

OBSERVATIONS ON A PAINTING BY NICHOLAS POUSSIN

PREAMBLE

In this essay the terms painting and sculpture occur. In some places the terms are used as neutral descriptions of a type of object; a painting, a sculpture. In other places the reference is more to a body of ideas or set of objective possibilities which are taken as essential; what painting 'is' etc. This second usage does not have any necessary correspondence with, for example, the set of entities in an art historical sense which are paintings. The usage is therefore partisan and, when employed, is denoted by an upper case initial to the term; Painting, Sculpture.

INTRODUCTION AND THEME

One man turns from the sight of another killed by a snake, the body still wrapped in sealed and shining coils, a leg and an arm dangling into black water. From the snake's head glints a red eye. The gaze of the man remains fixed on the scene both caught (fascinated) and holding off (distancing - the eye is the prime means of placing objects in space, at a distance -cf. pornography and erotica).

His body, turned, makes ready to run; his left arm raised with the palm flat, a gesture of prevention that yawns a woman beside the road not to approach. The woman (who cannot see the body) is on her knees, a bundle by her side. She looks towards the man, both arms outstretched. The gesture is ambiguous, indicative of, on the one hand alarm, lack of knowledge or fear and on the other of invitation, welcome or rescue. This ambiguity reveals its equivalent in the man's gesture - he both warns off and reaches for the assistance he needs.

It is a thematic element in this essay that visual perception (in particular) equivocates between and is compromised by two contradicting elements; closeness (instrumentality) and distancing. Or, put differently, between projection and introjection, I have implicated this complex as an evidenced feature of the represented relationship connecting the man and the woman, amplified by their gesturing and prompted by an external event. That relationship displays the complex as a manifest feature of an apparent narrative concern, an event both caused and causative being the overt subject, ('Narrative' here being used to describe a relation between things based on an ordering of events successively and causally; that is, loosely, the establishment of successive temporal relations within the mode past/present/ future). The actual lack of any narrative, there being no 'before' or 'after' implied, allows the re-

introduction of perceptual conflict as a genuine thematic concern of our inspection.

When we confront this painting our first impression is of something happening. Our further examination is conditioned and directed by the need (a) to clarify this impression and (b) to discover what the painting is in particular that causes this general impression to arise and how that impression is modified or sustained as the focus of interest in this particular painting.

An 'apparent narrative' refers us to 'something happening'. As this narrative proves false the question of what occurs remains. Proven falsity being derived from the continuance, in the painting qua 'object' or 'thing', of identity. That is to say, continuity (existentially) may implicate time, but monolithically. Object or thing, being 'just there', belongs to time as it belongs to space but does not 'live' through time or space.

PICTORIAL STRUCTURE

The main structural features of the painting are a series of crossing diagonals which define and contain a central ellipse. The picture plane is divided into quarters on a tonal basis. Various of the pictorial and structural elements generate information qualifying, by creating alternative and layered presentations, the pictorial space.

(1) The lake. The shape, as seen, is a shallow ellipse with the lower edge pulled forward and the distortion both compounded and reinforced by the sweep of the road across the painting and the rise of the cliffs on either side of the lake. Variant contours for the lake are, on the one hand a flattened ellipse - consistent with the central eye level and recession established by the representation of the town and far edge of the lake; the castle on the left hand hill; the diminution of figures in the same horizontal plane (i.e. the lake): on the other hand there is an ellipse with the major and minor axes more nearly equal - established by the distortion mentioned above. The consequence of the second is either to view the lake as 'tipped up' within the perspective box or to read the eye-level as much higher. This variant eye-level will come into play in our understanding of the 'action' in which the figures are engaged.

In perimetry the boundaries of the visual field may be plotted. The visual field is not the visible world and, in some degree, even what is behind me has an element of visual presence. Bearing these qualifications in mind it is possible to compare aspects of the experience of looking at this painting with everyday experience. 'Above', 'below', 'front', 'back', 'right' and 'left' are orientations

qua the body having some component within the visual field. We move these coordinates around as we move our bodies around the world and locate ourselves and the objects of our attention in reference to them.

