

Humorosa, engelske

Humorosa - konstretenskap

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ET IN ARCADIA EGO: POUSSIN AND THE ELEGIAC TRADITION

Read the foot-notes

In 1769 Sir Joshua Reynolds showed to his friend Dr. Johnson his latest picture: the double portrait of Mrs. Bouverie and Mrs. Crewe, still to be seen in Crewe Hall in England¹. It shows the two lovely ladies seated before a tombstone and sentimentalizing over its inscription: one points out the text to the other, who meditates thereon in the then fashionable pose of Tragic Muses and Melancholias². The text of the inscription reads: "Et in Arcadia ego."

"What can this mean?" exclaimed Dr. Johnson. "It seems very nonsensical—I am in Arcadia." "The King could have told you," replied Sir Joshua. "He saw it yesterday and said at once: 'Oh, there is a tombstone in the background: Ay, ay, death is even in Arcadia.'³

To the modern reader the angry discomfiture of Dr. Johnson is very puzzling. But no less puzzling is the quick understanding of George III, who instantly grasped the purport of the Latin phrase but interpreted it in a manner dissimilar to that which seems self-evident to most of us. In contrast to Dr. Johnson, we are no longer stumped by the phrase *Et in Arcadia ego*. But in contrast to George III, we are accustomed to reading a very different meaning into it. For us, the formula

¹ C. R. Leslie and Tom Taylor, *Life and Times of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, London, 1865, I, p. 325.

² See E. Wind, "Humanitätsidee und heroisiertes Porträt in der englischen Kultur des 18. Jahrhunderts," *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg*, 1930-1931, p. 156 ff., especially p. 222 ff.

³ Leslie and Taylor, *loc. cit.*

Et in Arcadia ego has come to be synonymous with such phrases as "Et tu in Arcadia vixisti," "I, too, was born in Arcadia," "Ego fui in Arcadia," "Auch ich war in Arkadien geboren," "Moi aussi je fus pasteur en Arcadie" and all these and many similar versions amount to what Mrs. Felicia Hemans expressed in the immortal words: "I, too, shepherds, in Arcadia dwelt." They conjure up the retrospective vision of an unsurpassable happiness, enjoyed in the past, unattainable ever after, yet enduringly alive in the memory: a bygone happiness ended by death; and not, as George III's phrase implies, a present happiness menaced by death.

I shall try to show that this royal rendering—"Death is even in Arcadia"—represents a grammatically correct, in fact, the only grammatically correct, interpretation of the Latin phrase *Et in Arcadia ego*, and that our modern reading of its message—"I, too, was born, or lived, in Arcady"—is in reality a mistranslation. Then I shall try to show that this mistranslation, sensible though it is from a philological point of view, yet did not come about by "pure ignorance" but, on the contrary, expressed and sanctioned, at the expense of grammar but in the interest of truth, a basic change in interpretation. Finally, I shall try to fix the ultimate responsibility for this

¹ This form of the phrase is found in Richard Wilson's picture (in the collection of the Earl of Strafford), cited below, p. 317.

² This is the beginning of Friedrich Schiller's famous poem *Resignation* (quoted, for example, in Büchmann, *Geflügelte Worte*, 27th ed., p. 441 f., with many other instances from German literature), where the frustrated hero has renounced Pleasure and Beauty in favor of Hope and Truth and unsuccessfully requests compensation. In English dictionaries of quotations, the passage is often erroneously ascribed to Goethe (by way of confusion with the motto superscribed on his *Italienische Reise*, for which see below, p. 319); cf., e.g., Burt Stevenson, *The Home Book of Quotations*, New York, 1937, p. 94; *A New Dictionary of Quotations*, H. L. Mencken, ed., New York, 1942, p. 53 (here with the equally erroneous assertion that "the phrase begins to appear on paintings in the XVI century"); Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*, Boston, 1947, p. 43.

³ Jacques Delille, *Les Jardins*, 1782, quoted, e.g., in Büchmann, *loc. cit.*, and Stevenson, *loc. cit.*

⁴ *The Poetical Works of Mrs. Felicia Hemans*, Philadelphia, 1847, p. 398. See also below, p. 318, Note 49.

change, which was of paramount importance for modern literature, not on a man of letters but on a great painter.

