

# On Arcadia

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Recently I've been thinking about the idea of utopia, a state of eternal bliss that persists. At the Pierre Bonnard exhibition called 'Arcadia' at the Legion of Honor in San Francisco, the images I like best are not necessarily the official representations of paradise, elaborate works displayed in the dining room of the patrons, a millionaire couple. I prefer the painting 'Le Cannel', a view from above of rooftops and trees. In it Bonnard's colors are extremely intense, his shapes precise. Although no people can be seen, it's easy to imagine them in their homes taking baths, stroking cats or spending time together, just as they do in Bonnard's other images.

The rolling hills of Le Cannet are not so different from those of California, and I'm not sure whether to call this beauty 'wild and tangled' or 'tame'. I suppose in the end it's a question of comparison, what reference wild and tame are being compared against. Just as in Goethe's color theory, perceptual experience is what ultimately matters.

Colors... everything is in bloom here, at the start of summer. My mother likes to garden and knows about flowers. When we leave, I ask her what the one in front of the museum is called, a plant whose base looks like an artichoke with a purple bloom emerging from it. For some reason it's very important to know the names of things today. Hen and chick, she hazards. The big flower is the hen, the nested leaves surrounding it below are her children. Then she tells me about the duplex she's renovating in San José, which she considers her art.

In ancient Greek 'arcadia' referred to a peaceful wilderness, a place of natural splendor and harmony. Here at home for a while, recuperating after illness, I feel this is a close substitute on our planet. My mother has a garden with flowers in many colors, and there are rows of lemon trees. I like to walk past and touch their leaves and breathe in their scent. Unlike the events of other months, they seem something real. If I scatter birdseed I can watch the ringtail doves bob their heads and peck the earth. They are calm here, unlike the pigeons in the plazas of Argentina or Bolivia. But I suppose the distinction has less to do with nations than with country vs. city animals. I imagine the birds of San Francisco or New York City are vicious too.

For some Marxists we exist only in the minds of other people, and individual mental existence and works have no meaning. Perhaps there is some incomplete truth to this. Yet somehow I can't be convinced by it, or need to believe in some possibility that is stranger and more personal. The convolutions of time and memory seem far more fantastic than any of us realize. Perhaps someday we might even be recreated based on the works we leave, so our writing ensures survival in a *literal* sense. I wonder if there is a way to transform the stories written by my grandmother, for instance, into something that can survive her once she is gone, something with a sustainable life of its own.

One story is about a painting in her house of a brown dog with paws pressed tight together and a collar around its neck. It says R O S E in big letters, an enigmatic name. Supposedly it's by a 'primitive' painter in New York, who as Grandma (always politically incorrect) pointed out in a whisper, is *black*. But famous, she would have me know. The man supposedly gave her that painting long ago, before she met her husband. Is she the rose? Or if not, who is? All the details must be in her journals... Her other story, to my surprise, is about me. I live in Argentina and am married to a cattle baron who is incredibly wealthy. Supposedly he is in command of a troop of men who spend their days chasing down beasts rodeo style, while the baron has all the time in the world to embrace me.

These are her only two memories left. I know one is not true, and probably both are confabulations. But they are who she is now and for her they are real, constituting her consciousness. If I could bring them into reality, perhaps the dog and cattle baron might imagine *her*, so she continues to exist even after her body is gone. Is this crazy? Can an imaginary imagine a reality? 'You turn to literature as a consolation instead of tackling problems head on,' my mother always rebukes me. This is probably true, but it changes nothing, does nothing to allay my confusions or answer my questions.

At the entrance to the road where my family lives, someone has been moving the stones every day, positioning them in different arrangements. I wonder if the activity is being documented, and if to be considered art it requires a register as photograph or film. If it were put in a gallery or had pretensions to enter art history, it would be required. In this part of the world, where utopia is technological and progress quantifiable, the idea of activity for its own sake seems almost subversive. But maybe Arcadia means precisely this, doing things for the sheer pleasure of them with no need for record, no egoism. Along with *Le Cannet*, another of my favorite Bonnard images is a white cat whose back arches so high it seems not to have a neck. Its eyes are squeezed shut and its tail is a squiggle, pure joy without an ulterior motive.

For me a real Arcadia would involve complete trust and be something like a cathedral of belonging. The space first appeared to me in visions and dreams. When I started thinking about it consciously I wondered if the loss of creative tension would also mean the end of production. Perhaps art must emerge from an emotion like despair, nostalgia, rage, resentment or fear, or the recollection of one... But this seems a silly, artificial worry. I think even in Arcadia we'll continue to make things. Maybe not installation art featuring violence, depictions of torture or bodily illnesses, but small intimate scenes pulsing with color, celebrating affection. The idea of this eternity haunts me, time without beginning or end, in which no one ever dies and love survives forever.



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