

*Painting at Ground Level*

T. J. CLARK

THE TANNER LECTURES ON HUMAN VALUES

Delivered at

Princeton University  
April 17–19, 2002

T. J. CLARK is George C. and Helen N. Pardee Chair and Professor of Modern Art at the University of California, Berkeley. He was educated at Cambridge and received a Ph.D. from the Courtauld Institute of the University of London. He has taught at a number of institutions in England and the United States, including the Universities of Leeds and Essex, the Camberwell School of Art, UCLA, and Harvard. He has been a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, and is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a corresponding fellow of the British Academy. He is the author of numerous publications, including *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (1973); *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (1985); and *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (2001).

## I. POUSSIN'S MAD PURSUIT

*Si j'ai du goût, ce n'est guère  
Que pour la terre et les pierres.*  
ARTHUR RIMBAUD, "Faim"

*Man alone is a biped.*  
CHARLES DARWIN, *The Descent of Man*

These two lectures aim to present an argument about painting; not about painting in general, but about a certain kind of interest that some painters have in the world they belong to, and a certain kind of power that painting has—maybe only painting has, among the varieties of representation—to state that interest in full. Let me do two things immediately: present the paintings around which the argument will largely turn, and set out the argument itself.

The images are an extraordinary pairing, I realize. The first is a picture by Nicolas Poussin almost certainly done for the Cardinal de Richelieu, as one of a series of four *Bacchanals* for his chateau in Poitou, probably in 1635 or 1636. The decorations do not seem to have been assigned separate titles at the time, or not ones that have entered the written record, but I am fairly confident calling this *The Triumph of Pan*. "Triumph" should carry its original Greek meaning preeminently, from which the later Roman military term derived: *thriambos* being a certain kind of hymn to Dionysos, or even an epithet applied to the god himself in one of his merciless moods. I go along with those who think the red and gold idol being cultivated at the center of things is Pan not Priapus, because there seem to be so many of Pan's known attributes on view, especially thrown down on the ground by his adepts: the pipes at left with their lovely blue ribbon, the *lagobolon* or curved throwing stick, and the pinecone; and on the cult statue itself, the golden horns that Porphyry and others talk about, and the face stained with a hectic vegetable dye. "Pan deus Arcadiae venit, quem vidimus ipsi / sanguineis ebuli bacis



Fig. 1. Nicolas Poussin, *The Triumph of Pan*, National Gallery, London.

minioque rubentem”: famous lines from Eclogue X. One recent translator has them: “whom we ourselves have seen / Ruddled with elderberry blood and cinnabar.” It is true, by the way, that Pan and Priapus are often hard to disentangle in the ancient images and texts. Both are gods of fertility, the one of flocks, the other of gardens. Both go around with penis unwearingly erect, and on the whole parade the fact not cultically and pompously, but with a leer or belly-laugh. They lack seriousness about sex, but for that very reason are irrepressible. A character in Aristophanes says that Pan has the ability to make the entire male population of a city ithyphallic. This is, we shall see, part of Poussin’s story.

My other painting is by Pieter Bruegel, signed and dated, bottom left, 1567—a black year in the history of the Low Countries. Though the picture was, by the look of things, quickly in circulation as an engraving, which happened to surprisingly few of Bruegel’s paintings in his lifetime, the first word we have of the oil-on-panel is in an inventory of the Imperial Collections in Prague more than half a century later:

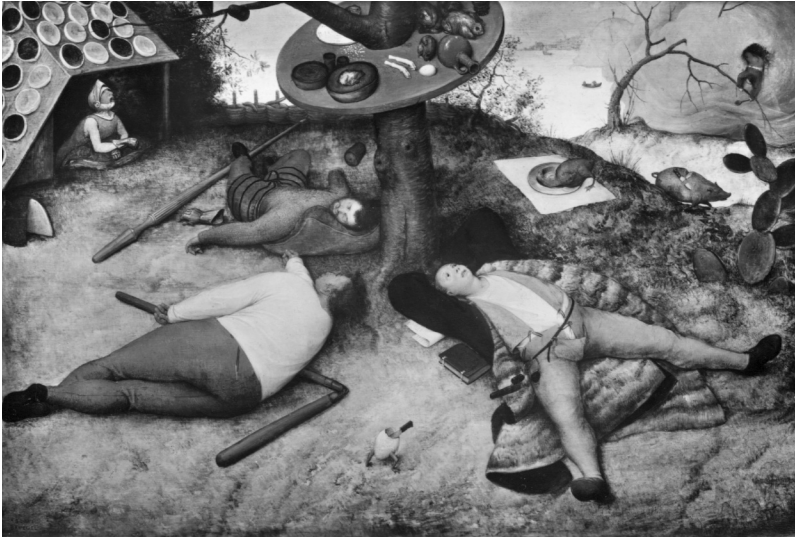


Fig. 2. Pieter Bruegel, *The Land of Cockaigne*, Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

“Drei schlaffende bauern im schlaraffenlandt von dem alten Prügl.” It is not true, though the mistake is telltale, that the three prime sleepers are all peasants, but the bureaucrat has got the basic subject right. This is Schlaraffenland, or Luilekkerland, as the Netherlanders had it (“Lazy-greedy-land” is, I gather, the proper translation), or what the French and English called *The Land of Cockaigne*. It is the kingdom where cooked food is everywhere, falling fresh-roasted from the air into the idler’s mouth, laid out on tables attached to every other tree, or roaming the landscape in search of consumers—pigs with carving knives sheathed in holsters of their own crackling. No one here will ever again eat his bread in the sweat of his brow.

These paintings are in many ways wildly unlike one another, and one task of my lectures will be to persuade you that looking at them together has a point. Perhaps what the point will turn out to be can best be suggested, here at the start of things, by putting my argument starkly in the negative.

For the vast majority of painters, I shall propose, ground level in painting does not greatly matter. They take the earth or floor for granted; they establish them as a small part of the pantomime (a stage for it), or they leave them out altogether and press the upright action close to the surface, in a proximity where the place on the ground where people are planted and how they are planted exactly seem not greatly relevant.

Most painters—are they like or unlike most people in this?—exist naturally and unthinkingly in an upright world. What they see is other bodies, lined up roughly on a level with their own uprightness; and beyond those bodies, a world of further uprights that men have built to contain and reiterate their standing—walls, columns, arcades, lofty or intimate rooms. If they look further, and of course many of them do, they plot the further distances as the eye does, looking out over a landscape from a specially good vantage point—“vantage” meaning an eye moving unimpeded from near to far, not being obstructed by the local ups and downs of the place, grasping the whole geography at one fell swoop, not touching down, not getting distracted by the ground beneath its feet. (Remember, *a contrario*, the famous accounts of Poussin coming back from his walks by the Tiber, and his admirers noticing that “he carried in his handkerchief pebbles, moss, flowers, and other such-like things”—“jusqu’à des pierres, à des mottes de terre, & à des morceaux de bois” is how André Félibien puts it in his *Entretiens*—“which he wanted to paint exactly after nature.”)

Some painters, as implied by this last parenthesis, step away from the common unconsciousness. They too exist in a world of uprightness, inhabited by bipedal bodies. But for some reason this uprightness is, or comes to be, a subject in its own right: not a fact taken utterly for granted, from which proceed all the actions and aspirations that constitute the interest—the value—of the human world, but rather, the fact of facts, which both (they agree) inflects and informs the whole texture of human doings but also (they suggest) sets limits to those doings, threatens their balance constantly, puts them off their stride. Yet at the same time it humanizes them, this mere physicality—this precarious footing, this instinctive adjustment to the force of gravity.

Perhaps one could say that most painters are chiefly interested in the first phrase of Milton’s request to God at the beginning of *Paradise Lost*—“What is dark in me illumine”—and not in the one that follows—“What low, / Raise and support.” The drama of illumination, and the tipping of human being always between darkness and light: this is a metaphoric world that painting occupies automatically, seemingly as part of its very nature. Very few painters see that their art can occupy the second of Milton’s worlds just as naturally, and show the business of bodily raising and supporting, and even articulate what that act of elevation means—what resistances it works against, what constraints it acknowledges, and above all what lowness (what ground bass of materi-

ality) it depends on. Of course painters who do see this are likely to understand that all of the physical terms here are also metaphorical. They know how deeply the figures of bipedalism are built into our ethical, metaphysical, and erotic language. Uprightness is a value—for some an absolute. “Staying on a good footing” is as important as “maintaining one’s high standing.” Being supine or prostrate or prone is never very far from lolling about and groveling. Our culture still thinks of failure or error as versions of the Fall.

Some painters, I am saying—and they turn out to be few and exceptional—see the great fact of the human world as the body’s complex (and by no means trouble-free) standing on its hind legs; and therefore they become interested in what is underneath the human animal’s feet. They paint the contact between upright man and the groundplane. More—they give the groundplane an equal and opposite weight to the world erected on top of it. They may agree with Darwin and the palaeontologists that bipedalism was the great and puzzling step (and even “step” is a metaphor that begs the question) by which the human animal became what it is; but they borrow another scene from the anthropologists’ story. Before bipedalism, and maybe driving bipedalism, there was simple terrestriality—the fact of coming down from the trees. Of course I am not insinuating that in some fantastical way the painters who interest me intuited the argument of *The Descent of Man* two centuries before it was published. Standing on one’s hind legs is a great fact of human existence whether or not it is thought of within an evolutionary frame. For whatever reason—within whatever ideological matrix—some artists come to see it as the key to our being in the world. So the ground in their hands becomes something other than a notional “plane,” established in a system of equal spatial coordinates or dimensions; it becomes a level, a grounding, a limit condition of the human; and further, it becomes a world in itself, level and yet not level, firm and yet locally unreliable, fissured, fractured, intricate—a world of levels as opposed to an image of levelness. A set of steps, a system of *terrazzi*.

This is the argument naked. I shall want to clothe and qualify it in various ways over the next three days, and there is one immediate qualification I can make that will also serve to pull the “most painters” I have lumped together so grandly out of the realm of abstraction and give us an image by one of them to look at. Let me start at the top, with Raphael’s *Deposition*. For whatever else my argument may be, it is not

meant as a test of aesthetic quality. It is a description of a certain kind of pictorial interest. Obviously I shall try to persuade you that the interest is worth having, and can point painting to aspects of the human world—I almost said, the human condition—that it, as an art, may be uniquely qualified to explore. No other art (not even sculpture) is so well equipped to set out the physical existence of men and women in a *surrounding*, in relation to a continuous, particularized, changing ground—not an abstracted “base” or compliant “pedestal.” You will gather that this is an aspect of painting—an opportunity I see painting as having—that I warm to. I envy the way this kind of painting can state its materialist case so sensually, so matter-of-factly. But I am very far from arguing that this is the only or the most adequate view of the world that painting can promote. There are reasons for its rarity, which I shall get to. I do not even think that ground-level painting (I am going to use that phrase as shorthand from now on for the texture of interests I have just described) is a necessary concomitant of commitments in painting I would call Realist. I do not think Caravaggio was a ground-level painter. Nor was Gustave Courbet. Nor were Vermeer or Chardin or even, most of the time, Rembrandt and Van Eyck. I hope the rollcall of names excluded from my canon at least persuades you that it cannot be a “great tradition” in disguise.