We gaze out over the (represented) landscape, our attention fixed on the town in the distance, reflected in the intervening lake. Below us a group of figures are engaged in some action. We shift our attention to see what is happening nearby. It is my contention that two, as it were, superimposed, frames - the distant landscape and the nearby action - are equally maintained within the painting. We move from detached observation of a distant scene to involvement with an event. What I have called the 'falsity' of this event pushes us again back to an understanding of the painting as detached observation. The vital structural feature allowing this tooing and fro-ing is the 'variant contour' of the lake, interpretations of the contour and extent of the lake and of our position in relation to it being variously supported by other of the elements in the painting, as indicated above.

(2) The figures. The three 'major' figures - the dead man, the man about to run, the woman on the road - each occur on geographically separate and successively distant stages. The dead man is on the far side of the stream, separated from the other man by the stream and from the woman by an outcrop of rock and by the road; the other man is on the near side of the stream separated from the dead man by ... and from the woman by the raised road and by the width of the road itself; the woman is on the far side of the road separated from the dead man by ... and from the other man by ... None is heavily foreshortened, each occurs, one lying, one kneeling and one standing, in separate planes parallel to the picture plane and within the modulated space of shallow relief. The eye scanning the painting sees the figures successively brought forward and recede.

(3) The tonal divisions. The simple division of the rectangle into dark and light quarters establishes and articulates the picture plane, a vertical surface, supplementing the 'tipping up' of the lake and supporting (by giving a 'front' surface for them to be pressed against) the flattening and bringing forward of the figures. This front plane is again contradicted by the otherwise established perspectival recession.

The impression of the operating space of this painting is of a shallow cone receding from the picture plane, centred on the town above the lake in the background. From the 'inside surface' of this cone figures are projected forwards onto or towards the picture plane which is established as a tangible though transparent surface. This 'projecting forward' being itself subsequent to a relocation of the conical centre in the foreground below the lake.

THIS SPACE AS EXPERIENTIAL

The containment of a three dimensional object within its surface (the outward form) is more complex than the limits of that form as presented to sight from any one viewpoint. There is always something hidden. In two dimensional figures the outline, or silhouette as perceived and the actual form are co-extensive. The perceptual effort in accommodating to a continuing contradiction between three dimensional form (and the continuance of phenomenal identity) and the received edge, outline or silhouette, is to move the perception of three dimensional figures towards the completeness exhibited by two dimensional figures. The means adopted is perceptual distortion of the retinal image -flattening out and opening up the viewed object.

This distortion is shown in the perceptual constancies, in particular in shape constancy. An object or surface tilted so that it is no longer at right angles to the line of sight tends, in appearance, away from the retinal image towards its configuration at right angles. For example the perceived ellipse of a tilted circle will appear as an ellipse falling somewhere between the retinal image and that of a circle viewed at right angles. This is not the resultant of any tendency towards 'goodness' or simplicity in the perception of figures - complex figures exhibit the same distortion. This "regression to the real object" can be progressively eliminated by the progressive elimination of attendant perspectival cues. (Thouless; Phenomenal Regression to the Real Object; Brit. J. Psychol. 1931 vol 21 pp 339-59).

Ames (Some Demonstrations Concerned with the Origin and Nature of our Sensations; Laboratory Manual; Dartmouth Eye Institute, 1946) - a window rotated in its frame until almost end on to the observer will appear as rectilinear. The image of the same cast onto a photographic plate will appear to change continuously, i.e. approximate to the retinal image, other perspectival cues having been eliminated.

Piaget (*La Formation du Symbol Chez l'Enfant*; Neuchatel; Delachaux et Niestle, 1945) finds that the constancies are learned, presumably experientially. Size constancy for near objects is achieved completely during the first year, but for more distant objects not until after five years. A key concept in such learning is the (acquired) belief that objects retain their phenomenal identity and that a world continues to exist apart from our perception of it. Support for an experiential rather than developmental view of such learning is to be found in studies of Pygmy adults who, having spent all their lives in the closeness of the Congolese jungle, on being removed to extensive grassland were unable to believe in the first instance that familiar animals seen at a distance were not unfamiliar insects nearby (Turnbull: *The Forest People*: London, Chatto, 1961).