Before attempting all this, however, we have to ask ourselves a preliminary question: how is it that that particular, not overly opulent, region of central Greece, Arcady, came to be universally accepted as an ideal realm of perfect bliss and beauty, a dream incarnate of ineffable happiness, surrounded nevertheless with a halo of "sweetly sad" melancholy?

There had been, from the beginning of classical speculation, two contrasting opinions about the natural state of man, each of them, of course, a "Gegen-Konstruktion" to the conditions under which it was formed. One view, termed "soft" primitivism in an illuminating book by Lovejoy and Boas,⁵ conceives of primitive life as a golden age of plenty, innocence and happiness—in other words, as civilized life purged of its vices. The other, "hard" form of primitivism conceives of primitive life as an almost subhuman existence full of terrible hardships and devoid of all comforts—in other words, as civilized life stripped of its virtues.

Arcady, as we encounter it in all modern literature, and as we refer to it in our daily speech, falls under the heading of "soft" or golden-age primitivism. But of Arcady as it existed in actuality, and as it is described to us by the Greek writers, almost the opposite is true.

To be sure, this real Arcady was the domain of Pan, who could be heard playing the syrinx on Mount Maenalus⁶ and its inhabitants were famous for their musical accomplishments as well as for their ancient lineage, rugged virtue, and rustic hospitality; but they were also famous for their utter ignorance and low standards of living. As the earlier Samuel Butler was to summarize it in his well-known satire against ancestral pride:

The old Arcadians that could trace
Their pedigree from race to race
Before the moon, were once reputed
Of all the Grecians the most stupid,

⁵ A. O. Lovejoy and G. Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity*, Baltimore, I, 1935.

⁶ Pausanias, *Periegesis*, VIII, 36, 8: "Mount Maenalus is particularly sacred to Pan so that people assert that Pan could be heard there playing the syrinx."

Whom nothing in the world could bring
To civil life but fiddleing¹⁰

And from a purely physical point of view their country lacked most of the charms which we are wont to associate with a land of ideal pastoral bliss. Polybius, Arcady's most famous son, while doing justice to his homeland's simple piety and love of music, describes it otherwise as a poor, bare, rocky, chilly country, devoid of all the amenities of life and scarcely affording food for a few meager goats.¹¹

Small wonder, then, that the Greek poets refrained from staging their pastorals in Arcady. The scene of the most famous of them, the *Idylls* of Theocritus, is laid in Sicily, then so richly endowed with all those flowery meadows, shadowy groves and mild breezes which the "desert ways" (William Lithgow) of the actual Arcady conspicuously lacked. Pan himself has to journey from Arcady to Sicily when Theocritus' dying Daphnis wishes to return his shepherd's flute to the god.¹²

¹⁰ Samuel Butler, *Satires and Miscellaneous Poetry and Prose*, R. Lamar, ed., Cambridge, 1929, p. 470.

¹¹ Polybius, *Historiae*, IV, 20. For further authors emphasizing the negative aspects of primordial simplicity, see, for example, Juvenal, who characterized a peculiarly boring orator as an "Arcadian youth" (*Saturae*, VII, 160) and Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii*, VIII, 7, v, calls the Arcadians "acorn-eating swine." Even their musical achievements were disparaged by Fulgentius, *Expositio Virgilianae continentiae*, 748, 19 (R. Helm, ed., Leipzig, 1898, p. 90), who by *Arcadicae aures* (the reading *Arcadicis auribus* is better documented than, and preferable to, *arcaicis auribus*) meant "ears not susceptible to real beauty." The much discussed question as to whether there had existed in Arcady a genuine pastoral or bucolic poetry preceding Theocritus' *Idylls* now seems to have been decided in the negative. In addition to the literature adduced in E. Panofsky, "Et in Arcadia Ego; On the Conception of Transience in Poussin and Watteau," *Philosophy and History, Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer*, R. Klibausky and H. J. Paton, eds., Oxford, 1936, p. 223 ff., see now B. Snell, "Arkadien, die Entstehung einer geistigen Landschaft," *Antike und Abendland*, I, 1944, p. 26 ff. An article by M. Petriconi, "Das neue Arkadien," *ibidem*, III, 1948, p. 187 ff., does not contribute much to the problem discussed in this essay.

¹² Theocritus, *Idylls*, I, 123 ff.