MEETING ONE’S DEATH IN ARCADIA

The *et in Arcadia ego* theme has been explored in three famous paintings by two artists, and widely discussed in an essay that has become a classic in its own right. The present paper will take as its starting point the interpretation offered in that essay and proceed to analyze the paintings as artistic expressions of the phenomenology of life and death.

Erwin Panofsky first published his essay “*Et in Arcadia ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition*” in 1936. In this study he traced the history of the theme and discussed the three paintings. The earliest of these, in which the phrase appears for the first time, is the work of Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, known as il Guercino (1591–1666), and was painted around 1618 (Figure 1). The other two are both the work of Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665) and were painted in 1627 and 1638 respectively (Figures 2 and 3). The first of the Poussin paintings belongs to the Chatsworth Collection and the second hangs in the Louvre. In the short description of the three pictures that follows I shall single out those features that are relevant to my subsequent iconographic interpretation.

Guercino paints a disrupted pastoral scene in which two shepherds holding crooks observe a skull placed on a low monument against a wooded background. Through foreshortening, the skull looms large on the lower right side of the painting. The fly and the maggot add the horror of decomposition to the frightening skull. The inscription *et in Arcadia ego* appears on the front of the monument, facing the spectator, but at an angle that makes it impossible for the shepherds to see it.

Poussin’s earlier, Chatsworth version, although it retains the dramatic diagonal structure and most of the components of Guercino’s painting, already differs markedly from it. The two shepherds are now clad in Classical-looking wraps, and one of them is bearded and wears a wreath. To them is added a female figure, likewise only lightly clad and baring a breast and a thigh, as well as the mythical figure of the river Alpheus, pouring out water from his vase. Even more pertinent to the theme of this paper are the transformation of the tomb into a Classical sarcophagus, the diminished importance of the skull and, especially, the increased prominence of the inscription, which now appears on the side facing the shepherds and is subject to their intense scrutiny.

In contrast to the excitement conveyed through the concerted movement of the figures in the earlier version, Poussin’s later version exudes...
calm and composure. It is a more contemplative, philosophical painting. The whole scene has been re-arranged on a frontal plane, facing the spectator. The scene is squarely set within the framing landscape and the female figure is fully dressed and coiffed. The river god is replaced by a third shepherd and the inscription is centered. The figures have been placed symmetrically so that the structure has become more stable. The skull is completely gone, but a different symbol of death appears: the shadow of the bearded youth on the plain stone monument resembles the shape of death holding a scythe. As in the earlier painting, here too the shepherds are engaged in deciphering the meaning of the inscription.\(^3\)

I shall focus on the last of these paintings, but with reference to the two earlier ones, in order to show the significant changes introduced by the later Poussin into the treatment of his theme. Although the object of my analysis is painting, it will not be conducted from an art-historical perspective, but rather from a phenomenological point of view. I shall