Hence Raphael. I do not see that ground level, in the terms I have posed it, exists in his *Deposition*; or perhaps I should say it only exists as pure support for the action above—the falling and holding and balancing, with its intricate criss-cross of movement sideways, close to the picture plane. The earth in this picture is just a provider of vegetable incident; it has not the least resistance or material character of its own. Of course Raphael can put a foot on the ground convincingly, but he seems to me not interested in the foot’s weight-bearing or body-balancing qualities. His feet are balletic. The key one in the formal order of the *Deposition*, belonging to the man in green and yellow—Joseph of Arimathea, presumably—is pure shape, pure extension, with the body it carries exerting no force whatever on it, or through it onto the ground. Bodies in Raphael do not feel the strain—at any level, really, high or low. The lean of the man is an *amplificatio*—a strengthening and repetition—of the deathly weightlessness of Christ. The woman turning to lend a hand to the swooning Virgin feels nil pressure on the two arms she holds up.

Raphael’s plants—take the least patch of grass in the Poussin as comparison—do not actually go into or start out of his virtual earth.



There is no earth or grass for them to fasten onto; and the convenient two-step *terrazzo* over to the left—convenient for the ballet of leans and swoons and limbs full-stretch, I mean—only confirms the general impalpability of things this far down in the divine order.

When Gian Bernini, on a visit to France in the 1660s, came face to face with copies of the Richelieu *Bacchanals* (including *The Triumph of Pan*, for certain, which the diarist describes as the picture “où sont ces masques jetés par terre”) one thing he singled out for praise, apparently, was the paintings’ *terrazzes*. The word is mildly technical: it means the painter’s handling of the groundplane and foreground, and built into it is an awareness on the part of practitioners of what careful steps have sometimes to be taken to reconcile the groundplane with the picture plane and have the groundplane reach a satisfactory accommodation with the painting’s literal bottom edge. Will it cross it regardless, as if continuing out and into the viewer’s space? Or will it take a final step or two down, as if feeling the pull of the picture’s frontality and flatness the nearer it gets to the bottom of things? I think the ground in the Raphael is the kind Bernini must have had in mind when he could not stop looking at what Poussin had done instead. The diarist tells us he looked at the *Triumph* “un bon quart d’heure tout au moins.” Compare the attention Raphael gives (I mean does not bother to give) to the section through the earth’s actual substance made visible by the two small banks of bare soil at the left—its material composition, that is, its softness or dryness or friability—to what happens next to Poussin’s *tambourine*.

Bernini’s use of the word *terrazzi* was one main trigger, as far as I can reconstruct things, to the line of thought I have just set out. It struck me how seldom we have evidence from the past of what one great visual artist chose to look at in another; and I thought it told us something important that he looked so hard at these creatures’ footing. Of course he looked at the creatures themselves, and the trees (which the diarist also mentions), and the unabashed interweave of bodies, the storytelling. “Veramente quel’uomo è stato un grande istoriatore e grande favoleggiatore,” he said. This is an ordinary verdict, and a just one; but I was still interested in the traces in the text of Bernini’s more technical attention, as fellow practitioner, and the sense of the story’s being so moving for him because of the ground it stood on.

I was, I now realize, prepared for this piece of evidence by the time it



Fig. 3. Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*, National Gallery, London

cropped up. In particular I was prepared to believe that questions of levels and grounding in painting, and the place of upright or fallen man on those levels, could carry—did carry—an ethical charge. Over the course of the previous year I had been looking at a particular painting by Poussin, the one in London called *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*, done for Poussin's friend and banker Jean Pointel. And slowly but surely I had come to recognize that *Landscape with a Snake's* whole view of the human turned on the contrast between the running man's magnificent bipedalism—his poise, his turning, his steadying; his signing arm, which is also a lever (a cantilever) moving about a fulcrum—and the snake as bipedalism's absolute opposite.

Snakes, as has often been noticed, are the members of the animal kingdom that Poussin seems to have been most drawn to. They appear relentlessly in paintings and drawings throughout his life, time and again charged with a specially repellent beauty. (Maybe it tells you something about Poussin's limitations that he only seems to have been truly interested in the part of the animal kingdom that he knew could kill him.) The subject has many fascinations, but I think the drawing Poussin did, most likely in the late 1630s, of a snake at rest inscribed in a circle—it is now in the Louvre—points to one heart of the matter as far as he was concerned; and it connects directly with his treatment of python and corpse by the spring in the painting in London. The snake, so the drawing sets out for us, is a body that can constantly recreate its

own form, and which appears to have no “given” or optimum disposition of its parts in space. It is a body that is content with a constant, as it were provisional, intersection of one bit of itself with another: a constant coiling (that interesting word), and not only a going round and round but in the process an interweaving, an overlapping—ultimately a seeming echoing (a mimesis) of the part just touched, just *felt*, by the part of the organism doing the touching. The Louvre drawing gets this horribly right.

The snake, we could say, is a body that belongs too completely to the ground it rests on. It not only provoked and participated in the Fall, but it revels in what the falling made possible. Bearing in mind Poussin’s politics for a moment, and their rootedness in a certain view of an *ordre déterminé* existing in Nature, I think we might almost say that the snake for him is an egalitarian body, a creature without established hierarchy among its constituents; a body in which the senses hardly seem to be located or concentrated in specific organs (with other parts clearly subordinate, only dimly or rudimentarily sensate, having as their function more lowly tasks of digestion or circulation, for example, or more basic ones of maintaining organic integrity or equilibrium). In the snake everything, it appears, is sensate and animate, and this seems to be the clue to the creature’s love of involution—its touching and coiling and circling back on itself—as if it needed, as part of its life, to enjoy its own polymorphousness.

The snake is the ultimate sign in Poussin’s world of mere, but also infinite, extension. It is mere because seemingly not yet crystallized out into a form (or not a form with a *disposition* or an *ordre déterminé et ferme*). It takes what form it chooses, and barely even seems to acknowledge gravity. It is infinite because so unstoppably variable. Of course variation was a quality Poussin was capable of valuing (“Je sais varier quant je veux”). But within bounds.

I believe, incidentally, that the snake on the ground also figured in Poussin’s *Bacchanals* for Richelieu. Given what I have said about it as one pole of Poussin’s metaphysics, how could it fail to? The case is complicated, and necessarily inconclusive. We know that the painting to which, specifically, Bernini applied the word *terrazzi* was a third *Bacchanal*, very probably a *Triumph of Silenus*. What happened on the ground there cannot, in my opinion, remotely be suggested by the horrible copy or travesty of this *Triumph* that lives downstairs in London—it is botched and repainted almost everywhere, and its bottom eighteen

inches are particularly vapid. Either Bernini was an imbecile or this is not what he saw. I think what he saw was something much closer to a drawing that survives in the Hermitage. I go along with Louis-Antoine Prat and Pierre Rosenberg in thinking that the drawing is a copy after a lost original by Poussin and that it shows him working on the kind of action he had in mind for *Silennus's* ground level. The key action takes place between snake and mask. The snake is now coiling round a discarded *thyrsus*, mimicking the motion of the more usual ivy, and striking at an old man's mask propped up against a wine jar. It is fitting that the happenings on the ground in this drawing, by contrast to those in the *Pan*, are animate and aggressive. The painted *Silennus* is the nastiest of the *Bacchanals*: it is the one that admits most openly, as the whole myth of Dionysos does, that eros and madness, or ecstasy and cruelty, are closely linked. In the center midground of painting and drawing an ass is braying pitifully. A satyr is using his ritual equipment as a stick. A satyress stubs out a flaming brand between the ass's ears. Just for fun.

So this is the first thing about *Landscape with a Snake* I had come to take seriously: the contrast within it between a body whose order and balance come from its standing upright, negotiating the force of gravity, and another body that does no such thing. The second was simply the question of levels. It dawned on me slowly that the running man's movement through the landscape would not carry the ontological charge it seems to if it did not take place on a series of wonderful (but also strange) terraces. (You might want to build into your sense of the picture in this connection an awareness that much of the slightly fiery earth-tone of the banks in the foreground has been flattened and darkened and hotted up over the years by Poussin's paint becoming transparent to its underlayer; so that though the banks were always earthen, they were undoubtedly more varied in the first place—fuller of terrestrial detail, in the way of the crevices in *Triumph of Pan*.)

Poussin's thinking is complex. Naturally, as you would expect from him, the specific ground level on which the running man pivots is intensely realized, and established above all as a floor, a flat. The spellbinding calm (and hardness) of the stream helps to do that: it gives us an absolute measure of levelness, of the disposition of a substance spreading out and equalizing as a result of Nature's laws. And the surface of the lake reiterates—crystallizes, you might say—the same idea. Yet the stream and the lake are at the same time not quite trustworthy as meas-

ures of groundedness and levelness. The stream sweeps slowly from left to right and then turns a little more sharply left again, disappearing into a declivity. The stream is flowing: it is serpentine: it partly participates in the twisting and turning of the snake that haunts its waters. And which way is it flowing? The streambed must be tilting, however gradually, in one direction or another. Does the water make its way down to the lake? Or is the lake its feeder? I think we are given just enough of contrary suggestions to make both readings possible.

And I think the equivocation matters. I believe the play of levels and directions finds its way, in the end, into our understanding of the painting's two key gestures: the running man's extended arm and hand, and the woman on the path who seems to answer him with arms thrown wide, in a movement of wonder and alarm, presumably, but also, strangely, of balancing—her arms coinciding exactly with the near shoreline of the lake, as if she were a kind of Atlas or Gaea holding the great upper storey of the world on her shoulders.

I do not think these two gestures would have the ethical force they do—one that in my view goes far beyond the mere story, or the precise exchange of *affetti* in the case—if they were not bound into a universe of levels; levels established and dependable, levels flowing and turning and maybe slightly out of kilter; levels materialized and levels elusive; the world of man, which is partly an *effort* at leveling (we shall see this again in Bruegel), and the world of the snake, who revels interminably in twists and turns, and for whom the earth is always potentially a series of openings into chthonic dark. The reaching out of the running man is also a steadying, a holding, a stopping of the flow. It tries to reiterate the continuity—the dependability—of the ground beneath his feet, and to flatten and straighten the slight tilt and velocity of the path his arm is set against, on which, at a little distance, the woman has put down herself and her bundle of laundry.

