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Et in Arcadia ego. A Semiotic Exercise regarding the Relation between Text and Image

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Abstract: In this paper I aim at examining the way in which a famous Latin phrase, *Et in Arcadia ego*, modified its meaning due to a homonymous painting made by Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665), a French painter. Initially, the respective Latin phrase may have had the function of explaining or even generating Poussin's painting (in its both variants). However, those who interpreted the meaning of the painting also reinterpreted the inscription inserted in the image and gave it a new meaning. That is why, nowadays, the phrase *Et in Arcadia ego* is used and understood exclusively in its latter meaning, and not in its original meaning. In my analysis, I will start from both Roland Barthes' remarks concerning the relation between language and image, and Erwin Panofsky's commentaries regarding Poussin's painting, *Et in Arcadia ego*.

Keywords: semiotics; text and image; Nicolas Poussin; Latin phrase; meaning

1. In most of the bibliographical sources I consulted it is stated that the Latin phrase *Et in Arcadia ego* was used as an inscription for the painting *The Arcadian Shepherds*, made by the French painter Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665), signifying the regret of the lost happiness. Its meaning derives from the fact that Arcadia, a region in Ancient Greek (in the heart of Peloponnese) inhabited by an innocent people of shepherds, came to designate in the verses of the old poets (especially in Virgil's works) an imaginary country (therefore, a literary realm), a land of purity and joy, a heaven on Earth symbolizing the idyllic, patriarchal life. The phrase is also used as a reminder of the inconstancy of happiness.

1.1. As a matter of fact, Poussin painted *The Arcadian Shepherds* twice. The earlier variant (around 1630) differs from the latter (around 1640) by an important detail: on the tomb, a skull can be seen, a symbol of Death (both variants depict a group of people next to a tombstone engraved "*Et in Arcadia ego*"). According to many interpreters, the meaning of the Latin inscription is the same, regardless of the presence or absence of the skull: "Even in Arcady there am I [=Death]". The French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss shared the same opinion, stating that the woman in a yellow-bluish cloth (from the latter variant of the painting) personifies Death or at least Destiny.

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1.2. What is not mentioned, however, in any of the dictionaries and encyclopedias consulted by me, is, seemingly, that this phrase was already known in Poussin's epoch (a few years before, Giovanni Francesco Guercino, had already used the Latin formula in a similar painting which must have inspired the French painter). Irina Mavrodin believes that the phrase changed its meaning precisely due to Poussin's painting, the new meaning being caused by "the internal necessities of the visual text generated by it, in relation to which this literary formula only played the role of a «textual generator»" (Mavrodin, 1981, p. 254). Her hypothesis is based on the opinion of the reputed specialist Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968), that is why I find it appropriate, at this point, to resort to Panofsky's study, in order to better understand the way in which the *sui generis* relation between text and image was established.

The former version of Poussin's *The Arcadian Shepherds* (around 1630)

Source: public domain

The latter version of Poussin's *The Arcadian Shepherds* (around 1640)

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2. Erwin Panofsky devoted an extended study (*Et in Arcadia ego. Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition*) to this formula, showing what exactly motivated its initial meaning. He starts his analysis, narrating a happening when the British King George III decoded correctly the message of the Latin phrase: "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 England. 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 Melancholias. 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.'»" (Panofsky, 1955, p. 295).

2.1. J. Reynolds' painting was already part of a tradition in which the Latin formula was meant to help convey another meaning: "For us, the formula *Et in Arcadia ego* has come to be synonymous with such paraphrases 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» [...]. 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 paraphrase implies, a present happiness menaced by death." (Panofsky, 1955, pp. 295-296).

2.2. Next, Panofsky intends "to show that this royal rendering – «Death is even in Arcadia» – represents a grammatically correct, in fact, the only grammatical 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." (Panofsky, 1955, p. 296). In spite of breaking the rules of the Latin grammar, the current meaning of the formula is a correct one, generated by the change in artistic vision, by the different manner in which the French painter Nicolas Poussin chose to represent the shepherds of Arcadia.

