

UBI SUNT: AN ELEGIAC TOPOS IN THE « FÊTE CHAMPÊTRE »

While its attribution has been widely disputed, the *Fête Champêtre* (fig. 44) remains a quintessential piece in a new genre that is fundamentally Giorgionesque. Although the work has often been studied, the mood of the painting and the reason for its melancholy effect on the viewer remain unexplained. Art historians have noted the Arcadian spirit of the picture and pointed to parallels in contemporary pastoral literature. A closer analysis of key elements in that tradition provides a point of departure for a fuller reading of the painting.

In Sannazaro's *Arcadia* of 1502, the conflation of the pastoral genre with the myth of the Golden Age was revived for the Renaissance. There shepherds sing a plaintive elegy, yearning for that faraway time which is irretrievably lost. The melancholy mood of the poem owes its existence to a fundamental aspect of Virgil's *Eclogues*. Virgil interpreted the dream of Arcadian bliss as a place of happiness tinged with melancholy. The all-pervading music, the leisure for love, the eternal spring and the inspiration of the muses is interrupted by the reflection on the limitations of human life. Virgil introduces the poignant idea of death in Arcady (¹). Though peripheral in Virgil, the motif becomes central in Sannazaro's poem. While it seems clear that Giorgione was greatly influenced by Sannazaro's verses, this elegiac quality has been overlooked in the *Fête Champêtre*. But its presence is fundamental and the picture forms the nexus of a new elegiac style that continues to develop into the eighteenth century.

A brief summary of central themes in Sannazaro's text (²) will indicate the parallels in the work of the poet and the painter: Sannazaro's narrative describes a gathering of shepherds in Arcadia who sing laments of love and death. Invoking the muses of tree and spring, they evoke the lost Golden Age and pine its loss. Elegy is the leitmotiv of the text: first sounded in the opening chapters in the melancholy laments of Ergasto, a persona for the author. At mid-point this mournful nostalgia becomes the central subject of the poem. At the stream which is the dwelling of the nymphs, cowherds pour libations upon the tomb of Androgeo lamenting his death: « You whom the muses blessed with song are constrained to cold stone ». Behind Sannazaro's elegy lies the medieval lament « *ubi sunt qui ante nos in mundo fuere* » now sounded with a classical ring. This popular literary genre in which the living are juxtaposed with the dead, glorifies the ineluctability of past beauty and the nobility of past heroes. The topos confronts the continuity of

nature with the transience of man. But unlike didactic literature, life is not rejected for this transience—it is only regretted—and the song « ubi sunt » confers poetic immortality on its heroes (3). Sannazaro transposes this topos into a Renaissance format, returning to Virgil's *Eclogues* for the fusion of death with the motif of love and for the idyllic setting of pastoral Arcady. At the end of the *Arcadia*, love-sick Sincero, the second persona for Sannazaro, is led in a semi-trance by the vase-carrying nymph of the region who reveals to him the source of all the waters on earth (3^a). Awestruck by the unfailing current and the eternal course of the waters, he is overcome with melancholy. Desiring death, he takes refuge in his music and in his power as a poet to teach the shepherds their own long-forgotten songs.

If we look to Giorgione's picture we find a parallel mood prevails. The format of poet and goatherd, the evocation of an Arcadian dream of love and eternal spring, the almost metaphysical longing for the past correspond directly to Sannazaro. But the nymph of the vase, a marginal figure in Sannazaro, apparently only added to the basic text as late as 1504, becomes the central figure in Giorgione's picture, articulating both theme and resolution of the elegiac motif. The painting presents two men in the prime of youth, surrounded by two women and a music-playing shepherd in the background—the whole suggesting the panoply of idealized love and the life of the senses. The idealization and the psychic isolation of the women gives them a presence that is both mythic and real. They incorporate the idea of physical love in the painting, yet they function like muses, attending and commenting on the action of the men. Garbed in the finery of a gentleman—like Sannazaro's cultured youth who teaches the shepherds their own songs—the lutanist indoctrinates the attentive peasant in the learned truth of Arcady. Aided by the *locus amoenus* and the music, he reconjures the Golden Age. Giorgione counterpoints the realms of shepherd and poet. The barefoot peasant with unkempt hair—his rude and asymmetrical hut behind him suggesting the artlessness of his existence—is accompanied by the seated woman who holds the sensual flute. The elegant poet, crowned by the well-proportioned edifice that suggests are and learning has relinquished these pleasures, now possessor of a lofty instrument and a more tempered love.

