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Those who flee and those who see: Poussin's drawing and withdrawing

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In memory of Kate Maull
(1960–2021)

ABSTRACT

Louis Marin sees the aesthetic realm as engendering power through its effects. The chiasmic intersplicing of allegorical text and image on a medal divides and arrests the spectator in the king-effect. It is real in the sense you can touch it and it is imaginary in that it reveals 'baroque' desire, the fantastic desire of absolute power. This paper explores the other side – fragile, material, and gendered – of Marin's world to examine not so much the institution of power's potential in the operation of grand 'finished' art works or art as 'representation', but a drawing by Poussin, which stages violent force ('power in the most vulgar and general sense') in relation to powerlessness, specifically the vulnerability of infants and women, their mothers. Rather than focus on the operation of power in relation to the great unleashers of absolutism and European wars, it inquires into a particular depiction of their victims, those caught up, against their will, in historical convulsion and into the strange precipitates of these forces in which the viewer is implicated. In light of recent work by Jean-Luc Nancy, Andrew Benjamin and other scholars, it considers what the drawing brings to its subject materially beyond representation.

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Louis Marin sees the aesthetic realm as engendering power through its effects. Hence the chiasmic intersplicing of allegorical text and image on a medal divides, dazzles and arrests the spectator in the king-effect.[1] Versailles was 'the result of a production real, imaginary and symbolic in which the king is both architect and architectural subject of Versailles through which the kingdom receives its most perfect consecration'.[2] It is real in the sense you can visit the palace and it's imaginary in that it reveals 'baroque'

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Figure 1. Nicolas Poussin, *The Massacre of the Innocents,* drawing, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille. [Image in public domain].

desire, the fantastic, and phantasmatic 'desire for the absolute of power'.[3] Notably, Marin also suggests that official modes of representation work through human subjects when they practice their most innocuous activities and that when subjects admire and imitate the orders put to them in ritualised life, a continuity of social distinctions is upheld.[4]

This paper explores the other side, fragile and gendered, of Marin's world to examine not so much the institution of power's potential in the operation of grand 'finished' art works, but a drawing by Poussin, which, amongst much else, stages violent force ('power in the most vulgar and general sense')[5] in relation to powerlessness, specifically the vulnerability of infants and women, their mothers. Rather than focus on the operation of power in relation to the great unleashers of absolutism and European wars, it inquires into a particular depiction of their victims, those caught up, against their will, in historical convulsion and the strange precipitates of these forces in which the viewer is implicated.

* * *

The young man, incongruously graceful, furled in shadow, his foot on the infant's stomach, bends back his sword to hack the body (Figure 1). And the woman hurls all she has at him, arm flung out, clawing his back, flailing,

Figure 2. Poussin, *The Massacre of the Innocents,* detail: collapsing anatomy of the defeated woman.

falling, to pull him low.[6] Already we can see what she already knows. She is deflating before our eyes, as if only her dress holds breath. She fails and her anatomy is flailed: her legs and arm collapse and fail (Figure 2). It is too late, the baby too little too punctual, her action – all that she is – too little too late. It is just not enough and too much all at once here and now in this swift brown ink. And although the man's pose is incongruously over-poised, nevertheless, he will do just that in a tick and a trice. He will smite the infant. The basest acts are struck in self-regarding pose.

The painting

Too often art historians treat drawings as if they matter only in reaching their telos elsewhere in a finished painting.[7] And this drawing by Poussin has to date been interpreted largely in relation to the *Massacre of the Innocents* painting (Figure 3) (variously dated between 1624 and 1635), in Vincenzo Giustiniani's collection in 1638, and now at Chantilly.[8]

Poussin made this painting during the devastating Thirty Years War. By the time the war ended in 1648, between four and a half million and eight million people had been killed, most lost to disease and starvation. In

Figure 3. Nicolas Poussin, *The Massacre of the Innocents,* oil on canvas, Musée Condé, Chantilly. [Image in public domain].