2.3. Among other things, Panofsky reminds us that, actually, the region of Arcadia from Ancient Greece is a poor one, inhabited by people "famous for their utter ignorance and low standards of living" (Panofsky, 1955, p. 297).[1] Arcady (or Arcadia) would become a utopic land in the Latin poetry, thanks to Virgil who, unlike Ovid, "idealized it: not only did he emphasize the virtues that the real Arcady had (including the all-pervading sound of song and flutes not mentioned by Ovid); he also added charms which the real Arcady had never possessed: luxuriant vegetation, eternal spring, and inexhaustible leisure for love" (Panofsky, 1955, p. 299). Therefore, the distancing from reality should be attributed, in this case, to Virgil's imaginative force: "It was, then, in the imagination of Virgil, and of Virgil alone, that the concept of Arcady, as we know it, was born – that a bleak and chilly district of Greece came to be transfigured into an imaginary realm of perfect bliss." (Panofsky, 1955, p. 300).

2.4. After a period of oblivion, in the Renaissance, Virgil's Arcady "emerged from the past like an enchanting vision" (Panofsky, 1955, p. 303). Just that, this time, Arcady was envisaged by artists as a forever lost realm "seen through a veil of reminiscent melancholy" (Panofsky, 1955, p. 304). Giovanni Francesco Guercino (1591-1666) painted in Rome, between 1621 and 1623, his first painting in which "the Death in Arcady theme" was represented. One can first notice here the phrase *Et in Arcadia ego,* engraved on a piece of masonry (Panofsky, 1955, p. 304-305). Panofsky remarks that "we are now inclined to translate it as «I, too, was born, or lived, in Arcady»". What is more, "we assume that the *et* means «too» and refers to *ego,* and we further assume that the unexpressed verb stands in the past tense; we thus attribute the whole phrase to a defunct inhabitant of Arcady" (Panofsky, 1955, p. 306).

[1] Here is a relevant explanation: "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." (Panofsky, 1955, p. 298).

Guercino's *The Arcadian Shepherds* (1621-1623)

Source: public domain

2.5. In what follows, Panofsky demonstrates why such an interpretation does not obey the rules of the Latin grammar: "All these assumptions are incompatible with the rules of Latin grammar. The phrase *Et in Arcadia ego* is one of those elliptical sentences like *Summum jus summa iniuria*, *E pluribus unum*, *Nequid nimis* 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 preterite. [...] Even more important: the adverbial *et* variably refers to the noun or pronoun directly following it (as in *Et tu, Brute*), and this means that it belongs, in our case, not to *ego* but to *Arcadia*; it is amusing to observe that some modern writers accustomed to the now familiar interpretation but blessed with an inbred feeling for good Latin – for instance, Balzac, the German Romanticist C.J. Weber, and the excellent Miss Dorothy Sayers – instinctively misquote the *Et in Arcadia ego* into *Et ego in Arcadia*." (Panofsky, 1955, pp. 306-307).

Therefore, Panofsky's conclusion is: "The correct translation of the phrase in its orthodox form is, therefore, not «I, too, was born, or lived, in Arcady", but: «Even in Arcady there am I», from which we must conclude that the speaker is not a deceased Arcadian shepherd or shepherdess but Death in person." (Panofsky, 1955, p. 307).[1] In fact, in Guercino's painting, what really interests the two Arcadian shepherds is not the "funerary monument", but "a huge human skull that lies on a moldering piece of masonry" (Panofsky, 1955, p. 307). The words engraved under the skull (*Et in Arcadia ego*) belong to Death, symbolized by the respective skull. Thus, we do not deal with a "dead man's head",

[1] And, as Panofsky adds, "with reference to Guercino's painting, it is also absolutely right from a visual point of view" (Panofsky, 1955, p. 307).

but with a "death's head".[1] "In short, Guercino's picture turns out to be a medieval *memento mori* in humanistic disguise..." (Panofsky, 1955, p. 309).[2]

2.6. Around 1630 and almost a decade later, Poussin (established in Rome) painted the two versions of the painting *The Arcadian Shepherds*. In the later version, he changed the attitude of the shepherds, which became a serene one; therefore, completely different: "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." (Panofsky, 1955, p. 313).