At a moment in time—the descent of twilight—the central group pauses in their activity for a moment of reverie. Cast into sudden shadow, the men reach a shared comprehension and a sudden recognition to which we are privy. Though they have defied time by evoking the past, they are already aware that they have become part of its unhalting continuum. Only the uninstructed shepherd in the distance remains unaware and continues in the flooding sunlight his primitive song. The nymph at left, the keynote figure for the painting, is unaffected by their musing and tends her task, much like Arethusa, the fountain nymph of Arcady. She is separated from the central activity and set in relief by the fountain and the tree with which she is so closely identified. Her function is unrelated to that of the others, and she does not share their shadow nor participate in their activity. The overlapping of limbs and the interlocking of forms creates a pyramid of the seated musicians that suggests no space has been emptied by her departure and none is available for her return. Though the others do not regard her action, the sound of the water permeates and is the cause of their shadowy reverie. Absentmindedly and self-absorbed, she proceeds with her pouring, the flow of the water akin to the continuum of a process in nature. The cut-off basin and the truncated tree serve to extend her domain beyond the realm of the immediate. The pouring nymph provides both the protagonists and us with a metaphor of time

and an intimation of mortality—the close of day, the pouring action, the ruinous state of the fountain all enforce this meaning. Yet the interdependence of the woman with the tree against which she stands and the basin on which she leans, suggests they carry a heightened significance (fig. 56). Their prominence and their juxtaposition recall the Tree of Life and the Fountain of Life which the Middle Ages injected into the Arcadian tradition. By drawing upon these traditions, and by recasting their meaning in terms of *natura rerum*, Giorgione provides a glimmer of a poignant yet more profound immortality.

Giorgione's developments go far beyond the achievements of Sannazaro's poem. A brief excursus on three elements in the painting—1) the Musicians, 2) the Golden Age, 3) The Goddess of the Tree and Fountain—will suggest the further literary and visual traditions on which Giorgione drew in forging his conception.

1) *The Musicians*

The clearest antecedent for the presence of Muses and musicians with an elegiac context exists on ancient sarcophagi (fig. 57). Among the ancient Greeks, the survival of the soul was granted only to a select few. Plato nominated the philosopher; based on analogies with the harmony of the spheres, Plotinus extended this elect group to include the musician and lover as well. This tradition was well known in the Renaissance, through *Cicero's Dream of Scipio*, one of the most influential and famous treatises of the time. In the visual tradition the notion was carried by Muse sarcophagi. Musicians and philosophers are an intellectual elite chosen for eternal life. The Muses, givers and protectors of knowledge, and connoisseurs of the laws of the universe, are represented in varying number on sarcophagi as sponsor of immortality⁽⁴⁾. The motif could be extracted from that context, and re-utilized independently, as in the example by Agostino Veneziano (fig. 58). Occasionally, the derivation is more explicit in appropriating the elegiac content from the antique. Devoid of poetic sentiment and lacking the power of Giorgione's evocative images, Parentino similarly combines the notion of generation, death and rebirth as a corollary to a concert of love (fig. 59). Watched by the ape of nature, the nourishing waters proceed from the cave and traverse a sarcophagus before existing to stet the earth.

The eminent musicologist Emmanuel Winternitz has shown the adaptation by Filippino Lippi of Muse sarcophagi for the association of Muses, music and death in the Strozzi Chapel. Christian ideas of immortality are integrated into the chapel in the presence of the Tree of Eternity behind the Muse Parthenice (fig. 61) and by the inscription recording the promise of the Water of Life made by Christ to the Woman of Samaria. The execution of these ideas by an artist whose presence in Venice circa 1500 is attested by a series of paintings in the Seminario, provides a parallel example of the fusion of two distinct concepts that are important for our picture: the integration of musical symbols into a homogeneous meditation on immortality, and the fusion of these ideas with the Christian tradition of the Water and Tree of Life. The pastoral mode in Giorgione transposes these concepts into a secular context.

2) *The Golden Age*

From its venerable beginnings in the *Works and Days* of Hesiod, the myth of the Golden Age remained a persistent ideal which interpreted man's first

beginnings in the reign of Saturn as an ideal existence, free from strife and innocent of vice. Not only was this ideal of a Golden Age identified with a primordial time—« *in illo tempore* »— it was soon identified with a consecrated place: a *locus amoenus* of eternal spring and love, where a kindly nature brought forth her bounty without labor. The notion of prelapsarian bliss was tempered by Virgil's inclusion of the notion of death in Arcady. He relieved its burden by an escatological interpretation that suggested a cyclical return of the Golden Age. These basic concepts were naturally ripe for Christian embellishment. Beginning in the fourth century with Eusebius' christianization of Virgil, the biblical and the pagan paradise were fused. Saturn's reign became identified with the terrestrial paradise of Holy Scripture. The Tree of Life and the Fountain of Life from the Garden of Eden in Genesis became corollaries of the grafting of Christian interpretation onto the Arcadian idea. The promise of the return of Arcadia in a new Golden Age is interpreted as the earthly paradise prophesied to descend at the end of time in Christian escatology. The Tree of Life and Fountain of Life, with its baptismal connotations of death and rebirth, are identified in Revelations 22:1 as the sacred source from which immortality proceeds ⁽⁵⁾.