I came to realize that the great thing I returned to in this painting over the months—the thing no reproduction could give me, and that I had to experience again at actual scale, with the precise balance of painterly substance (yet also economy and abbreviation) that Poussin had chosen to give it—was the distance between the man's outstretched fingers and the woman's. Was it a distance just great enough to register—to be a metaphor of—everything that human sign-language cannot cross, cannot contain? Or had enough of a signal already leapt across it? Was the running man still essentially in the snake's world? (Is the

word “running” the right one, in fact, to describe what the man at the right is going through, or should we see him as turning back, hesitating—maybe even paralyzed, as animal prey are reputed to be in face of the predator’s rising to strike? It is a notable fact that the first writers on the picture—Félibien, in particular, who returns to the painting more than once—seem not quite able to make up their minds about this.) Has the man stepped outside the human world for a moment? Or does the partial mirroring of hand-signals on either side of the gap between him and the woman produce just enough of reciprocity and bind him already back into language?

My experience of the painting is that Poussin has set up a distance from hand to hand at which (of which) we can never be sure—never be sure in memory, never be entirely satisfied in the flesh. And part of the charge here—part of the pathos and uncertainty—is not just the amount of empty space between the two gestures, but the change of levels. It is especially hard in memory, I find, to hold onto an image of just how great the *vertical* distance traveled is between the two key extremities. The man’s uprightness puts him somehow on a level with the woman, and in a sense above her. His forearm, as I said, repeats and expresses the groundplane of the path. It is continually a surprise to register the fact that literally, geometrically, the woman’s hand has its center of gravity on a level with the very top of the man’s head—maybe even a fraction above it. Again this would not matter ethically—it would not strike us as carrying with it a special kind of thought and feeling about the nature (the fragility) of human relations—if it did not participate in the overall world of levels and groundings that Bernini knew was Poussin’s own. You could say that if certain cultures and individuals think the difference between Nature and Culture in terms of raw versus cooked, or naked versus clothed, then Poussin habitually thought it in terms of level versus tilted, solid versus liquid, earthly versus chthonic, bipedal versus serpentine.

I come back to *The Triumph of Pan*. Let me begin by saying that in many respects it presents us with a world that has little in common with *Landscape with a Snake*. It could almost be seen as its contrary. In particular, the question of human (and nonhuman) standing and falling, and the whole relation between the realm of upright desires and purposes and the terrain underneath on which that desire is planted—all this is imagined differently. No more magnificent bipedalism, no more feeling

eternally for one's center of gravity. Maybe even, in a sense, no more *acknowledgment* on the part of bodies of their belonging to the world below and being subject to physical constraints. But this too, I shall argue, is part of Poussin's anthropology. Because a painter is capable of recognizing, and relishing, the place of the ground in the human comedy does not mean that he fails to take seriously everything in the human that wants to escape from gravity. This is what *The Triumph of Pan* is about, I think. The difficult question to decide is what the place of the earth ends up being, nonetheless—in and against the attempt to escape it.

So I start underfoot. It is hard to think of another ground level in painting where so much happens, and where the ground itself takes on so much the force of an actor in the drama, answering and parodying and maybe gently negating the goings-on above. It is, in a sense, the ground itself that does this, for reasons I shall go on to spell out; but for the ground to do so effectively it has to be covered with signs, paraphernalia—it has to be given a face. The masks are an unforgettable part of it. They are the picture's signature. They give the earth a physiognomy—a comic or satiric one. (What I take to be the mask of tragedy is also there on the grass, but in comparison with comedy and satire on either side of it tragedy tends to slip through the net of attention; it seems barely attached to the ground it is laid on. It is as bland and ephebic as the Lydian stranger himself.) The earth has a face here, smiling or scowling, but of course it is part of the point that the face—the mask—is empty, counterfeit; a presence that makes the absence underneath it all the more salient and strange. Men try to give the earth a persona and draw it a little into their upright realm. But absence persists. The tambourine next to the satyr mask is the absence articulated, as if by a seventeenth-century geometer.

The syrinx too, on the grass to the left, has a crisp, seventeenth-century flavor to it, at a long remove from the reeds it imitates. The longer one looks, the less one believes that any musician could coax a note from it. It is a Cartesian syrinx, setting out the laws of orthogonality—maybe laughing just a little at them, sotto voce. It seems to arrive from another world, another conception of levelness and groundedness altogether—Paolo Uccello's world, or even Van Eyck's. Maybe an angel from the Ghent altarpiece would feel at home with it. And its sensible regularity (this is part of the Poussin joke) is simply overwhelmed by what lies next to it. The ribbon, the pinecone, the crooked stick, the flowers spilling from their basket, the wine, the hacked tree-trunks, not

one but two great artichoke wands wound round with ivy, and two toppled jars, one of them with a frieze repeating the frieze of actual figures above; and centrally, gratuitously, the great serpentine sheet to which the mask of comedy is attached.

The white sheet in particular is the key to the groundplane's power. It would take too long, and take me too far, to present you with the evidence for the sheet's specific place in Poussin's imaginary, and the full range of meanings wrapped up in it. Death is certainly one of them. The sheet is a shroud—it puts me in mind of the bundle on the stretcher in Poussin's *Phocion*, or even the corpse in the toils of the snake. It is a fallen parody—a gentle parody, as I say—of the masked statue of Pan up above.

It may also be—surely in the context the sheet's multiple folds and protuberances are suggestive—that one of the things it conceals is the upright phallus. If so, this is Poussin's nod to one of the standard features of the Bacchic processions he fed on while putting this picture together, on the sides of sarcophagi scattered through Rome. It is (but of course it is also *not*) a *liknon*: that is, a winnowing basket carried by an adept, in which a mystic phallus nested, sometimes naked, more usually under wraps. And lest you think my leap from sheet to erection too little motivated, let me say that we know from the drawings associated with the Richelieu *Bacchanals*, and with another *Bacchanal* done later, that veiling and masking and engorged penises were very much part of Poussin's visual thinking on the subject. There is a tremendous wash drawing in the Louvre, where on the right a maenad seems to be masking or unmasking her partner, whose risen phallus is unmistakable under his robe. Is it the masking or unmasking that produces the arousal? Masking is anyway part of it. On the ground to the right of the figures are more masks ready for use. The idea is repeated more explicitly on a sheet now in London, next to a pen drawing for *The Raising of Lazarus*. I like the idea of Poussin's mind wandering from sex to death, and erection to resurrection. Shrouds and *liknons* are compatible. No doubt the painter and his antiquarian friends were fond of musing on the fact that Bacchic revels, and *liknons* and masks and other more explicit sexual shenanigans, were the stock in trade of one kind of Imperial tomb sculpture.

Then there is a famous drawing in Windsor, which someone in the seventeenth century—I am inclined to think Poussin himself—tore into fourteen pieces. (The glue that put it back together again is period.) Masking is not in evidence here, but much the same game as in the Lou-



vre drawing is going on between two figures at far right. It is not clear if the phallic male in this case is bribing the woman with wine or grabbing her by the scruff of the neck. She in turn is armed with the *thyrsus* to end all *thyrses*. Elsewhere in the drawing the link between erection and concealment is positively thematized. Over to the left is an initiate doing handstands in a loose undershirt, thereby revealing all. And the all turns out not to amount to much. Naturally the thought with Poussin is also a thought about bipedalism. The phallus goes with the man standing up. Its power goes with its being concealed. The flaccid member belongs to the individual who willfully turns the world upside down.

Remember, however, that this drawing was ripped to bits. The white sheet in the *Triumph* is, as it were, Poussin's public alternative. Its sexuality is more deeply hidden, or, maybe better, dispersed. It may be the phallus stirring underneath the drapery, or the dead body stiffening under the shroud. Or it may be nothing. The sheet may simply be what it is—discarded, contingent, a satyric invitation to us (us upright viewers) to see any material *as* something, to give it a face and desires.

So much, for the moment, for what takes place on the ground. It is sufficient for our purposes that a lot takes place, that the ground is a world of its own, and that various kinds of connection, and maybe tension, can be detected between the world below and the one on top of it—the procession of cultists and corybants. Let me turn to them.

I had better begin by admitting that the world on top in this Poussin, the frieze of figures, has never been entirely easy for viewers to assimilate or sympathize with—even Poussin's admirers tend to flinch. When Pablo Picasso chose it as the subject of one of his very first versions after the Old Masters, in 1944—he was working, I take it, from the excellent copy then in the hands of Paul Jamot (perhaps it was the very copy Bernini had looked at)—his choice was eccentric. Of course it chimed in with the moment, and his own view of the nature of sex. It is not a view easily shared. Pierre Rosenberg, for instance, giving his reasons for not including *The Triumph of Pan* in the Paris retrospective of 1994, recoils urbanely from the *Bacchanals* in general with the phrase “leur sensualité figée.” This is a fair description: the Bacchic procession could hardly be more plotted and metered and formalized. Its rhymes and symmetries are laced tight as a straightjacket. But the question follows, it seems to me: Is there a way in which the paintings put that

freezing and stiffening to use, or make these qualities genuinely part of an overall—a generalizable—account of the senses? I think so, at least in the case of the *Pan*.

It is perfectly true, as I say, that the line of figures, especially in comparison with their first appearances in pen drawings at the Louvre and Windsor, has a packed, flattened, and angular quality. The to and fro of diagonals, in particular, has the look of a working of a great machine, with limbs as pistons and heads as cogs. It is a *Triumph*, not a revel. The actors are doing their phallic duty. The central bacchante in blue seems essentially to be a reprise of the figure of Flora, from the painting originally called *Primavera* done by Poussin just four or five years earlier, though now the figure is moving in the opposite direction; but the reprise only sums up the general change of mood from one picture to the other. Easy movement becomes ecstatic posing, turning in space becomes spreading across the flat, a smile hardens into the fixed grin of a mask. Everyone in the *Triumph* is as agonized as the *Primavera*'s mad Ajax. Maenads and satyrs are playing their part in a pleasure production line, with the animal in their nature—their animality, as well as the actual animals they mount or shoulder toward sacrifice—all subdued to the serious business of climax. “Climax” might be another word for *Triumph* here, with the absurd trumpet blown by the corybant at left summing the whole thing up. The corybant's neck muscles are a study in strain. The serpentine vine that issues from the trumpet's mouth is surely sounding the opposite note to the one we imagine the instrument producing. Climax is piercing in this procession. It is stiff and agonized, not sinuous.

None of this means, in my view, that the procession is ominous or frantic; or not straightforwardly so. The grins may be fixed, but they do not seem false. The actors are colluding, almost tenderly, in the absurd performance. They are solicitous of each other's efforts. The hand in the satyr's hair is steady as opposed to punitive. Those who have fallen (especially the silly goat-men, always unsteady on their pins) will be helped up. The male adept's hold on the maenad riding the goat to the left and the play of looks between the two have the ease of long familiarity. The moves have been gone through many times before. This much help is necessary—this much pressure, this much frisson of stage desire. Pleasure requires practice, and also, massively, equipment—accoutrements, paraphernalia. The ground is encumbered with them, the

term to the right smothered by them, the frieze as a whole crammed full of bowls, baskets, carcasses, garlands. The maenad holding onto the upside-down faun is broken into fragments by her charge, and the faun's rigor mortis is a parody of everybody else's animation.