Figure 4. Jacques Callot, 'La Pendaison' (The Hanging) from *Les Grandes Misères de la Guerre* ('The Miseries and Misfortunes of War') 1633, etching. [Image in public domain]

some parts of Europe, particularly areas of Germany, maybe sixty percent of the population was dead. At about the same time as Poussin was working on his painting, Jacques Callot published his great series of etchings, *Les Grandes Misères de la Guerre* ('The Miseries and Misfortunes of War') in 1633, which included 'The Hanging' (Figure 4):

Figure 5. Jacques Callot, *The Massacre of the Innocents,* etching, Metropolitan Museum of Art. [Image in public domain]

> In the end these infamous, lost Thieves
> Like unfortunate fruit hanging from this tree
> Demonstrate that the crime (oh horrible dark brood)
> Is itself an instrument of shame and vengeance.
> And that it is the Destiny of vicious men.
> To sooner or later experience the justice of Heaven.

The scene is catastrophic. Like putrefying fruit, bodies hang from the vast tree at the centre, its canopy out of sight, encircled by an enormous military encampment, bristling with pikes and flags. What is worse: the bodies dangling into the picture from heaven or the transformation of the rest of the world into soldiery? The sheer scale of organised killing is chilling. The dying figures on high, soldiers gathered around, clothes scattered on the ground, and dicing for possession imply the Crucifixion. Yet to the left a priest hears confession, and another mounts the ladder, on which a man is

being strung up, to hold aloft the cross. Do they bring solace or chastisement? to hangman or victim? It is not clear. What does seem clear is that the beat of the drum allows responsibility to be thrown to the fall of a die.

If Callot's 'The Hanging' is a rural rendering of the Thirty Years War, his *Massacre of the Innocents* (Figure 5) is its urban counterpart. Here the scale of slaughter is accentuated in a city street transformed into a torrent of slaughter. A frenzied murdering streams between towering buildings that signal the finer things of life and dwarf the cockroach human beings scuttling about their pitiless pointless ends; the street a shambles of human butchery, an urban forcefield of barbarity. As Georges Bataille observed in a different context, 'The turbid felon joins with inebriation'. Atrocity is here amplified by scale, speed, and by the urban setting: the choreography of killing is pitched as far as the eye can see, people reduced in size to scurrying ants, whose purposes and patterns are illegible and unintelligible, whose cries ricochet indistinguishable, a nonsense of a nonsense; and the palaces, roads, structures of civil civic life are emptied out, exposed as empty facades by the deranged frenzy as much as by the merciless aloofness of the vantage point.

In a radically different approach to history and event, Poussin's drawing of the same subject (Figure 1) offers estrangement in a form that is at once more intimate and contracted and yet monumental and expansive. He draws in close and compresses the page, in a form like a spring that triggers and binds the woman who flings herself, the soldier's attack, and the backward-flung glance of the woman who flees in compressed syncopation. We see the inflicting of death on a body, that is not just vulnerable, but absolutely helpless; and we see the helplessness of grief. The crowds are stripped away to expose the powerlessness of women and children in relation to the execution of power.

The one who flees

The one who draws my eye in relation to our theme of the image of power and the power of the image and their bristling entanglement is the woman who flees, the woman who turns and flees (Figure 6). That woman who emerges in Poussin. A figure of a strange sort of grace, out of place. Clinging to her baby, she flees. And what matters is: she turns.

I am interested in this woman who looks the wrong way, as it were, sees from the point of view against the grain (Figure 6). The one that endangers, and the one that engenders a different sort of relation to power, and maybe is also a form of gendering of that relation.[9] She runs away, but she looks back. Her own infant is safe. But she looks to the one who is lost. Unlike the others, her own is not the only fate that concerns her. She sees the man striking, the woman sinking, the baby lost. What she sees over her own heaving shoulder

Figure 6. Poussin, *The Massacre of the Innocents,* detail: woman fleeing who looks back.

engraves itself inside her eyes and brain and dreams for all her life and the baby in her arms will carry it, too. This, too, is now passed to the child in her arms alongside the protection of its life. What is seen over the shoulder, when one flees, does not leave, however fast one runs. It seeps into the calmest days, creeps into safe retreats, undoes every sanctuary. The

Figure 7. Poussin, *The Massacre of the Innocents,* detail: woman's face like a mask.

looking back is an undoing of what the fleeing might achieve. An undoing that is not a negation, but an unravelling, setting in motion a counter current that does not stop.

