugated verbal form locates the sentence between present and past, identity and alterity, at their limits which are the very limits of representation. In other words, a certain representation of death refers to the process of representation as death, which writing (and painting as a writing process) tames and neutralizes among the living people who read and contemplate it.

The obliteration of the name and the verb in the inscription points out the operation enacted by the representational-narrative process and represents it as the concealment of the "enunciative" structure itself, thanks to which the past, death, loss, can come back here and now by our reading—but come back as representation, set up on its stage, the object of a serene contemplation exorcising all anxiety.

Text and Icon: The Representational "Negation" Represented

It seems to me that Poussin's *Arcadian Shepherds* bears some traces of the functioning of the historiographical process. But I do not offer this next stage of my reading as a conclusive explanation; it will be only a step further into the indeterminate area which is ultimately the contemplative reading of a painting—that area between proving and dreaming, vision and fantasy, analysis and projection, that Poussin calls *delectation*.

I would like to come back to the central space between the two groups of figures, and precisely to the part of the paint-

ing imperatively pointed out by the two shepherds' forefingers. The index finger of the shepherd on the left is located on the letter *r* of the word *Arcadia*, that is the central letter of the inscription and also the central point of the painting resulting from the displacement of the vanishing point from the horizon of the representational stage to the wall of the tomb. That *r* is the initial of the name of Cardinal Rospigliosi, who invented the phrase "Et in Arcadia ego" and commissioned the painting we have been studying. This letter *r*, a pure signifier which takes the place of the vanishing point and viewpoint on the tomb, the place of death, is a kind of "hypogrammatic" signature of a name, that of the author of the motto and of the painting as well. It is the signifier of the name of the Father of the painting in the place of the painter-beholder: Rospigliosi, who commissioned two other paintings by Poussin whose allegories might signify the symbols that *The Arcadian Shepherds* reveal: *Time Saving Truth from Envy and Discord*, and *A Dance of the Ages of Life to the Music of Time*.³²

The other shepherd's forefinger is located on a vertical cleft in the tomb wall, a crack situated straight up the break which divides the stage ground and isolates the "shepherdess" on the right. That cleft splits the inscription, the legible syntagm written in the painting. Moreover, while it runs *between* the two words of the first line, *in* and *Arcadia*, it *divides* *elgo*. That "pun," right in the center of the painting, indicates what is at stake in it: a gap between two gestures, between the initial of the name of the Father (of the motto and the painting) and the splitting of the writing-painting *Ego*, the *ego* of the representation of Death in Arcadia; a scission of the absent name of the painter, who nevertheless has made the painting and who signifies that he too is in Arcadia, but as one absent from that blissful place which is nothing else than the painting itself.

A last word: We observe that the light of the sunset projects

³² See Bellori, *Le Vite dei pittori*, pp. 447ff., and Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, p. 305, n. 29. See A. Blunt, *Paintings of Nicolas Poussin*, p. 81, no. 123 for *Time Saving Truth from Envy and Discord*, original lost; in the Palazzo Rospigliosi till about 1800.

the shadow of the shepherd who attempts to decipher the inscription onto the tomb wall, as an unexpected version of the Platonic myth of the cave: his shadow, his vanishing double, his image, is inscribed in that other painting within the painting which is the opaque wall of the tomb. So, the tomb is somehow the painting, a surface reflecting only shadows, reflections, appearances where the actual happiness, Arcady, is lost and found again but only as its double, or rather as its representation. If the shadow of the shepherd's arm and hand points out the letter *r* of the Father's name, it traces too on the wall of the tomb, not an arm and a hand, but a scythe, the attribute of Saturn, who reigns over the Arcadian Golden Age, the attribute of Cronos too, the castrating God and Chronos, Time, who makes everything pass away; the scythe which we also find as an allegorical sign in the two other paintings commissioned by Rospigliosi and which would be in *The Arcadian Shepherds* a kind of "hypogrammatic icon."

Demonstration or fantasy, I leave my reading indeterminate: self-conscious intentions of Poussin, who modestly said: "Je n'ai rien négligé," or enigmatic operations of the painting always in excess of its reading. This may be the "Golden Bough" Poussin alludes to,³³ Virgil's Golden Bough that opens the gates of horn and ivory through which the actual shadows and dreamed recollections come to light: my reading of *The Arcadian Shepherds* has no other justification than my "delectation" in a painting of Poussin, who was said by Bernini to be a great myth maker.³⁴

Et in Arcadia ego could be read as a message sent by Poussin in order to signify that from the representation of death—that is, the writing of history—to representation as death and as delight, history in the history painting is our contemporary myth.

³³ N. Poussin, *Correspondance*, ed. Jouanny, de Nobelet, Archives de la Société de l'Art français (Paris, 1968), p. 463.

³⁴ P. Fréart de Chantelou, "Voyage du cavalier Bernin en France," in *Actes du colloque international Poussin* (Paris, 1960), 2: 127.