I want then to see the point of the freezing and mechanizing. I think what truly makes such a "seeing the point" possible (for if the picture itself did not frame and reflect on the freezing—did not put it in perspective—then one would be open to the charge of simply performing an arbitrary reversal of the terms of a normal reading, a predictable deconstruction) is the way the painting puts the procession on the ground. Here is the great contrast with the drawings, in fact—just as much as the hardening and geometricizing of the figures' bodies. Everything in the finished work depends on the *Triumph's* happening on the littered earth.

Pleasure, says Poussin—or phallic pleasure, at least—is essentially an effort at levitation, at ecstatic escape from gravity. It is full of the fear of falling. Pleasure equals uprightness, ejaculation, the wild rictus of the mask. The debris on the grass seems to me to ironize that dream machinery, but with an infinite tenderness. The crumpled sheet is a shroud, as I say, a broken body, and its efforts at expression are rightly literalized as masquerade. The panpipes are overbuilt and architectural, like a fragment of architrave fallen from a temple. The tambourine is pure abstraction. *Thyrsus* and pinecone are robbed of their magic. The two broken trees reiterate the message. The wine in the bowl is a last splash of *real* sensuality—wine red, but blood red too—which makes the machine up above seem the more anaemic. The red of Pan's mask is a ghostly facsimile of the flush of orgasm. The revelers are as inorganic, ultimately, as their listless, ghostly doubles on the tipped-up urn—Primiticcio doubles, white and long-legged. "What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape?" "The Naiad 'mid her reeds / Pressed her cold finger closer to her lips."

So the stuff on the ground puts the *Triumph* in its place; but not glibly, I think, not with a moralist's finality. Even the leftovers are full of the will to exceed, to do phallic magic, to lift and prolong. And anyway the foreground is nothing on its own: it should be connected, as the picture takes pains to, with the wider extent of the earth—the genial dusk, the screen of trees, the far glimpse of meadows, a winding road, mountains, sea level. No doubt the earth ironizes the efforts of human sexuality—the attempt to stop time, to concentrate sensation into a single

movement, repeated and repeated—but it also provides the setting for it, the shelter, the potions and materials. Wands, cones, elixirs, aphrodisiacs.

This is a picture of Nature, in other words, every bit as much as *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*. It is an account of the human animal engaged in one of that animal's characteristic activities—a physical and cultural anthropology. And of course as such it is open to challenge. Do not the very words “human” and “animal,” which surely are the appropriate ones (the period ones) in this case, beg the question? Do they not operate at a level of species-generality, which may exactly be the problem? What is this painting's conception of *gender*, exactly? Who has power in the world of the sexes, and why? What are the *Bacchanals'* sexual politics?

My answer would be this. Whatever else may be happening in Poussin's revels—and it is time I entered the most glorious of them into the equation, the *Bacchanalian Revel by a Term of Pan*, also in London, done most likely in 1632 or 1633—the sexual *Triumph* taking place does not appear to me to be that of the phallic male over the woman. There is some satyric rough-housing, often at the center of things, but even as it happens the satyr seems basically harmless. Maybe it has to do with the limitations of his legs. Only Poussin would put the human and goat foot so perfectly in apposition (the detail is in the right foreground of the London *Revel*) as if for a lesson in comparative anatomy.

Males and females in the *Bacchanals* are both phallic, at least in the sense that Poussin seems to have understood the word. They are both capable, that is, of stage-managed ecstasy—meaning erection, levitation, freezing into an interminable instant of pleasure. Sexuality in Poussin is not modeled around, or directed by, the dyads male/female, active/passive, exteriority/interiority, penetration/reception, on top/underneath. Both sexes are pure outsides in Poussin, appearances in search of *parousia*: both sexes are on the lookout for the phallic moment, and both can attain it. The erect penis is one (strong) form of the phallus, but so are the *thyrsus*, the upflung limb, the rigid and triumphant body, the twitching limbs of the sacrificial beast, the striking snake that so haunts the sarcophagi, or the garland roping the term to one's momentary purpose. The phallus is any piece of symbolic equipment that can mimic—and therefore enact, make possible—the moment of raising, hardening, getting high. Getting high is the essence of sex. But maybe above all

getting high secretly. Think back to the sequence of drawings. The phallus rises, but behind a veil. Sex is essentially a masquerade. E. R. Dodds says of the actor playing Dionysos in Euripides that he was “a man masquerading as a god masquerading as a man.” Many of Poussin’s figures exist in the same limbo.

There seems to be a wild speculative biology at work here, though I doubt we shall ever find traces of it in the work of Poussin’s friends. Getting up on one’s hind legs—the great fact of human evolution, of human difference—is somehow conflated with the stiffening and rising upward of the penis. (That the stiffening results at all in a rising *upward* is in itself largely an accidental byproduct of bipedalism, but let that pass.) Contra one version of metapsychology, then, it is not the unitary and digital nature of the erect penis—its standing for “one,” for irreducible identity—that is the essence; or even its strange exteriority to the body, and therefore its standing perhaps for the Word and our body’s surrender to it; but simply its uprightness, its feat of levitation. In it is symbolized and recapitulated the business of humans becoming other than animal—paradoxically symbolized, of course, since it is done by means of an “animal” reflex, which therefore immediately has to be masked, sublated, sacralized. The term is never more potent than when it is kept in the dark. Pan in his *Triumph* is actually diminutive in relation to most of the revelers. He is a plaything, a harmless totem. So that maybe the real source of sexual energy in Poussin’s picture is to be understood as occurring way to the right, beneath the cloak and cymbals, in the second term whose terminus can only be guessed at.

“Sexual energy” may be one way of saying it; and yet that form of words does not seem to me quite to capture the great fact of eroticism as Poussin conceives it. The fact is this: that bodies in pursuit of pleasure are capable of almost endless permutations and interpenetrations, but somehow in them nothing happens, nothing changes; and the “nothing happening”—the stillness, the repetitiveness, the *un*productiveness—is the payoff. It is the true excitement of sex.

Perhaps this is why the things on the ground are so affecting. It is not so much that they stand for what has to be discarded in order for ecstasy to happen, it is that ultimately we feel them as standing for the state toward which ecstasy is directed. The mask and the crumpled white robe—they are the satisfied body. Ground level, then, is, among other things, regression. It is where bodies sink back into sleep or death or disintegration; where fat babies dream.

I finish with a different painting, in some ways a more typical one; for I am conscious of having represented in this lecture only the smallest fraction of Poussin's interests in ground level, and the kinds of things he had happen there. The realm could be sinister: the worst of all ground-level objects in Poussin, it seems to me, is the Medusa's head on a shield in *Venus Presenting Arms to Aeneas* in Rouen, where the face seems molded from a coiling fecal stick. Things on the ground could be hellish, that is, but of course they could be heavenly, with cut stone standing in for eternity and composure. A tilted column base could stand for the fall of a whole civilization, a bowl on the shoreline for enlightenment. Ground level was deathly. Ground level was soft and nurturing, and brought on the deepest of sleeps. Give Poussin a sprawling body to paint and all his gifts are mobilized—he enters immediately and totally into the thing he is depicting. Partly, as one or two of the paintings show, this is because such a disposition of the body stirs up a deep past. The child dozing on the stomach of the sleeping maenad in the Louvre *Nurture of Bacchus* is Poussin himself, I intuit, dreaming a faraway, long-lost non-identity. Words could be written on the ground, of course, as they are indelibly (with a lapidary's chisel, by the look of it) in *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*. The snake could be brought into the realm of language. But at a cost. The real painter, the real materialist—"moy qui fais profession des choses muettes," as Poussin describes himself—keeps his eyes on the clod in his handkerchief.

Nonetheless I shall end in the upright world, the world of the Word, for I certainly have not been meaning to deny that Poussin lived in it and valued it much like the rest of us. Of course the established view of Poussin is not simply incorrect. I may be arguing that in leaving out the mute and earthly and material in his painting the usual view misses the *point* of Poussin's discursiveness, but I do not deny that discursiveness matters. Reason and Law and Speech and Judgment are Poussin subjects, right enough. But I still believe we should look at the ground they stand on.

The most laconic and ethereal of upright bodies in Poussin occurs, I believe, in the center midground of his *Death of Saphira* in the Louvre, where the apostle Paul is shown about to heal a paralyzed beggar-woman—again bipedalism is at issue. Front of stage, by contrast, God smites the half-hearted to the ground—Saphira's crime, I should remind you, was to have withheld from the church a proportion of the money raised from the sale of her lands. The Lord is merciless, but also

tender. He points and strikes, but at the same time raises up all that fall down. The whole area in which we are shown the latter happening—the backdrop to the small drama of Paul and the paralytic—is a feast of Poussin-type painterliness: wonderful dry-drawn ghostly figures, walking about, climbing the great flight of city steps toward a temple front blazing with gold and red. The painter plays variously with the will-o'-the-wisp quality of his tiny simulacra: back and back into space go the togaed strollers, smaller and smaller, harder and harder to separate from their surroundings. The almost imperceptible, by the way, is one of Poussin's great themes. Over to the left is a row of still smaller upright shapes, painted the same way, which eventually one realizes must be goods hanging up at a market stall, perhaps cuts of meat or whole carcasses of birds or game. The line between human and animal, or body and commodity, is not entirely clear. Then, right underneath Peter's blasting hand, there is a final, singular line of dry color—I think it is a white with some green in it—and, stepping back, it becomes readable, just, as the vestige of a person disappearing into a doorway (or about to emerge from it). It is a brilliant, weird conceit—I imagine Poussin smiling as he made it. Somehow its juxtaposition with the merciless main hand just above seems charged. Bodies are this fragile and ephemeral, easily disposed of: anyone can do God's conjuring trick.

This is ultimately, for me, what makes Poussin's materialism special, and very unlike that of most other painters with the same intensity of feeling for the body's physical belonging to the world. Poussin's bodies are always vulnerable, just because they are so fully and merely things of flesh and blood. Hence the inimitable character of his actors—the man running in *Landscape with a Snake* is a perfect example. No body could be more completely present and articulate on canvas, laid out as a strange and touching configuration of muscle, nerve, skin, and bone (Cartesian machine, but with the soul at work in every fiber); but none could be more fragile, more provisional, as if the next puff of wind or trick of Fortune could blow it away. Materialism usually means massiveness or palpability. Even a painter like Rembrandt, who becomes more aware of decay and mortality as he proceeds, has them appear as actual behaviors of sagging or puffing flesh. Poussin's sense of mortality is different. Death in Poussin is signified most powerfully simply by the fact of the body's being rendered in two dimensions. The particular way Poussin has of registering three dimensions in terms of two *is* his apprehension of the body's subjection—to force, to Fortune, to the Music of

Time. But you will see from the very example (the extreme example) I have chosen to end with, in *The Death of Saphira*, that this will-o'-the-wispness, this vulnerability, would not strike home in the way it does were it not always in apposition to levelness and groundedness and solidity. The man is a wraith, but the floor he walks onto is as solid as a rock. Its shape and hardness and dependability are repeated and repeated through layer after layer of space. Humans have Fallen; the world they construct for themselves is too regular and perfect, and in time will fall down too. Look at it even here, to the right, already partly in ruin. But the ground, the level, will survive. Thumbs are for sucking, but not for long. Very soon the baby too, over to the left, will reach for the cold pattern of the flags—even dangling in midair his feet seem to be practicing a step. It is cruel ground level. Only Poussin could have made a floor so stand for precision, implacability, the geometry of the Law. One fears for the baby's knees. But try to stop him!