By joining the myth of the Golden Age with the suggestion of the Tree and Water of Life, it seems clear that Giorgione was aware of these traditions. By utilizing these motifs in the format of a Pastorale, he secularized the content and pointed to a new cosmology of nature.

3) *The Goddess of the Fountain*

In the context of the Renaissance Tarocchi, the Muse who pour the waters over the earth is specifically identified with the Muse of Poetic Inspiration (fig. 62) ⁽⁶⁾. But the tradition of the pouring woman is much older and the implications much wider. The woman at the fountain can be traced back to the Near Eastern goddess of the spring. Celebrated as the source of all the waters on earth and related to the image of the « flowing vase », she is classicized in the Roman Diana, goddess of the nymphaeum and the water shrine ⁽⁷⁾ (fig. 60). She has a regenerative function in the Renaissance. In the *Hypnerotomachia*, the fountain of life in the midst of ancient ruins is guarded by the nymph of the fountain, keeper of its secrets and mother of all things. The nymph of the vase in Sannazaro tends the source of the eternal waters. The pouring figure in the *Fête Champêtre* performs a similar function, now enriched and communicated by Giorgione's interpolation of Christian motifs.

The Christian counterpart of the woman who pours the water of regeneration is the Woman of Samaria. In the biblical account, she pours for Christ the living waters which become the source of eternal life. Often treated with the symbolic geometry of circle or hexagon, the fountain or well of life from which she draws, denotes salvation through baptismal death and rebirth. In a painting of the *Woman of Samaria* by Filippino Lippi for the Seminario at Venice, the inscription provides a compressed poetic metaphor of the immortality suggested by the image: *Si scires donum dei, da mihi hanc aquam*—the gift of God which is eternal life springs from the well of living waters ⁽⁸⁾. The sacred and the secular traditions are fused in Giorgione's standing nymph. In the *Christ and the Woman of Samaria* by Campagnola (fig. 63) the tetrad—woman, tree, fountain and vessel—are preserved from Giorgione's picture. But the intimations of immortality spring from the specifically Christological context and the hexagonal well of baptism. Like San-

nazzaro's nymph of the source, Giorgione's woman at the fountain derives her power from Nature and provides an immortality that is physical, not metaphysical. Supported by the recrudescence of ancient theories of the elemental primacy of water and the growing interest in Aristotelian theories of the permanence of matter and the mutability of forms (⁹), the fountain can be considered the source of all generation stet. The metaphoric properties of water, ever present mystically in the Christian notion of baptism as womb and tomb, are re-secularized by Giorgione and placed in the care of a nature goddess. These pantheistic ideas about nature, gaining currency in Venice at the beginning of the sixteenth century, are given poetic resonance in the poetry of Ronsard at mid-century:

La sont divinement enclous
 Au fond de cent mille vaisseaux
 Les semences de toutes choses
 Eternelles filles de eaux

The eternity of this element is contrasted with the transience of human life:

Fontaine . . . vous courez perpetuell d'une course perenelle,
 Vive sans jamais tarir, et je doit bientôt mourir
 Sans qu'il rest rien de moi qu'un petit vase de pierre
 Pourira dessus la terre (¹⁰)

Giorgione's evocation of Arcadia enriches the meaning of the Pastorale beyond the achievements of the bucolic piets. He conflates pagan with Christian themes that have been divested of their liturgical content and integrated with a burgeoning conception of Naturans. Giorgione has extended the temporal frame of reference in the painting from nostalgia for the past to reflections on the ever-present passage of time, and the ultimate subjectivity of all life in nature to its quiet forces. But the melancholy mood that attends the loss of personal entity is assuaged through the gift of the poet. Like the troubadours of « ubi sunt », he juxtaposes the physical immortality of the elements with the evanescent immortality conferred on its heroes by their song. A stet transient reward is evoked; like that aspired to for Sannazaro's Sincero: « With this I trust that you, if it be not denied you by the fates, in the future will sing in loftier vein the loves of the Fauns and the Nymphs. And even as up to this point you have fruitlessly spent the beginnings of your adolescence among the simple and rustic songs of shepherds so hereafter you will pass your fortunate young manhood among the sounding trumpets of the most famous . . . not without hope of eternal fame » (¹¹).