As a result, there is distortion of the primary meaning meant to adapt the formula to its new appearance and to the new content of the image represented by the painting: "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*." (Panofsky, 1955, p. 316).[3]

3. In a study from 1964 (*Rhétorique de l'image*), devoted to images in advertising, Roland Barthes demonstrated that, in connection with image, the verbal language (in its written form) has two functions: either (1) *the function of anchorage*, or (2) *the function of relay*. The function of relay is activated when the verbal language is in complementarity with the image within a story (as in film dialogue, cartoons and comic strip balloon, etc.). The function of anchorage is more often encountered, mainly in the fixed images. The images taken as such are, frequently, polysemous, *i.e.* they can signify many things. In order to control the sense of an image, to convey the exact meaning, we need anchorage; this is possible thanks to the (written) verbal language. A few words added on the margin of an image (of a visual advertisement, for instance) help us immediately grasp the meaning (see Barthes, 1977, pp. 38-41).

4. It seems that, in the Middle Ages, the role of image was, most frequently, to illustrate the written text (as it happened in the Renaissance, as well[4]). Image would hold a peripheral position, unlike the text, which was central. Image would facilitate a better understanding of a text. However, there were still exceptions, even in those times (see Gherghel, 2012, pp. 179-183), as it is the case of the Tapestry of Bayeux, where the scenes/images of the Battle of Hastings (1066) are accompanied by explanatory words or sentences. Therefore, the function of anchorage of verbal language was present in that era, too.

5. The latter version (and the most famous one) of *The Arcadian Shepherds* made by Poussin demonstrates that the relation between text and image (or image and text) can be reversed while

[1] "The speaking death's head was thus a common feature in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century art and literature…" (Panofsky, 1955, p. 308).

[2] Thanks to J. Reynolds, who had accepted the correct interpretation given by George III, this very idea of *memento mori* was retained in the English cultural tradition (see Panofsky, 1955, p. 310).

[3] However, mention must be made that, in 1975, the historian Lawrence Steefel discovered in the shadow of the knelt shepherd's hand the shape of a scythe which replaces the skull from the former version (see Steefel, 1975, pp. 99-101).

[4] Even more in the case of illustrating religious texts: "Images too were enlisted in the religious struggle. Luther, unlike Calvin, did not disapprove them – he displayed a picture of the Virgin Mary in his study. What he opposed was what he called superstition or idolatry – the veneration of the signifier at the expense of what is signified. In Lutheran churches a few religious paintings continued to be displayed, mainly paintings of Christ, with the Resurrection as a particularly popular subject. Images in print as a form of communication with the illiterate were a still more important means for the diffusion of Protestant ideas, as Luther himself was well aware when he appealed to the 'simple folk', as he called them. His friend Lucas Cranach (1472-1553) produced not only paintings of Luther and his wife, but also many polemical prints, like the famous *Passional Christi und Antichristi*, which contrasted the simple life of Christ with the magnificence and pride of his 'Vicar', the Pope." (Briggs & Burke, 2009, p. 65).

treating the same theme. Inspired by a Latin formula already known in that epoch, Poussin's painting becomes autonomous and constructs its own meaning. The phrase *Et in Arcadia ego* should have fulfilled in this case at least the function of anchorage. On the contrary, the force of the painting and of its further interpretation led, exceptionally, to the alteration of the meaning of the linguistic expression previously taken as a generator.

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