## II. BRUEGEL IN THE LAND OF COCKAIGNE

*By reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright.*

BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

My subject is Bruegel, and once again I feel the need to apologize for yoking together in these lectures painters as dissimilar as Bruegel and Poussin. I know they exist in radically different worlds. But what I have been calling “ground-level painting” is no respecter of ideological boundaries. It occurs spasmodically through the centuries and comes in all shapes and sizes. It can be ponderous and sensible—a good example would be the Ferrarese painter Ortolano, for whom the earth and its covering, and the kinds of contact human bodies make with it, seem simply to come up as part of getting the gravity of everything right. They are not singled out, exactly, and Ortolano does not have anything very striking to say about them, but even to treat the earth as calmly and equally as he does is to steer painting into a realm it does not often occupy. Compare Ortolano with Ercole de Roberti—I have in mind his predella painting in the Vatican, *Episodes from the Ministry of St. Vincent Ferrer*. I take it we would agree that “calmly” or “ponderously” would be



the wrong words in this case. What Ortolano is capable of is as unlike Ercole's fantastical relish for the different things that ground level can do as it would be possible to imagine; and yet I think the two painters can stand as exemplars of straightforward *interest* in the earth (in contrast to the subtler and more interwoven attentiveness of a Poussin or a Bruegel): the one a purveyor of down-to-earthness in general, the other a showman, a dilettante, of stones and paths.

One of the things I have liked about the train of looking I stumbled into over the past two years is that I have gone on finding it impossible to predict which painters put their characters four-square on the ground, and why—into what kind of worldview the performances fit. Paolo Veronese, for instance, has emerged, very unexpectedly, as a ground-level painter through and through. He has only to set a row of toes along a ledge for the viewer to feel the whole weight of the body upon them. If an angel takes off and hovers above the earth in his paintings, it is always as an entity tentatively stretching itself in an element not its own, and feeling every moment the pull of the ground beneath. Veronese can have ground level be utterly dominant in a painting, ruling its least detail, without even showing it. All kinds of painters, we know, are fascinated by the opportunities of estrangement that offer themselves when the scene of the world is shown from below, as if from a nether region. It is one of Western painting's preferred viewpoints. Only Veronese sees it primarily as a way to reassert what *standing* is—how it looks from this angle—and how absolute the law of gravity. His roundel of *Marcus Curtius Spurring His Horse into the Abyss* in Vienna would be the extreme case. The edges of the chasm are barely registered. Ground level is nowhere, but felt as a force or base for everything. The picture plane *is* the ground level here. Trust Veronese to take *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, in the version also in Vienna, to be a subject not about ascent and vertigo and sudden reaching down from a height—the angel is hardly allowed in the frame—but, rather, about the occupation of a series of steadily mounting steps (compartments, really, marked out by decent sacrificial architecture, in which bodies and belongings take their stolid, separate place).

But here is the danger. A proper discussion of this aspect of a painter as strong as Veronese would have to confront the ways this aspect of his materialism coexists with others—his courtliness and sumptuousness, for instance, his eroticism, his refusal of tragedy. And is there not something forced, or over-analytical, to my extracting “ground level” at all

from this pattern of appetites, the full lightness and heaviness of which makes Veronese so spellbinding? I do not think so, but I recognize the problem.

Let me take one further example. The last time I saw Annibale Carracci's *Landscape on the Flight into Egypt*, it struck me that in memory I had lost hold of its wonderful human size and miniaturized it slightly. I think that was because the relative smallness and vulnerability of the Holy Family is one of the things that is most touching, most astonishing and deep, about the painting as a whole—the two sailing white birds right next to the Virgin, no higher than her waist, somehow complete the picture of isolation, far-awayness. The picture in memory grows smaller under the influence of these figures' size. But of course the painting has to be big enough to make their size *seem* vulnerable: they are not in any simple factual sense miniature (I would say the Virgin is nine inches tall), so the whole canvas has to be correspondingly high and wide. I'd estimate just over three feet high at the apex and over four at the base. And it is darker, or has a wider range from light to dark, than I remembered: not stormy or gloomy, but with evening drawing on (which I suppose chimes in with the figures' unhouseled feeling).

Now to the main point. Joseph and Mary are wonderful bipedal figures. By comparison with almost everything else in the crammed galleries at the Doria-Pamphili, these are truly bodies standing on the ground, feeling the earth beneath their feet: Mary turning back slightly, balancing, taking the weight of the baby on her right shoulder, stable and easy; Joseph walking, steering the donkey with his staff, a trifle stiff from the climb up the riverbank, his two feet pushing ahead—the rear one in electric silhouette against the line of the bank, paint scuffing and flaring around it as if it were dust thrown up by a heel. The contrast of the two bipedal figures with the four-legged beast between them—has anyone drawn a donkey's tired stride and spavined joints with more feeling for another sort of movement?—is infinitely touching. Bruegel would have loved it, so would Blake or Van Gogh. And the whole thematizing of balance and uprightness is sealed, as it were, at right, by the young oarsman pulling the ferry back across the river from the Holy Family's landing—he is clothed in the same colors as Joseph, youth to his age, a figure of total ease in his uprightness, holding it exultant (like a professional) against the play of water and wind.

This painting is a touchstone for me of how much can be said

about—and by means of—the standing of human creatures on the earth. But someone could always ask me, even here: Are we not somehow lessening the range of Annibale's vision by extracting these feats of drawing (these feats of empathy) from the mix? Is not doing so inevitably to suggest that the picture started from the Holy Family's movement and stasis, or anyway was meant to end with them? Actually this does not strike me as a belittling suggestion: the longer I look at *Flight into Egypt* the more I do think the landscape was meant from the start—completely meant, designed in its every detail—as a foil for Joseph and Mary's uncertainty. Nonetheless the possibility exists of a vision of the world so comprehensive that it throws up the feel (the poignancy) of bipedalism just where the fact or feeling occurs, under the impulse of the particular scene or story in hand. Maybe this is true of Annibale: prima facie he does not seem a painter with a special, constant feeling for *terrazzi*. All I would say is that when the subject does occur for a painter of this magnitude it does so with a vengeance: he sees immediately its implications, its force. And of course there are painters—foxes as opposed to hedgehogs—who see no reason to stick with a subject just because one time they grasp its profundity.

Which leads to *The Land of Cockaigne*. I take it there is no mystery as to why I have chosen to talk about it. Never has a painting presented the tilt and feel of the earth so insistently, and put its humans so touchingly in contact with both. The man of letters, the peasant, the soldier—I cannot help seeing them as grown-up versions of the baby on the ground in Poussin's London *Revel*, sucking its thumb and staying close to its Winnicott blanket. "He laid us as we lay at birth / On the cool flowery lap of earth."

Bruegel is the king of ground level. His view of the world, and of painting, turns continually, and in a sense relentlessly, on the set of concerns I have been outlining; and in them and through them is spelt out a unique—and daunting—view of what makes the human animal what it is. No other artist I know, for instance, has shown us so touchingly the human urge to *make* ground level—make the earth even and measurable, patting it down and truing it up and mixing in drainage and mulch. It is typical, by the way, that Bruegel has the activity be class-specific, and maybe a little silly. The *parterre* in his drawing of *Spring*—which seems to me his ultimate statement on the subject—goes along

with the young swells visible in the distance, top right, playing at being nymphs and shepherds in a gazebo. Class-specific, maybe, but nonetheless speaking to the species in general. Even the corn at *Harvest* is to be cut down decently and regularly, in such a way as to yield house after house—block after block, level after level—of the same colored stuff. The peasants luxuriate in the temporary city. Edward Snow, in his wonderful book about Bruegel's *Children's Games*, puts one facet of this thinking in a nutshell. He homes in, characteristically, on a pair of figures far back in the *mêlée*—a boy on stilts and a little girl on the ground just next to him, looking up, her face unsmiling, arms thrown wide—and writes as follows:

[T]heir juxtaposition is a key to the painting's anthropology. The human creature rises precariously on two feet (whose cumbersome black boots provide both immunity from the earth and anchored contact with it) and as a result has to devise for itself the world of functions and purposes which in nature seems merely given. One result is a paradox that the boy on stilts neatly illustrates: the device by which he goes about acquiring a sense of balance and a feeling for the laws of the physical universe nurtures in him both a fantasy of transcendence and a preoccupation with downfall and ruin. It is difficult, in fact, to know which is host and which is parasite in this symbiosis [of urges].<sup>1</sup>

A great deal of looking is packed into that paragraph by Snow, and I have the feeling I shall do no more in what follows than explore its implications for a painting Snow happens not to discuss. Or perhaps you should see me as glossing these (pungent) three sentences from Max Friedlaender: "Bruegel's heaven is an empty place, while his hell is populated almost exclusively by creatures out of Bosch. Only the earth, the here and now, was Bruegel's proper realm.... The world looked to him like a kind of clockwork that never needed winding."<sup>2</sup> The gloss is worth doing, I think. *Cockaigne* is a clockwork unlike any other. The slow whirr of the cogwheels, the flat sound of the chime that is always striking noon, the hush and stasis that lets the inflated body feel the world rotating underneath it—I feel these things viscerally, as I am sure many viewers do, and want to think about why they touch us so deeply.

<sup>1</sup> Edward Snow, *Inside Bruegel: The Play of Images in "Children's Games"* (New York: North Point Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Max Friedlaender, *Early Netherlandish Painting* (Leiden, A. W. Sijthoff, 1967–), vol. 14.

Let me start with the subject, the story. The basic idea of *Schlaraffenland*—a place where food is obtainable endlessly without effort, where roast pigeons fly down obligingly into any mouth that has a hankering for them, where houses are edible and fences made of a wicker of sausages—seems to have been a staple of the oral tradition in Europe long before it made its first textual appearances in the later Middle Ages. The evidence suggests it was a yarn that appealed in particular to the peasantry. The subject cropped up regularly in prints during the sixteenth century, and prints done at very different levels of skill and sophistication. Bruegel stays close to many of the standard features of such depictions: for instance, the mountain of buckwheat porridge through which hopefuls have to eat their way if they are to attain nirvana—in some treatments the new arrivals are spewing and farting as they reach the promised land—and the pig with the knife in its backside, for which other explorers reach even before the porridge has disgorged them.