Poussin pauses and wonders, allows the woman to wonder and hence to turn. She looks back and in her eyes the scene is changed and she is changed. There is an estranging; it's the backward glance that changes everything. Her estrangement is the form of the viewer's own estrangement.[10] And the woman becomes the figure of the viewer's own looking that is at once enchanted and, not so much horrified, as horrible.

Anthony Blunt observed that the woman's arm and her left hand, just visible, pull the child close to her and render her as someone far more than a figure merely fleeing (as in the drawing for *The Plague at Ashdod* where a figure to the right also turns his/her head).[11] And, in fact, her face is a tragic mask and her eyes are swallowed up in looking, one a collapsing scar that travels round her face (Figure 7). Blunt remarks that another figure whose eyes are sunk in wash to 'see' in comparable manner occurs in Poussin's *The Adoration of the Kings* (Chantilly, Musée Condé, pen & brown wash) gazing at the Infant Jesus (Figure 8).[12] It is true also of the gaze of the lovers Mars and, particularly, Venus (Poussin, *Mars and Venus*, Chantilly, Musée Condé, pen & brown wash, 196 × 261).[13] In other words, who

Figure 8. Poussin, *The Adoration of the Kings,* pen and brown wash, Chantilly, Musée Condé. Photo (C) RMN-Grand Palais (domaine de Chantilly) / Michel Urtado.

sees what is shown to be not easily decried or depicted; the looking and seeing and their relationship with introspection and insight are not directly revelatory or simply to be revealed.

Wonder involves making one thing into another, a prosaic thing into a poetic thing, or fleeing into a backward glance. The looking back to see what is happening is the spring that pushes her forward, her baby reeling in her arms, that pulls the drawing open and apart, that transforms the Warburgian *Mnemosyne* nymph into not just 'the sight of death', but the one who cares: the witness who renders to the viewer their own looking back. There is an aleatory relation between the horror of the subject and that which the woman, saving her baby, turning, sees with her mask eyes, and the viewer's looking with pleasure at dismemberment and flight.[14]

It is light that catapults her and divides her from what she sees or cannot see. The sharpest contrasts cross the assassin and the woman who are absorbed, eroded and scarred by dark wash that effaces them into an elongated Z of his body and her abdomen (Figure 9). The wash swallows and ingests spits out crown of head, sword, fist, face pulse. Here the contrasts between dark wash and unmarked paper are at their sharpest and at their least obedient to the separation of figures; indeed they risk fusing them at their deepest. And at that point the ink lines are scoured deep, insisting on some sort of unfathomable gulf where the wash fuses, confuses, seeps and seals. An attempt as it were at undoing violence's undoing. By contrast the woman who flees is as light as a feather.

For there is, oddly, something enchanting in this pirouetting figure. Despite the mask face, the fierce clutching of the baby, with her dancing veils and gauziness, she has the grace and lightness of a Botticelli nymph (Figure 10).[15]

Figure 9. Poussin, *The Massacre of the Innocents,* detail: Z-bend of the defeated woman's body.