Degrees of constancy are variable, particularly in sophisticated subjects, with the nature of the experimental task. That is, there is a sense in which we are able to monitor our own perceptual affairs, though it would be difficult to say whether this was a case of corrections through knowledge (from cognition) or greater attentiveness to the retinal image. There is a good account of all the constancies - shape, size, colour and brightness - in Vernon; *A Further Study of Visual Perception*; Cambridge 1962.

The point is that the presentation of a complex experiential as opposed to strictly perspectival space (albeit sustained and qualified by the latter) is a means of carrying and conveying a thematic structure of the sort previously adumbrated.

'LOOKING FOR' AND 'LOOKING AT' AS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN PAINTING AND THEME,

The illustrative is a mode of seeing pictures. It is a mode which 'looks for' the representation of incident or appearance and connects these up associatively, drawing from the resources of an everyday and instrumental way of going about the world. This connecting up allows a distinction to be made between what we refer to as 'form' and what we refer to as 'content' in the work (content being very roughly what the work is illustrative of - a notion enriched by associative ramifications). This mode (of seeing pictures) may be rich in certain meanings; sensuous, erotic, lyric, propagandistic, etc., and may be in reference to extremely skilful work. Yet because of the built on or added character of such we are deflected from (a) meaning being disclosed to us as an inseparable part of our connection to a particular object and implicated within our perception of that as a whole object. With this whole object identity is retained in the face of attacks aimed at prising off areas of meaning and producing for ourselves an illustrative content. Faced by this object we are led to 'look at' it. ('This whole object' remains a notional entity, all objects, as things in themselves, being whole; my intention here is to make the opposition looking for/at). I take the mode 'looking at' to be characterised by the enabling of phenomenal (or, as previously, thematic) structures to arise. At the risk of sounding narrow, I say that my commitment to Painting and to Sculpture, as fields of possibility rather than as say history or as manual operations, lies with this enablement.

Having said the above, qualifications of a serious sort need to be made. The illustrative may be the only means to effect a transition to looking at. One thinks of 'figure' for Giacometti or 'motif' for Cezanne as illustrative but enabling transitional features, functioning as a nexus or core against which deviations may be plotted. In Mondrian's case it seems as if recognizability itself or, more precisely, the ordering of a perceived image is the core against which the deviation is plotted. In the Poussin painting we have been considering I take what I have referred to as 'false narrative' or 'something happening' as an engaging or background device of this sort.

Differences arise in my experience of seeing things. These differences are not slight. The area of difference seems to have connections with 'aesthetic' as a characterisation of kinds of experience'. The distinction 'looking for/at' is sustainable in relation to my experience and helpful in understanding these differences. The brain is a conservative mechanism and for most of the time our perceptions are connected to aspects of our instrumentalities (the range above, sensuous etc., are instrumental). What we 'look at' when we are outside instrumentality remains unknown; ye still live in a material world; pure 'looking at' remains a possibility only conceivable within and against the illustrative mode. Nevertheless there are examples to be looked at and this Poussin is one.

APPENDIX

Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake; National Gallery; London.

Painted for Pointel probably 1648. Catalogue for Robert Strange sale, 1773: "The scene of this picture represents a prospect of the ancient city of Terracina, in the kingdom of Naples. It was in the neighbourhood of this city, in the morass of Pontine (Pontine Marshes) that the catastrophe which gave rise to the subject of this picture happened, in the year 1641."

By shifting the location a few miles east, to Fondi, Blunt is able to substantially endorse the above description. There are three lines of evidence: the geography of the region; an historical tendency for the area to be snake infested; Poussins likely acquaintance with the area at a period prior to the date of execution and at a time corresponding to the date.

Blunt says of the composition "Poussin has taken certain liberties in arranging the elements of his composition. He has reduced the size of the lake (Lago di Fondi) and made it more compact in shape, nearer indeed in form to the little lake of Puerto between Fondi and Sperlonga. He has brought Fondi considerably forward since from the Lago di Fondi it is barely visible in the extreme distance. He has heightened the slope on the right hand side since, in reality, the lake is enclosed by nothing more than a bank; and the castle of Monte San Biagio, if it is Monte San Biagio, should be on a higher hill."

On the basis of the evidence put forward he, Blunt, is doubtful about the existence of either classical landscape or allusion in the painting regarding it as "a psychological study into the communication and expression of differing degrees of an emotive state."