As the *Fête Champêtre* was available in France from sometime in the seventeenth century, it is tantalizing to hypothesize iconographical and even formal links with Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego* (fig. 64). We know the Venetian experience was crucial for Poussin, and while Panofsky has shown Poussin's dependence on Sannazaro for the motif of death in Arcady, it is tempting to conjecture the intervention of Giorgione as a visual antecedent for the various conceptions of poetic immortality.

NOTE

(¹) The fundamental discussion of the visualization of the motif of death in Arcadia is Panofsky's study of Poussin: ERWIN PANOFSKY, *Et in Arcadia Ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition*, « Meaning in the Visual Arts », N.Y., 1955, pp. 295-320.

(²) Textual references are to JACOPO SANNAZARO, *Arcadia and Piscatorial Eclogues*, transl. Ralph Nash, Detroit, 1966.

(³) The origins and character of the *Ubi Sunt* tradition are given in an article by C.H. BECKER, *Ubi sunt qui ante nos in mundo fuerunt*, « Aufsätze zur Kultur- und Sprachgeschichte, vornehmlich des Orients, Ernst Kuhn zum 70. Geburtstag » 7.II.1916, p. 87-105; and in a series of articles by J.E. CROSS appearing in *Vetenskapssocieteten I Lund Arsbok* (1956); (1958-59) et passim.

(^{3a}) But from the river nearby, without my perceiving her, all at once there presented herself before me a young damsel most beautiful of feature and in her walk and gestures truly divine... and in her hand a vase of whitest marble. This creature coming toward me and saying to me. "Follow my steps, for I am the Nymph of this region"... I set myself to follow her, and being arrived at the water's brim, suddenly I saw the waters shrinking back on one side and the other, and making a way for her through the mist... where following her... on to a place where many lakes were visible, many springs, many caves that poured forth water, from which the rivers that run over the earth take their first beginnings. (Sannazaro, *Arcadia*, Chap. 12).

(⁴) The subject is treated thoroughly with abundant illustrations in FRANZ CUMONT, *Recherches sur le symbolisme funéraire des Romains*, N.Y., 1975. This excursus draws heavily on the excellent summary of EMANUEL WINTERNITZ, *Muses and Music in A Burian Chapel: an Interpretation of Filippino Lippi's Window Wall in the Capella Strozzi*, « Musical Instruments and their Symbolism in Western Art », London, 1967, pp. 166 ff.

(⁵) Bibliography on the Golden Age is given in PANOFSKY, *op. cit.* A thorough study of sources is given in ERNESTUS GRAF, *Ad aureae aetatis fabulam symbola*, « Leipziger Studien zur Classischen Philologie », 8, 1, Leipzig, 1885. Discussion on the Christianization of the Golden Age is concisely treated in GUSTAVO COSTA, *La Leggenda dei Secoli d'Oro nella Letteratura Italiana*, Bari, 1972. The tradition of the fountain and tree of life are given in ARTURO GRAF, *Miti, Leggende e Superstizioni del Medio Evo*, N.Y., 1971, vol. I; GEORGE H. WILLIAMS, *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought*, N.Y., 1962; REINHOLD R. GRIMM, *Paradisus Coelestis / Paradisus Terrestris*, « Medium Aevum Philologische Studien », Band 33, 1977, pp. 121-128 et passim.

(⁶) See PATRICIA EGAN, *Poesia and the Fête Champêtre*, « Art Bulletin », 1959, 311-12.

(⁷) A summary of these traditions is given in LARS RINGBOM, *Paradisus Terrestris*, Helsingforsiae, 1958, with English summary, pp. 438 ff. Giorgione's possible derivation from just such a context is suggested by the nymph attending Diana in an ancient relief (Venice, Museo Archeologico) where both the limbs and pouring arm are crossed over the figure as in Giorgione. The relief's second attendant, seen from the rear, also shows interesting correspondences to Giorgione's seated woman.

(⁸) See WINTERNITZ, *op. cit.*, p. 168 f.

(⁹) Contemporary theories on water as the generative principle of creation are summarized in ISIDORE SILVER, *Ronsard's Reflections on Cosmogony and Nature*, PMLA, 79, 1964, pp. 219-233. The derivations of the goddess Natura are traced in GEORGE D. ECONOMOU, *The Goddess Natura in Medieval Literature*, Cambridge, Mass., 1972.

(¹⁰) See SILVER, *op. cit.*

(¹¹) SANNAZARO, *Arcadia*, Eclogue 7.