By this I do not mean that Poussin derives his figure from Botticelli. Poussin's figure is informed by and draws intensity from a range of artworks, including an ancient Medea sarcophagus and drawings by Raphael via prints by Raimondi.[16] The depiction of Creusa (Figure 11) in the Ancona Museum sarcophagus, flailing, flames shooting up from her forehead, as she dies a gruesome death from the punishment served up by the betrayed Medea, surely informs the woman in blue in the painting (Figure 12).[17] And the figure of Medea on the far right of the sarcophagus, escaping in her chariot drawn by winged serpents, with the corpse of one of her own children over her shoulder (Figure 11), is a haunting presence in the fleeing woman in Poussin's drawing. That drawing evokes too the backward glance, shoulder veil and buttocks-right leg prance of a maenad in a bacchic thiasus sarcophagus (Figure 13), now at Amsterdam, University).[18]

Poussin's figure probably refers also to a woman, holding her infant, who, fleeing, turns in Marcantonio Raimondi (Figure 14), in Raphael (Figure 15), and even Ghirlandaio (Figure 16).[19] Though Poussin swivels the point of view through ninety degrees, such that the viewer no longer sees soldier and woman on the same plane, as in a frieze, with the woman running past us. Instead, Poussin's woman looks over

Figure 10. Sandro Botticelli, *Primavera,* ca.1480, tempera grassa on wood, Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence. [Image in public domain].

Figure 11. Sarcophagus with scenes of the myth of Medea, white marble, mid-2nd cent. CE, Inv. No. 907. Ancona, National Archaeological Museum of Marche (Museo archeologico nazionale delle Marche).

her shoulder from deep within the picture, across the line of fire, as it were, to both the viewer and the slaughter, such that the viewer, interpolated, looks either at her or at the executioner. We have to choose whose side we are on.

Poussin's woman who looks back recalls, too, a drawing of Melpomene from Raphael's studio (Figure 17), which, if the inscription along the lower edge of the version in the Gallerie degli Uffizi is dependable, once belonged to Poussin.[20] Given Melpomene's association with tragedy (she holds a tragic mask in the Raphael studio drawing), Poussin's evocation of her in his fleeing woman has an extra resonance: the terrible way in which life depends on grace or disgrace, good and bad luck; the play of chance in outwitting what the powerful deem a necessity.

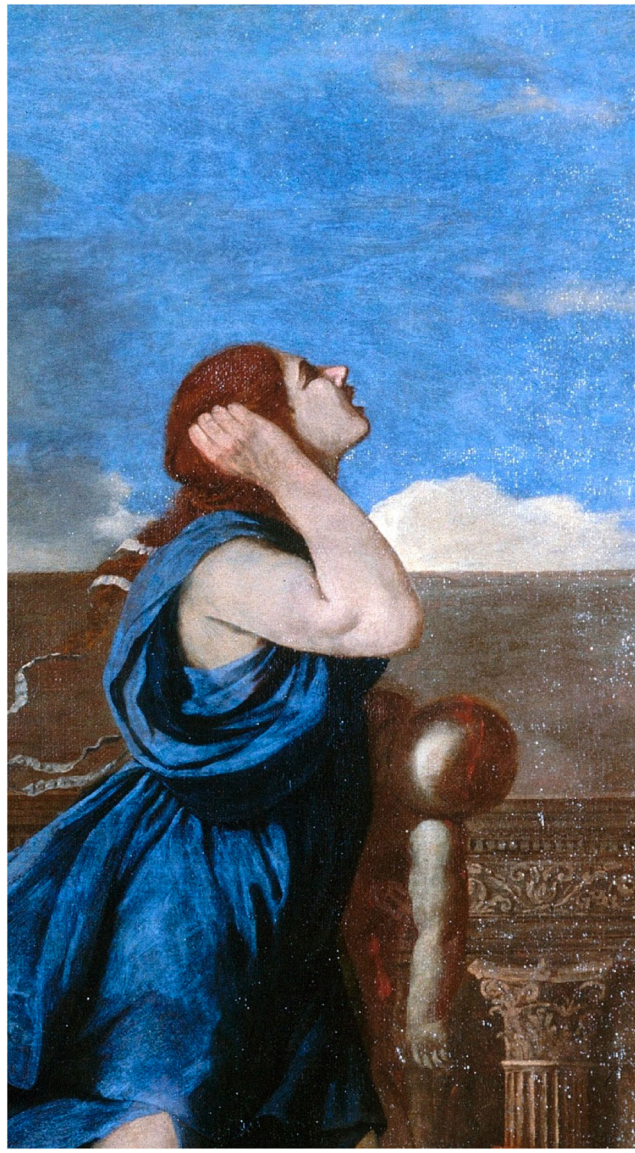

Figure 12. Poussin, *The Massacre of the Innocents,* detail of the woman in blue.

