



20 JANUARY

The first thing that caught my eye this afternoon in *Landscape with a Calm* was the placing of the foreground goatherd's hair exactly at the intersection of shoreline and hummock, with the man's curls silhouetted against the blue of the lake; and then, a second later, I noticed the spear-head of white on the water just above the head – the brightest white in the picture. It must be a ruffle or eddy on the water surface. Other lesser flecks lead back from it in a curving line. Maybe the liquid is very slowly gathering speed and being pulled to the left, toward a weir or waterfall out of sight.

The white calls out to other patches of highlight, or anyway distinctly lit, whites and grays scattered across the picture surface: flashes along the opposite shoreline, tiny but noticeable; light on the fleece of the sheep going last in the drove further back; light on the rump of the horse drinking from the washhouse trough, and the odd reflection of this highlight isolated in the water below; smoke from a fire way off behind the citadel at right, near the foot of the mountain (smoke with a touch of orange flame); and a pattern of broader light yellows – walls catching the sun. "Catching" sounds a bit temporary. The brightest and solidest walls are those of the tall lone building standing above the washhouse to the left, and (something I did not see two days ago) there is a more distant repeat of roughly the same color, a bit thicker and more buttery, along the center-right of the citadel's second terrace, close to the painting's heart. This last is almost dramatic, once focused on. Sun floods along the ramparts and then stops abruptly, presumably because a cloud intervenes. Both here and on the lone building to the left Poussin has stressed the evenness and solidity of his solar yellow by having it be partly hidden by leaves – backlit transparencies – in silhouette.

So one main "theme" or concern of the scene immediately presents itself, in a way that the picture's traditional title points up: Is what we are looking at in *Calm* a transitory state of affairs, or enduring? Is it Nature or Art here that has brought the world to a standstill? The water seems on the whole to give one kind of answer to that question, and the sky

Detail of *Landscape with a Calm*.

another. In any case, is the distinction set out in the first form of the question (let alone the second) at all satisfactory? Aren't there plenty of moments in life that, whether they last or not, have enough of permanence about them to stand for things as they are, things as the mind conceives them – and not just to stand for them notionally, but have them be visible on their face? If something like this is the picture's overall question, roughly, then various less rough (and therefore more interesting) questions follow. *How* does a momentary stopping of an action, or state of the weather – even when the momentariness is signaled, as here – come to speak to structure or persistence? What features of the momentary can be frozen without forcing? The galloping horse states a lot of this, almost as the picture's proposition. It is dangerously close to being too explicit, in fact, which perhaps is why Poussin has set the animal against a slightly muffling darkness, as opposed to etched it clear (like the top of the goatherd's head) against the light. Imagine if the galloping horse had been put against the plain yellow wall. The leaves that *are* against the wall come across as the horse's antithesis.

Landscape with a Calm is a strikingly orderly picture, and its being paired originally with *Landscape with a Storm* (pl. 3) would have stressed that quality; but I think the ultimate effect of this regularity is to sensitize a person taking stock of it to the amount of detail – sometimes wayward or galloping – that the order contains. How much detail is too much? This also is a Poussin question, posed here as clearly as he ever chose to. The details are exquisite and singular, the generalizations lordly. Focus on the shimmering birch leaves at top right; and then by contrast on the blue of the lake, or the long green trace of the brush on top of the bank below the citadel, standing for grassy meadow (it is one of the wildest pieces of paint consistency Poussin ever allowed himself), or the great Egyptian frieze of animals and herdsmen. You could say that the first thing I was attracted to today – the goatherd's head set against the water – condenses this larger juxtaposition: the etched, unkempt, and particular versus the even, flat, and generic.



3 Nicolas Poussin: *Landscape with a Storm*, oil on canvas, 99 × 132 cm, 1651 (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen).