Naturally the written forms the legend took during the 1500s pulled it into somewhat higher ideological space. It was moralized, sometimes sententiously; its tall tales of another world were updated, lightly, perhaps with a view to poking fun at the vogue for travelers' tales following (and preceding) 1492; there is even a moment or two in certain texts—Herman Pleij has discovered them—where the narrator seems to be toying with the notion of *Schlaraffenland* as one among current heresies. A couple of narratives put the kingdom briefly under the sign of the Holy Spirit. The jibe makes no sense unless as a reference to Adamite and Free Spirit imaginings of a new world of erotic godliness, which we know were on authorities' minds at the time. But these modernizings and moralizings seem on the whole not to touch the heart of the matter, or explain the story's appeal. *Schlaraffenland* is not primarily a realm of free love. Its genius is Gluttony not Lust. Obviously (and even the textual material confirms this) it originally belonged somewhere close to Carnival in the popular imagination, and spoke to the peasant economy of feast and famine. Whether or not the prospects of malnourishment actually increased in the late Middle Ages—the statistics are hopeless, and a general answer anyway beside the point—Pleij is surely right that the *fear* of hunger grew, and with it the habit of eating to excess. Doing so, in essence, was a mechanism of defense: as Pleij puts it, a “ritual surfeit designed to banish all thoughts of scarcity.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Herman Pleij, *Dreaming of Cockaigne: Medieval Fantasies of the Perfect Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

In *The Land of Cockaigne* fears have subsided permanently. No doubt some buyers of the print after the painting would have been capable of making the connection with the New World. Maybe one or two even caught a whiff of the Free Spirit. But what Bruegel drew most deeply on, I shall argue, were the dreams and wishes—and the sense of those wishes' impossibility of fulfillment—that had made the story worth telling for centuries.

Believe it or not, the art-historical consensus regarding Bruegel's intentions in *Cockaigne* is that he did it as a warning against gluttony. I shall spare you the battery of quotations here, but I assure you I am not guying or simplifying them: the purpose of the painting, they say, was to show gorging and idleness for the sins they are. This seems to me on a par with saying that Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* is all about how sense is preferable to sensibility as a guide to the conduct of life. Well, yes, that appears to be the book's premise, and roughly its conclusion, but it is not what makes the book *interesting*—it is not what structures the complex play of Austen's attention and makes generations of readers wish to pick up its thread. I dare say Bruegel sincerely believed that overeating was a bad thing: I have no quarrel with the simple-minded hack who thought that words to that effect were what ought to go on the bottom of the engraving made in its wake ("The slothful hideth his hand in his bosom: it grieveth him to bring it again to his mouth": Proverbs 26:15). But it seems to me an improbable, absurd hypothesis that Bruegel painted the picture—*this* picture, the picture painted this way—to illustrate the truism. This is an exercise in ontology, not ethics. It is out to make us see and feel things, not remember what we are supposed to think about them.

Where do we start here? At the bottom, predictably: with questions of format, dimensions, viewpoint, *terrazzi*—how high up the image means us to be, and how the ground depicted meets the painting's lower edge.

*The Land of Cockaigne* is not big. It measures just over twenty inches by just short of thirty-one—barely half the width of its savage pendant, done in tempera a year later, *The Blind Leading the Blind*. Size has little or nothing to do with ambition in Bruegel. His *Sea Battle off Naples* compresses the scene of history into sixteen inches by twenty-seven and reveals millimeter by millimeter in what miniaturization can do to its

objects. *The Cripples* fill a panel measuring seven inches by eight and a half.

I do not need to spell out what kind of scrutiny that size seems to dictate. But there is a sense in which the size and shape of *Cockaigne* are even more unsettling than those of *The Cripples*—because it is harder to put one's finger immediately on where the format intends to put you, in relation to the things portrayed—and sometimes in the literature it is suggested that the panel was cut down. On the basis of the engraving, it must have been by no more than an inch at the top, unless the damage was done before the engraver got a look. Anyway, the print is unreliable. It slices an inch or so from the side of the painting that contains the lean-to of tarts—look at what happens to the standing cheese, and the hinge of the roof as it meets the picture corner—so who is to know if it did not add as well as subtract? The printmaker is struggling with something fundamental, and well beyond his pictorial capacities.

That is, with proximity and interruption. There is a feeling in *Cockaigne* of things being close, the tree and its tabletop just as much as the egg and the sole of the man of letters' shoe; and of everything tipping and tilting toward the viewer, so that the egg has to work hard to keep its balance on the foreground slope. There is a feeling of things being crossed arbitrarily by the edge of the visual field—not just the trunk and branch and table, but the cactus of loaves to the right, and, above all, the lean-to with tarts on its roof. The corner takes a slice out of its architecture the way a knife takes a slice out of the cheese; and the slice delights in having us guess at the general logic of the structure—and eventually give up. It is like the picture as a whole in this. Corners are wonderful in *Cockaigne*—the roof, the buckwheat mountain, the grass giving way to a Poussin-type chasm—but they only confirm the general impression of stumbling into a space that never was. The porridge rolls into the picture like a lava flow.

Compare *Cockaigne* with what most scholars now agree was its closest visual source, an engraving by Peeter Baltens done maybe six or seven years earlier. (*Cockaigne*, to repeat, is dated 1567.) We know that Bruegel and Baltens knew one another and worked together on at least one big job; and obviously Bruegel has picked up his overall rough structure from the print, and one or two details of imagery—even the idea of a piece of tableware falling from the tree, arrested forever on its way to the peasant's head. Baltens's print is fumbling and fussy, but in

comparison to the Bruegel at least it *tries* to apply the new laws of perspective. Of course Baltens makes a hash of them and cannot get his sprawling figures sorted out properly across a receding groundplane. But he knows what he is supposed to do: he struggles to keep his horizon line low (in the modern way) and have his house of tarts be plausibly rectangular. There is even a door off its hinges in front of it, like a perspective drawing frame. Bruegel, by contrast, deliberately closes and fills up and pushes toward the picture plane. The line of the hill grows higher; the house folds up; the buckwheat mountain adheres to its corner; the tree sprouts its unplaceable tabletop; the egg spells out the gradient up front. Spatially the whole thing is more like a frame from a journeyman's archaic *Schlaraffenland* than the Baltens that Bruegel had in front of his eyes.

This is typical of Bruegel toward the end of his life. It is as if the artist were confident, after making the anchored and intricate spaces of his "Months of the Year" series for Nicolas Jonghelinck, that henceforth he could work with two kinds of spatial ordering in a picture at the same time. He could return to the maplike, broadsheet spread of his spaces in *Children's Games* or *Carnival and Lent* but have that viewpoint interact with a space felt as empty, palpable, proximate. Not that "perspective" had been lacking in the earlier pictures—only think of the endless street in *Children's Games*—but it had tended, instinctively, to cede to something like bird's eye view as things got closer. In *Cockaigne*, the space conjured up by the rim of the table does not peter out at some point close to the picture plane, giving way to the surface world of the egg: it somehow *includes* that surface world, looming over it, lending it geometry. (Block out the tabletop with one hand, even in front of a reproduction, and the foreground is robbed of half its vitality.) Perspective and broadsheet are in balance. The tree to the right, in front of the buckwheat mountain, is pure silhouette but at the same time a bending, extruding entity in space—grabbed by the indefatigable mountaineer, sucked in by the glacier of porridge.

*Cockaigne* is only the wildest example, I would say, of a to and fro between surface and deep spatiality that is characteristic of Bruegel at the top of his game. Variants of the same thing happen in *The Cripples*, *The Misanthrope*, *The Blind Leading the Blind*, even *The Peasant Dance*. *Cockaigne* does the thing comically, and no doubt intends its transitions from space to surface, or map to prospect, to be outlandish—vertiginous. But what interests me is why Bruegel retreated at all from the foreground



terracing of the Prague *Haymaking*, say, or the Vienna *Dark Day*, or the Winterthur *Adoration of the Magi*. Because, I think, ground level in them was not firmly enough—palpably enough—the picture’s matrix.

I said in my first lecture that ground-level painting was rare and that there were reasons for that. Here might be the place to give one of them. It is technical but not esoteric.

On the face of it, a solid, continuous groundplane going off into space is the aspect of a picture most relentlessly at odds with the picture’s actual flatness as a physical object, or even with the special (commonsensical) fiction called the picture plane. Groundplane and picture plane are contraries; and it might seem that a painter inclined to a materialist point of view would want instinctively to pull everything toward agreement with the picture’s literal two dimensions. (Manet and Courbet are cases in point. When did you see a groundplane in Manet that could bear anybody’s weight?) But a certain kind of painter, of whom Bruegel is the chief, sees the problem and opportunities differently. Groundplane and picture plane strike him as analogues as well as contraries; and the groundplane can act as a *materialization* of the picture plane—which is always ultimately a posited transparency, close to the actual flat of the picture surface (borrowing vividness from the manual activity taking place on that surface), but in the end a nothing, through which the things of the world are visible. Certain painters dream of a form of depiction in which the groundplane merges with the picture plane, or crosses over into it, or reaches a state where the ground can be read as frontal and orthogonal at once. For this sort of painter, having the world take shape on a surface only fully makes sense if the exercise—the exercise of painting, basically—is imagined as like what happens on the surface beneath our feet. Of course Bruegel is perfectly aware of the tension between the one surface and the other *as they occur in a painting*; but the tension is there to be solved, not passed over; because if it is solved, painting itself will be grounded, solidified, made factual and continuous—it will borrow the resistance of the earth.

Bruegel’s *Cockaigne* is not crowded. The painting is one of the most striking examples of the artist reversing a theme that seems naturally to call for abundance and multiplication of episodes—in the way of the prints and texts—and instead restricting it, reducing it to a particular closed space and focused cast of characters. It is typical of late Bruegel

that he individualizes the idea of excess. Of course the individuals are carefully chosen and stand for the separate orders of society as Bruegel understood them—much more clearly than in Baltens, say. Diego Rivera peasant with flail; soldier with lance and armored glove; a further soldier vegetating under the roof of tarts—by the look of him maybe a full-blown knight to the other one's mercenary, though one cannot be sure. (It is important that military men predominate. The year is 1567. The Duke of Alba is massing his troops. Someone who knows about such things told me that she read the soldier on the ground as wearing specifically Spanish uniform and even sporting a Spanish goatee.) All of the figures are fascinating, then, but I take it we agree that even with this competition the truly spellbinding one, around whose wide-open eyes the whole picture seems to orbit, is the young man lying on his folded fur coat. Let us call him the man of letters. His inkpots and penholder are still laced delicately to his belt—part of an array of ties and strings that is clearly barely holding together under the pressure of his swollen stomach. He may be specifically a cleric—the book next to him has the look of a Bible—but he could as well be a notary or wandering scribe. The manuscript being crushed by his sleeve has a legal look. He is a brother of the man with the pens dancing in the foreground of the *Wedding Dance* in Detroit.