However, it is not in tracing 'sources' that I am interested.[21] The grace of the woman who turns is Botticelli-like in a grace-filled way, like Ghirlandaio's nymph (Figure 18), rather more akin to Warburg's Mnemosyne project, his concern with the polarities that riddle culture and thought and the after-life of pathos-charged images in 'bewegtes Leben' ('animated life'/'life in motion'), something that recurs almost in spite of itself – in being

Figure 13. Bacchic thiasus sarcophagus, now at Amsterdam, University. © Allard Pierson, Amsterdam (inv 10.854).

Figure 14. Marcantonio Raimondi (after Raphael), *Massacre of the Innocents,* engr., Metropolitan Museum of Art. [Image in public domain].

drawn to the woman who looks back – as a way of making the power of historical change and recurrence immanent and apprehensible, in a manner that quietly side steps 'triumphal arch pathos'.[22] She is the nymph who flees, inaccessible but *revenante*.[23]

It is notable that the woman who turns in Poussin's drawing is in the painting scattered in space and time to become three, in a crazed and

Figure 15. Raphael, *Massacre of the Innocents,* drawing, British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings. Photo: Helen Hills.

Figure 16. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Massacre of the Innocents,* fresco, Santa Maria Novella, Florence. By permission of the Fondo Edifici di Culto administered by the Ministero dell'Intern.

dramatically disparate combination of scale: she roars to heaven in impotent grief (Figure 12), looks back from safety (Figure 19), and, without turning, bears her infant away (Figure 20). The woman on the right in yellow, with

Figure 17. Studio of Raphael, *Study for the figure of Melpomene*, drawing, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. [Wikimedia commons: image in the public domain].

a child in her arms, now turns her back; the woman who looks back now appears on the left of the painting and, exploiting an extraordinary contrast of scale, her looking back is framed by the executioner's legs (Figure 19). Holding her child and accompanied by another woman, she looks at what she must see from a place of safety and support. The framing of that look by the assassin's legs tightens the structural relationship between her looking and our seeing her looking back, her safety and our own, and the killing. If we look past it, we are thrown back into it. And now we see that the stamp of the man's foot on the baby's belly triggers the fling of its limbs in the air, as the baby's left leg involuntarily mirrors the killer's right (Figure 3). Not least of horror is the isolated absorption of each figure, utterly dependent on, but cut off from the next.[24]

Figure 18. Domenico Ghirlandaio, 'Nymph' from *Birth of St John the Baptist* (1486–90), fresco, Santa Maria Novella, Florence. By permission of the Fondo Edifici di Culto administered by the Ministero dell'Interno.

