CHAPTER 8

The City Recovered, Triumph and Time

Hypnerotomachia

We suggested that in Castiglione the creation of a continuum of artifice which touches everything requires the patterning of contraries or opposites and that Castiglione discussed time’s destructive force as an element in such patterning. Celebratory renovatio has its counterpart in the melancholy contemplation of time as decay. While laments over the decay of antiquity are well-established in the Middle Ages, in the Renaissance the tempus edax rerum topos becomes an element in the recovery of the antiquity, involving a complex temporality. In Landino’s Xandra 11. 30, Rome “teaches” how time devours all through the spectacle of her decayed statues and buildings. Castiglione’s sonnet “Superbi colli, e voi sacre ruine” evokes tempus edax rerum, finding consolation in the thought that time’s destruction, which has vanquished Rome’s glories, will also bring the poet’s torments to an end.1 Sannazaro’s “Ad ruinas Cumarum” develops from the pathos of one ruined site to the dissolution which comes to all imperial cities—Rome, Venice, Naples—as to all peoples.2

Prior to Castiglione, Sannazaro’s Arcadia (corrected edition 1504), a recreation of pastoral romance which for centuries inspired narrative and dramatic imitations shows how loss, absence and damage are located within idealised artifice. It is an exemplar of varietas which draws on classical, Neolatin and vernacular sources, with Virgil as central point of reference.3 These sources are combined to create a synthetic genre, called by Francesco Erspamer “at once lyric, eclogue, satire, apologo, teatro, narrative and encyclopaedia”.4 The work exhibits a conspicuously refined, allusive style and anticipates a highly refined audience.5 In its use of topoi, Arcadia invites comparison with Bembo’s

1 Lazaro Buonamici’s Latin version of the sonnet transforms the last lines on the poet’s suffering to a Horatian contrast between time’s destruction and the endurance of writing: “Calliope aeternum vivere sola posset”.
2 Ibid., 74–79.
4 Arcadia, ed. Francesco Erspamer (Milan: Mursia, 1990), 25: “insieme lirica, bucolica, satira, apolojo, teatro (i canti amebei), racconto, enciclopedia”. Sannazaro used Pliny extensively.
5 On the pleasure taken by Renaissance readers in the allusive artifice of Arcadia, see the 1596 commendatory of Giovambattista Massarengo quoted in Kennedy, Sannazaro, 116.
Gli Asolani, but the contrast between the two goes beyond the choice of varied as against selective imitation to the repeated allusions to darkness, loss and death which appear in tension to Sannazaro’s rarefied style.

The association of pastoral and mourning appears already in Theocritus, and pastoral in a culture of antiquarianism can contain the theme of reversion, as cities (primarily Rome) return to the wasteland from which they arose. Sannazaro’s most famed creation in his Latin poetry, the piscatory eclogue, adds to this theme the prominence of Proteus as a marine god who reveals future and past events (De partu virginis, Piscatoria).6

The artifice which touches everything in Arcadia involves an insistent orientation towards loss. The juxtaposition of delicate refinement and journeying to darkness or scenes of death in Arcadia gives a foretaste of preoccupations with the duality of preciousness and chaos in Mannerist gardens, before its inspiration of the idealised nostalgia of the Arcadian images of Poussin and Guercino.7 In these works, the opposition between recovery of antique beauty and loss is absorbed into the idealisation of style and genre, making pastoral an elegiac variety of the grand style that elevates all things into its ‘universal’ beauty.

The Hadean topography of Arcadia concerns not only tombs and funerals but visits to the temples of pastoral gods where magical rites are performed (IX), the sacred wood (X), the cave of Pan (X), the grotto where Hecate and Chaos are invoked, and sacrifice made to the Madre Terra (X). This topography culminates in a dreamlike descent into the subterranean caves from which the world’s rivers arise (XII); from here the protagonist returns to Naples where the work ends with a lament for a dead nymph, thought to be Pontano’s wife Arianna. The references to contemporary Naples through the work undermine the notion of Arcadia as a solely idyllic or conventional place.8

The shepherd poet’s ritual veneration at the Arcadian tombs is a figure for the Humanist’s relation to antiquity, both recovered and dead. Arcadia shares this theme with the stylistically divergent Hypnerotomachia Poliphili (1499), where the pursuit of antiquity is a prolonged erotic quest through the memories and fragments of the past for a phantasmal nymph who dissolves as the

6 See Chapter 6, n. 2. Pisc. IV, “Proteus”, recounts the history of Naples and its poetic tradition, concluding that “grata quies patriae, sed omnis terra est sepulchrum”.
8 The felled orange tree (arangio) in the poet’s disturbing dream in Prose XII is interpreted as a reference to the misfortunes of the Aragonesi.