I shall speak, I promise, to the point of this cast of characters; but first let me focus on there being so few of them. What does the reduction make possible? Certainly a stress on the main bodies' weight and shape—the bursting seams, the slipping codpiece. But that is bound up with an emptying—or, at least, a relative clearing—of the groundplane, which means that the substance and surface texture, and above all the orientation, of the grass, and the precise nature of the figures' disposition across it, become subjects in themselves. Relatively little is happening on the groundplane, and therefore its richness and strangeness and uncertainty of incline—its tipping and wheeling, as if in sympathetic response to the wild disc of the tree-table—detains our attention. (That we can see the sole of the man of letters' shoe, as I said before, only makes where we are in relation to the grass it rests on the more puzzling.) The groundplane too is engorged and distended. The moss is a marbled, aqueous green, every square inch fretted and patted by the painter's brush. (The fur is a slightly cruder rehearsal of the same procedure, as if to alert us to the softness and variance of the grass; the chain-mail is the variation mechanized.) Of course the earth is infected by the

analogy with fat arses and plumped up pillows. It is a swelling belly, as smooth and adipose as the mountain of gruel. The sausage fence just spells out its slippery rotundity. But none of this is stressed or improbable. The earth is round, the globe turns slowly on its axis. The great shape of the groundplane does no more than confirm the new science.

Tilting in *Cockaigne* then—and tilting and distending seem to be the picture's two topological models—carries a very special, and equivocal, ethical charge. It is disorienting, but not overmuch. Most things stay put on the canting table. It is unstable, but not utterly shifting and precipitous. The swell is that of a pillow not a wave. (The sea is flat calm and sunlit.) Tipping and swelling seem to coexist quite happily with this world's naïve delight in geometry. The starched square of the tablecloth on the grass; the ellipse of the table, and those of the cactus plant; the house of tarts; the zigzag of lance and flail; the segments cut cleanly from the cheese and pig; the fowl's eagerness to fit the parameters of its pewter dish. Maybe the world lacks horizontals, and in large part verticals to match. The tree is a poor substitute for an upright body—especially *this* tree, collared and truncated, halfway between living thing and piece of furniture. But I do not see the absence of flats and uprights as a bad thing in *Cockaigne's* case, a sign of the human world degenerating. Regressing, yes—but sometimes that means becoming even more itself.

Clothes are important here. It is telltale that Bruegel's Garden of Earthly Delights has no place for nakedness. (Or for sex in general. It is a male world, only partially demilitarized.) Max Friedlaender says somewhere that Bruegel's difference from the Italians hinges on his lack of interest in clothing as drapery—as a system of folds whose great purpose is to reveal the logic of the organism underneath. Bruegel's art has a different basis. What it aims for is the outline—the whole shape of a body or an entity, and the kind of energy or inertia conveyed by the shape. Its world is a compilation of unique particulars, not a structure built out of ultimately abstract—infinately interchangeable—gradients of tone and color. Clothes are a source of endless fascination in Bruegel, but exactly because they combine with bodies in utterly unpredictable ways—sometimes revealing and articulating them, sometimes concealing and muffling. Bruegel never stopped cataloguing the ludicrous intricacy of apparel. The ties and knots and overlaborateness round the man of letters' midriff are answered by the steady calligraphy at the soldier's—contour lines all leading to Mount Codpiece. Bruegel liked

clothing that took on a life of its own, maybe in the process robbing what it clothed of life. The iron glove still feels for the lance. The cod-piece was Bruegel's preferred piece of human flummery (as the ruff was Rembrandt's or the wimple Rogier Van der Weyden's) just because it was extraneous, and what it claimed to be covering might or might not be there in anything like the form the covering implied. All clothing is armor or prosthesis. Human beings are not bodies—even when they have eaten their fill, and they lie there like over-enlargements of themselves—they are outfits with bodies in hiding.

There is not a lot going on in *The Land of Cockaigne*, and Friedlaender is right that this marks it off from the generality of Bruegel's world, which is usually pullulating with activity. Even when the cast of characters is restricted, which I have claimed is characteristic of many of the late paintings, the characters are usually frantically on the move. The World is the goggle-eyed cutpurse in *The Misanthrope*, always pushing against its transparent carapace, driven—driven mad—by wants, needs, delight in wrongdoing. In *Cockaigne*, by contrast, the clockwork has run down—but not stopped. The fur cloak of the man of letters transmutes matter-of-factly into the grass next door. Everything here is still capable of becoming something else, but not dramatically, not in some moment of metamorphosis. Things in *Cockaigne* change state slowly. The pig is ambling, the egg is a child taking its first steps. Engulfing is a better metaphor for change than metamorphosis—like the sticky gray hillside swallowing the tree. Change is digestion.

What would a world be like—this seems to me Bruegel's question—in which all human activities slowed to the pace of the large intestine? Thought, too—the man of letters is still visibly cogitating, only in the way of the woman in Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs* staring after the stork. Or compare him to the gooseherd in the same picture pondering the bipedalism of his charges. “Hierom en daarom gaan de ganzen barveoets” (For this reason or that reason geese walk barefoot). I for one do not believe that Bruegel, any more than the folk itself, in throwing up this unforgettable image of the way the world presents us with *too many things to think about*, simply meant us to disapprove of staring into space. He had done some staring in his time.

Excretion is naturally part of it in *Cockaigne*. The man with the spoon falls into Paradise like a turd from an anus. We know that shitting was

something Bruegel habitually painted with affection and seems to have meant as a sign of life going on regardless. Shitting at the foot of the gallows (in the great panel at Darmstadt) is not so much cocking a snook at the Law as putting the world of Culture in perspective and showing what of Nature goes on regardless. Shitting at the base of the tower of Babel (in the picture in Vienna) has a similar valency. It takes place in a meadow where working people appear to be taking a break between *corvées*. Some are swimming. One man looks to be washing his smalls in the stream. The basic functions—the figures are tiny—go with the friendly (resilient) lie of the land. The juxtaposition with the king next door on his tour of inspection seems pointed.

Maybe death is part of it. Surfeit is close to insensibility. I can imagine a reading of *Cockaigne* that would start from the resemblance between its tree-table and that of the feckless courtiers ignoring (or trying to resist) *The Triumph of Death*. But again I think the tonality would be wrong. The egg is not an actor in a morality play.

So what kind of play is it in?

An answer should start from the source material, I think—the basic mode of *Schlaraffenland*, and what we can guess about its appeal. No one *believed* in the Land of Cockaigne. It was a (comic) thought-experiment: not a vision, not a utopia (it did not posit itself as perfection or as perfection gone wrong), not even really a wish-fulfillment. Wish-fulfillments do not spell out their absurdity as they unfold.

It seems to have been a product of the oral culture of the European peasantry; and the legend's unseriousness, its cynicism and materialism—including its cynicism *about* materialism, at least in utopian guise (its resistance to the move from imagining to positing)—these tell us something central, I am inclined to believe, concerning the basic texture of that culture about which we know so little.

Bruegel's painting is make-believe, not utopia; and its controlled unseriousness is the mode that allows it to think so deeply and humanely about what the material world is like, what the human animal is in its simple physical existence, what being fully and exclusively in the material world would be like. The unseriousness of the ethical and epistemological frame is what makes the ontology possible. Bruegel was obviously aware of how closely the bodies and objects of his counterfactual world duplicated—inflated, hypertrophied, but also in some sense

perfected and realized—those of his factual one. Laughing at exhaustion and satiety is a way of discovering more fully what they are—physically, experientially, gravitationally.

*Cockaigne* is a picture of gravity—of the pull of a gravitational field, of pleasure as a planetary system with cooked food as its sun. *Cockaigne* is a celebration of the cooked as opposed to the raw, or rather, of the cooked replacing the raw altogether. It is a place where the founding distinction of Claude Lévi-Strauss's or Marcel Detienne's "civilization" has been permanently left behind. The last unconscious residues of the palaeolithic have vanished from the cultural bloodstream. No more sacrifice; no more blood; no more shadow of the cross.

We do not need to know which picture of ease from one's labors came first—the man of letters under the table or the mower resting against the tree-trunk in *Harvest*. Whichever came first, it was always conceived as a variant of the other. Of course chronologically the mower in the painting at the Metropolitan preceded the clerk. Bruegel dreams the impossible in terms of the everyday, but also—always—in terms of the everyday world's *extremity*, of the way the everyday never ceases producing the horrible, the preposterous, the luxuriant, the eternal. Eternity here (remembering Friedlaender) means nothing more than the mad wish for stasis—for final fulfillment and perfection—that is constantly present in workaday life, haunting it, taking advantage of it, making it bearable. Bruegel, that is to say, is the opposite of utopian; but this exactly does not mean that he reverses utopia's terms or is even straightforwardly a pessimist. For no one has ever had such an eye for the non-existent *in* what exists, for everything in human affairs that pushes insatiably toward nonidentity: the will to pleasure as much as the will to power, playfulness as much as vacancy, the bride's dwelling for ever and ever in the moment (in the *Peasant Wedding* in Vienna) as much as the cripples' frantic determination to move on. *Dark Day* is his vision of the good life.

It is typical of Bruegel, then, that his vision of things being otherwise should not be the World Upside Down. Counterfactuality for him is an imagining of the present world as it would be if it were more fully itself—with its basic structures unaltered, and above all its physicality, its orientation, intact. *Cockaigne* is the World The Same Way Up, Only More So.

Not that this means, in my opinion, that the version of otherness we are looking at fails to grate against the orthodoxies of its time. Herman

Pleij (largely without knowing it) provides the key here. The question, again, is why the *Schlaraffenland* story appealed to its audience and why it survived in early modernity. The answer, I think, is this. Cockaigne was a dreamworld but also repeatedly in the telling a parody of dreamworlds. This meant it could be brightly topical in the world around 1500. Marvels and alternatives were the talk of the town. But it was more than topical: it spoke to something deeper in Europe than travelers' tales or Anabaptism. For Cockaigne was at bottom a parody of Paradise. It was a desublimation of the idea of heaven—an un-Divine Comedy, which only fully made sense in relation to all the other (ordinary, instituted) offers of otherworldliness circulating in late medieval culture. What it most deeply made fun of was the religious impulse, or one main form that impulse took: the wish for escape from mortal existence, the dream of immortality, the idea of transcendence itself. "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (Revelation 21:4). What Cockaigne said back to religion—and surely its voice in this was that of peasant culture itself, in one of its ineradicable modes—was that all visions of escape and perfectibility are haunted by the worldly realities they pretend to transfigure. Every Eden is the earth intensified; immortality is mortality continuing; every vision of bliss is bodily and appetitive through and through. Cockaigne speaks back especially to the Christian world of mortification—all the more unanswerably for refusing to occupy the same moral high ground and shrugging off the spiritual with a smile. To all of this—the deep structure of the legend, so to speak, and the reason for its not going away for so long—Bruegel's picture responds profoundly. It immortalizes peasant materialism, I should say, if "immortalizes" were not precisely the wrong word.