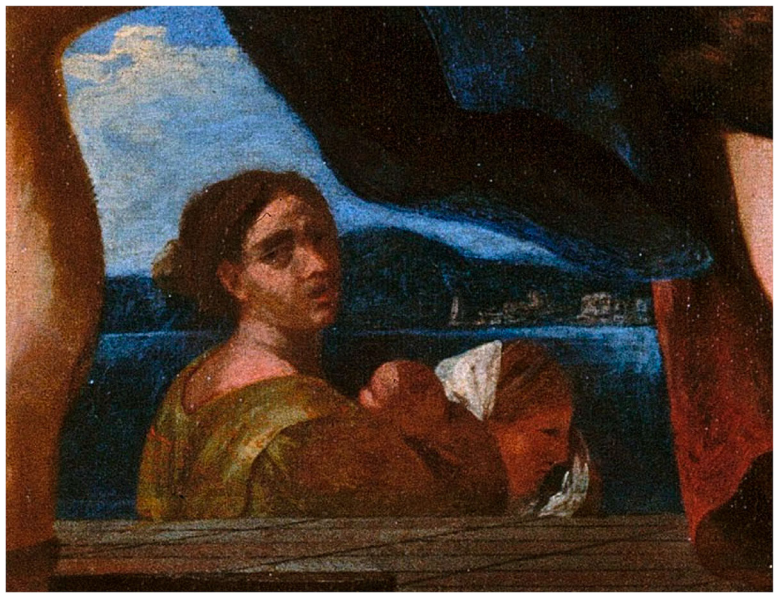

Figure 19. Poussin, *The Massacre of the Innocents,* detail of the woman looking back from safety.

But I really do not want to get drawn into the way the painting or the drawing represents a scene of horror, as if horror is something to be depicted, and as if somehow seeing horror depicted will teach the audience a lesson or two about life. For of course there is horror in babies being killed in front of their own mothers. That horror is theirs, not ours, and we do not see it. Horror cannot be 'seen' or represented, because it is the proleptic grasp of what the future now holds or no longer holds.[25]

The woman who turned in the drawing becomes, as it were, in the painting the woman in blue who has lost everything (Figure 12). The gauzy nymphiness of the drawing is stripped away to a monumental, statuesque bellowing to empty heaven. She is sundered from the other women who are bound together by the yellows and greens of their dress. She is a sort of figure of the Madonna, whose baby is sacrificed – but a Mater Dolorosa deranged in grief. Unhinged, unheeded, her hair undone (the undoing of the hair in the painting corresponds to the babies' liquidation) (Figure 3).[26] Oddly suspended, a masonry outcrop, a shiny sphere and steely column, hangs in front of her (Figure 21). It dawns on me not at once that this is her baby, less life in it than the sprightly architecture of capital, frieze and fluted column that parallel it just behind. This stone baby mimics the obelisk in the background turned upside down – an obelisk that was, in the drawing, curiously beheaded (Figure 1). Memorial and triumph inverted in a faceless body stone dead. The baby's individuality is