There is room for anecdote in this kind of structure: the goat confronting the goatherd's dog, or the general randomness and variousness of the other goats grazing at the side of the path, as foil to the tidy procession of beasts further back. Diagonals litter the scene, never really interfering with the basic rectilinear architecture, but putting a little pressure on it. There is the nearest, brightest goat reaching for the best leaves up the bank, and the zigzag track he stands on; the marshy lakeshore next to the horses; the lean-to sheltering the wash-trough; the clouds, the crags.

I count seventeen figures – from the 5-inch-high goatherd right down to two unicellular heads-and-shoulders looking out from windows well up in the citadel, each no more than a millimeter across. Human beings in Poussin run the gamut of sizes. I need to think about

the point and effect of this play of scale, and above all the intensity of the very small. It's a Poussin preoccupation.

Time is running out today – I'm due at a meeting. I haven't yet tackled the handling of the architecture and its reflection, and of course they are central – as much a starting point as the goatherd's head. I've said nothing about what is done to the cattle and sheep's reflections in the lake, which even from 8 feet away is vivid – seen immediately as a feat of transposition and abbreviation, but always with a sense of how easily the picture's economy could have been spoiled by too much or too demonstrative a reduction . . .

The herd's reflection overlaps the mirror-image of the buildings – as if it were clouds above them, or ground on which they stand unstably.

One herdsman on the far shore – the one to the left, with the single sheep bringing up the rear – looks to be playing the bagpipes.

Quite a fire at the base of the mountain . . . Flames and smoke, and a further small sputter of orange on the ground to the right. Wisps of smoke, breaking up into separate trails.

I have to run . . .

21 JANUARY

It is late afternoon by the time I get to the Exhibitions Room, and the battery of lights in the ceiling is switched on. The light is perturbing. It kills the contrast between the two pictures in the room (which had been absolute on previous days), lightening *Snake*, or picking out its incidents more clearly. *Calm* becomes another painting altogether: it seems as if the tungsten has evened out its mid-size, middle-distance details and brought everything into sharper focus. The cattle are now illusionistically crisp, and their reflections not much less so; quite different from the slightly smoky, smudged appearance they had yesterday. I think this is because the artificial light for some reason masks the materiality, the paintedness, of the mid-distance shapes. That is most striking with the long green trace on top of the bank. Today it barely registers as matt and

smear, even looked at close to. The standard art historians' patter about "Poussin's invisible brushwork" might almost apply. The conditions do make some things easier to see, nonetheless – notably the upside-down architecture in the water, where every window and crenellation is as sharp now as in a camera obscura.

Therefore one of the painting's main effects (or structures, or conceits – I don't like this last word, but I want to avoid "propositions") declares itself: simply that the stilled water does *not* reflect the changeable, fast-moving sky, and barely suggests the contrasts of light produced by that changeableness. (The lighter tonality of the big façade with the battlements, and the light-dark polarity of the lean-to washhouse in contrast to the wall it leans on – these are still there in the mirror-image. The light-dark polarity is pushed even further than in the reality above. But neither passage seems to be "lit," exactly. It is as if in the water effects of light become local colors, fixed characters to the things shown.) The calm gives the architecture another sky, and therefore another temporality. Again, how long will the calm last? In a moment will ripples spread out from the line of cattle?

These questions, however flatly stated, can't help over-dramatizing the painting's main contrast. The real sky and its reflection don't "question" one another, or contradict one another's signals. They don't register as not belonging together. Even when a viewer gets interested in what they do not share – what is and isn't mirrored in the lake – there is always a way in which the water's recapitulation of the landscape is entirely plausible. "Le ciel, face divine, / Le lac, divin miroir."

But the lines from Victor Hugo cut two ways, I think: they remind us of what is grandly conventional in Poussin's doubling and stabilizing, but at the same time they raise the question of the lack of divinity in his landscape world. Which is one key to its aesthetic dignity. If there's a place for a god anywhere in *Calm's* construction, it would be high up among the stormy crags – where Hercules strode or Polyphemus sat (pl. 4). Where heroes or monsters belong. There is a last white citadel up there, I notice, wedged between the two mountain-tops; then another