The dictionaries do not seem to agree with me, but I cannot help thinking that the homophony between the name for the never-never land of bodily pleasure and that of the useful substance extracted from the coca plant is not entirely coincidental. I imagine a nineteenth-century pharmacologist, naming and sampling, and getting at least a brief laugh from the way the new anaesthetic chimed in with the old. And this licenses me to say a few words about the difference between Bruegel's dream of consumption and ours.

Bruegel lived at the moment before "consumer society"; which is to

say, before the world of goods accelerated and expanded, before the mass production of commodities, and before the notion of bodily well-being—*extreme* well-being, intoxication and satiety—was transformed by the multiplication of addictive substances compatible with the new tempo and discipline of production. The dream of consumption for him was surfeit—eating and drinking to the point where wild dancing breaks out, or men and women fall helplessly to the ground. Consuming meant ingesting, relishing, dreaming a full identity with the world of things, swallowing them whole. He would not have understood, I think—or rather, he would not have sympathized with—the new world of regulated doses of pleasure, quarter-intoxications, small highs and hits: caffeine, tobacco, cane sugar, the international alcohols (rum, gin, and so on), opium and its derivatives, and, later, the pharmutopia of anxiety and despair.

Consumption went on for Bruegel and his contemporaries, as we have seen, under the sign of dearth and insecurity. *Cockaigne* is not heavy with soldiers for nothing. It was a dream of the opposite to a world of hard labor and malnutrition—a still world, a fat world, an idle world, a gorged and irresponsible world, a world of bodies. None of these descriptions—this is the point—apply to the dream of consumption that now possesses us. An intensification of “consumption” is not only compatible with an increase in the pace of work and in hours spent on the job—we surely do not need statistics to convince us that the past twenty years in the United States have seen an extraordinary speed-up and hyper-exploitation of the working world—it is *part of* that increase. Consuming and recreation go on at the pace of work, in work’s shrinking interstices, using an apparatus that has to present itself as an extension of—a magnification and perfection of—the gadgets and disciplines we come home from. The gym is a factory; the big game an animated spreadsheet; the body sweating on the treadmill is turned away as decisively from its actual carnal experiences—toward the TV on the wall or the magic on the end of the cellphone—as the coldest Weberian Puritan balancing his ethical and financial books.

Bruegel’s world of consumption was oriented to the notion of anti-work. Therefore play was one of its basic categories. That is why in talking so eloquently about *Children’s Games* Edward Snow was able to talk about Bruegel as a whole. But play only makes sense—only carries a critical, insubordinate charge—if it is posited as an other to the grown-



up world of purposiveness. We, by contrast, exist in a world where the “adult” and the “juvenile” are hopelessly commingled; where leisure time has been both increasingly infantilized and increasingly regulated, domesticated, hygienized, depoliticized, dosed and packaged. The infantilized and the commodified are two faces of the same coin. Bruegel’s terms seem to me different. He goes in for the childish, the foolish, the grotesque, and the boorish, as opposed to the infantile—which is a word that really only gathers force in the eighteenth century and does not spawn the verbal form “infantilize” till the twentieth. “Consumer society” for Bruegel means the festive, the excessive, the gargantuan, the multitudinous, the carnivalesque—all the kinds of performative community, that is, that preceded the cleanup we call modern. Whether Bruegel approved of the performances does not concern me. How modern *he* was is an unanswerable question. He showed us the bodies in action—he inhabited and articulated them—that is what counts.

Back to bipedalism, then—back to ground level. For of course I want to argue that it matters deeply that Bruegel’s way of thinking about the ends of the human animal was to tip him off his feet. Bruegel—let me put it briefly—was a connoisseur of bipedalism. Edward Snow is right. It structures his whole anthropology. By the time of *The Fall of the Magician Hermogenes*, done in 1564, Bruegel’s view of the impossible and demonic in existence—the nonhuman, that is to say—has clarified to the point of pedagogy. The banner in the magician’s room spells it out in picture language: to diverge from the human, which is what the disciples of Hermogenes are bent on achieving, is simply to do something else beside stand upright on two legs. Magic is upside-downness, or levitation, or walking the tightrope, or standing on one’s hands; or, ultimately, having a body in which the “up” of ingestion, perception, and production of language and the “down” of standing firm, moving forward, excreting, and copulating are utterly scrambled. The creature in the foreground of *Hermogenes* balancing the bowl on its groin sums this up.

One thing that is specially ludicrous, by the way, about up and down being lost hold of in the human body is what happens to the phallus. Both of the humanoids on the banner—one of them crablike on all fours, the other crawling on his belly with legs flapping as decorative appendages (like coxcombs)—are given the last touch of freakishness by

their codpieces' being extruded from their bodies by the logic of their poses, inviting the opponent's knife. (I said that codpieces were regularly a focus of Bruegel's attention. Part of that too was bound up with his anthropology. Codpieces are armor, or the ritualized afterimage of such. And is not one of the problems of bipedalism, among many, that it puts the male sexual organs somewhat at risk, as compared with their sensible hiding place on all fours?) The man hanging in agony from the ceiling in Bruegel's *Justitia* repeats the pose of the monstrosity bottom right on the banner. Which is to say, the arrangement of limbs is perfectly possible in the real world if men try hard enough. Again the codpiece is detailed. *The Cripples* (hard as it is for us, the title seems the right one) are unbearable, and no doubt originally laughable, above all because of the substitutes they have improvised for putting two feet on the ground. Speech they do not lack. If there is a question of their threatening our definition of the human, or dancing at the edge of it, this cannot be because they lack language. They look to be talking too much.

Only Bruegel could have thought of putting his cripples on such tender, delicate, succulent grass. But why? What response did he mean to provoke by it?

This leads me back finally to the question of Bruegel's ethics, Bruegel's values. *The Cripples* and *Justitia* put the problem *in extremis*. Let us assume that the "attitude" of Bruegel's contemporaries to such cases of agony or deformity was different from ours. Let us assume that Hessel Miedema is right when he says that sixteenth-century Netherlanders would have greeted the spectacle of leglessness with laughter. "Did people laugh? Undoubtedly they did. They laughed above all at the bizarre, the deformed, and the weak." I hear this laughter echoing in the spaces these pictures first occupied. And equally, I hear the voice of the preacher, citing the obvious text. *The Blind Leading the Blind* are no different from the rest of us. We are all Falling.

I do not think Bruegel's pictures exist anywhere else than fully in this world of derision and sanctimony. But that solves nothing. I cannot see them as simply repeating the derision or making the tired tag real again. "I cannot see them..." This does not mean (*pace* the ultra-empiricists) that I trust to my intuitions and pull the pictures immediately into my affective space. It means that however much I try to see Bruegel's actual visual choices and strategies—his choice of scale, his particularization of expressions and movement, his set-up of perspective and ground plane, his color, his turning of actors to face us or face away

from us, and so on—as forms of laughter or moralization, they will not be seen as such. These pictures inhabit a world of derision and sanctimony. I do not think they turn against it: they do not reverse or ironize or even undercut its frames of reference. But in the visualization—in the actual referring, in the giving of scale or the setting on the ground—they turn into something else, which passes through the sieve of ideology.

In my view, to say this is not to proclaim that any sort of magic has been performed. Making anything in the world *particular*—giving it substance, taking advantage of the physical resources of the medium you are working in to do so—means that qualities and dimensions in the thing are taken seriously—aspects that common wisdom often chooses to ignore. But those aspects and dimensions are not (ever) invisible or nonexistent, even in everyday life—maybe especially there. They haunt the world of established truths and exclusions. People of all kinds—not just “great artists,” but people negotiating the ordinary ambiguities of the world—take advantage of this haunting, this latency. Life would be a self-destroying mechanism if they did not. Derision implies the possibility of pity, or sympathy, or common humanity. “Blessed are the meek” is not so far from “blessed are the outcast, the halt and the lame.” And even had this culture not possessed a set of canonical texts in which the Son of God could be seen consorting with the wretched of the earth, it would still not have been easy—unequivocal—in its contempt for and dehumanization of the deformed. No culture could be: dehumanization is an activity, a feat (I am not saying the feat is not often performed to deadly effect), which has in its bones a sense of what in its object the conjuration is directed against. All human vocabularies have a gradient that expresses this awareness; and especially a gradient that harps on the thinness of the line between the genuine ethical negative and its various counterfeits—between roaring anathema and frozen jeremiad, between pessimism and misanthropy or piety and hypocrisy, between moral judgment and cant. One man’s blasphemer is another’s early Christian martyr.

Bruegel seems specifically to have been interested in the fine line. His *Misanthrope* stands precisely on it—neither securely figure of fun nor hero of inner otherworldliness. As usual the artist enlists the full ambiguity of common wisdom to put us, as readers and viewers, in a quandary. “Om dat de werelt is soe ongetru / Daer om gha ic in den ru” (Because the world is so untrue, I go about in mourning). It is unusual

for the proverb to be written, as here, more or less in the picture space. And does not the catch phrase have just a trace of ostentation to it? Could performing one's withdrawal from the world in this way—one's disappointment in it—end up as just one more performance among others? Are not the *pleurant's* clasped hands and pursed lips essentially self-congratulatory? "Hij schijt op de wereld." But even this Bruegel is capable of sympathizing with. Even the cutpurse World has his reasons. He wants to get out of those ragged trousers. The misanthrope's purse is too big, red, and heavy. The cripple slipping inside the transparent globe in *Netherlandish Proverbs* provides the proper apology: "You have to slither if you want to get through the world."

How often the word *wereld* sounds out. Of all forms of speech, proverbs are the least afraid of totalizing: the world for them is as concrete an entity as a broom, a barrel, or a gallows. In Bruegel's mad compendium of such sayings, the blind leading the blind exist at the furthest point of the proverbial universe. They are striding round a headland at the edge of the sea. The sun is associated with them (but also the gallows across the estuary). They seem to be exiting toward the landscape of *The Fall of Icarus*. The proverb itself—"When one blind man leads another, they both fall into a ditch"—applies here only lightly. I think the large tempera panel of the same subject sets itself the task of *making* it apply, literalizing it. But literalizing it—monumentalizing it, making the proverb loom up in the flesh in front of the viewer—also peels it away from the proverbial frame. Proverbs are concrete but blessedly abbreviated: their fewness of words is the key to their power: they slip by or slip out almost before the user is aware of producing them. Stopping a cliché in its tracks, magnifying it, giving it specific features—this is always in a sense turning it into something else.

So this is who the egg in *The Land of Cockaigne* reminds me of! Of the blind men, but also the World on the move in *The Misanthrope*, scuttling along, eyes popping, body swelling to fill its orb of glass. The egg and the World are cognate—except that the World is all malevolence and the egg all selfless service. It has sliced off its own top to make things easy for those wanting to partake. And this, finally, is the key to *Cockaigne's* whole pathos. For even here, in the land of the fallen, the memory of bipedalism lives on. The egg is the evolutionary cycle beginning again. The first cell sprouts legs, steadies itself, and sets off up Darwin's hill.