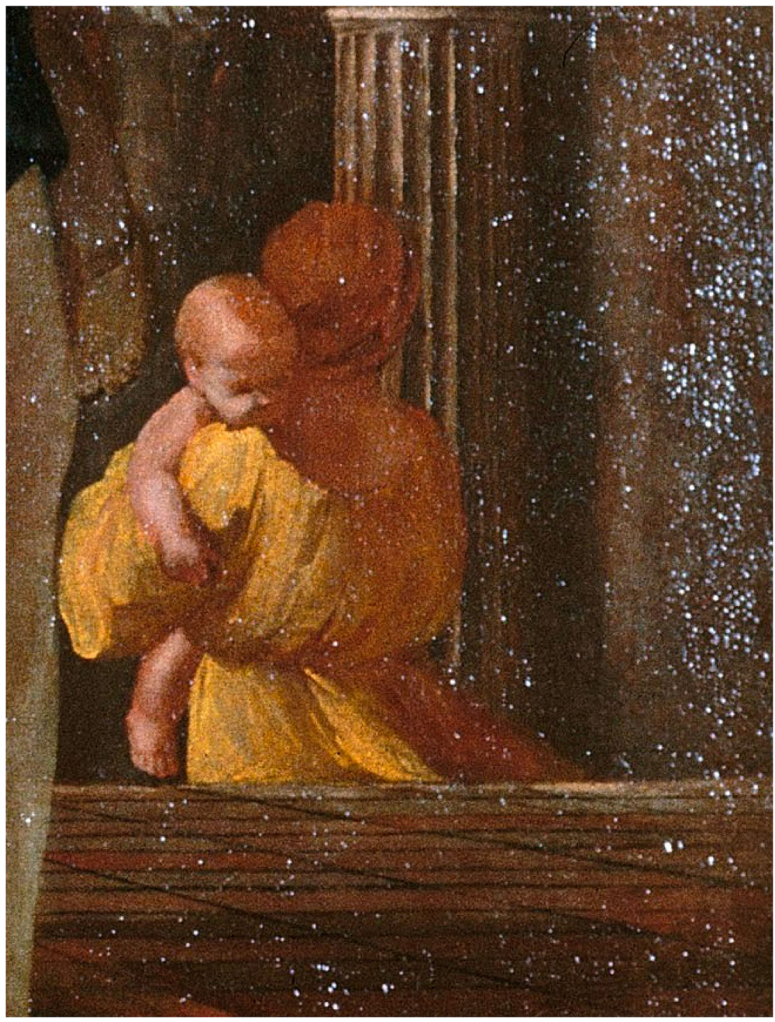

Figure 20. Poussin, *The Massacre of the Innocents,* detail of the woman who does not turn and bears her infant away.

annulled in that stony indifference. It points to a dropping horror where what can be seen is intolerable; where what is seen undoes what is known. Human life does indeed hang in the air, but not because there is no god. Rather it does so because the human being has been abandoned by Him. This abandonment by God and the world, a belonging to nowhere of the woman who raises her eyes, who is now a wandering refugee on the surface of the world for ever, is heightened by the obelisk that testifies to a time when memorialising and matter were treated as consonant and of consequence (and it is surely relevant that the obelisk in Poussin's drawing has

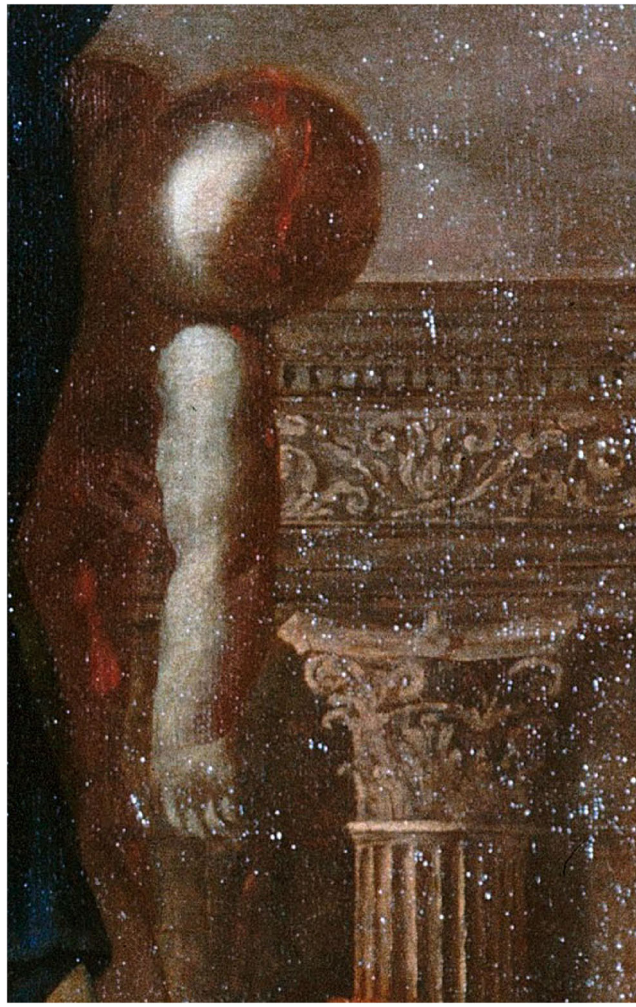

Figure 21. Poussin, *The Massacre of the Innocents,* detail [of what looks like a masonry outcrop].

lost its head). It is not so much grief at the loss of her baby that the woman in blue describes, but loss itself. And in this she towers over the woman in the drawing who grasps her baby tighter to save him in the teeth of loss; there is an opening of the abyss. That opening of the abyss is made visible also in the statuesque quality of the woman – whose monumentality is uncannily more akin to Picasso's *Women on the Beach* than to her alter ego in the drawing. She does not inhabit a world which is reducible to the arithmetic sum of the people who inhabit it. Hence the woman and her lapidary baby testify to the inadequacy of the obelisk and its pious claim to history as memorial or to justice in history.

Image and experience

But a drawing is more than part of a process headed elsewhere. 'Drawing opens form to its own formation', writes Jean-Luc Nancy.[27] It is also an opening, a revealing of what was never hidden. So it is pressing to look again at what, as it were, was left behind in the drawing, what was not taken up into the painting, to inquire again into what is closed off, betrayed, or left behind.

Again to turn back: the woman in the drawing turns (Figure 6). She is running away with her baby in her arms, she is running to save that infant; and then she turns. She looks back towards the slaughter. A baby born around the same time as her own; a neighbour, a sister, a dear friend, maybe. And the drawing opens the question: *What will she do now?* Now the running away will for ever be about that turning, the turning away, that will lead to another turning away, the abandonment of her friend and the friend's baby. After all, what could she possibly do? What can any of us possibly do in the face of a monstrous regime stamping injustice before our eyes? *What sense does she make of what she sees? What does that seeing do to her?*

Drawing allows a perilous fragility to emerge, a possibility of presence that is lost in the more substantial, decisive, assured and secured of the painting. The openness, or opening up, that drawing affords, is made evident. That perilous fragility that is enchantment in the horror. Poussin's drawing produces a point of view of poetic estrangement, that accords simultaneously an uncertain relationship with the grace of the nymph and the turn that is a moral dilemma, a questioning, a wanting to know that is at once a bearing witness and a flight for oneself. Is it wrong to save oneself? Is it always better to survive? It is a turning that is a moral dilemma and a hinge on which a future swings.

In this respect the drawing is more beautiful and more desperate than the painting**.** The looking back in the painting (Figure 19) occurs from a position of safety, the framing by the legs means it is already too late for anything but looking.[28] Looking back is already inscribed in the killing. She will not go back; she is already halfway down the hill. But the drawing skewers the possibility, leaves open the still unforsaken chance; the turn is open to change of heart and direction. It is a turn that is more than a looking back in regret. In painting a turning is often a point of conversion; the moment of seeing the light or encountering and recognising the truth, the change of direction in life (Figure 22).

To take up Jean-Luc Nancy's cue, what is exposed in the drawing may be seen as what the drawing allows to emerge as what is not to be grasped and cannot be retraced, the ungraspable, the veil, the slip and registering of sight, an apperception of what is emerging, changing, and deforming. This might be glimpsed, or apprehended, as a tearing apart that inscribes change as

taking place – in a place that is not given. There's a departure within the drawing, where something is torn. What is left behind produces also something new that has to be borne. This might be thought as a burden or a politics of drawing. Or what the drawing leaves behind.

Hannah Arendt argues that the apparent contradiction between poetry's ability to preserve and its drive to unveil is not a conflict of irreconcilable poetic values but the constitutive tension that defines the position of the political poet, the two demands set by the 'gods of poetry' for embracing a relationship to the political sphere.[29] For Arendt being a poet is less an occupation than a subject position in a world with politics; and poetic estrangement can only succeed if it is simultaneously in a constant uncertain exchange with a passionate rootedness, a driving attachment to the political worlds that shared language must enter. Arendt points out that without this interconnection, which she describes as occurring through the sense of

Figure 22. Giovanni Savoldo, *Mary Magdalen,* ca.1535-40, oil on canvas, National Gallery, London. Image in public domain.

wonder and compassion, estrangement is merely detachment made discourse. Without estrangement, the realities would perpetually threaten to overwhelm the poetic voice altogether. The gods' price for being 'blessed by Apollo' is the need to maintain a fragile peace between postures permanently at odds with each other.[30]

The woman in the drawing who looks back is torn; she is more than mere witness to horror. There is something else she may choose that the viewer is invited to contemplate. Poussin's drawing holds the turn without resolution. There is no conversion here.[31] That tension in which the figure remains veiled, fraught, beautiful, unsure and not even unsure, is what draws the drawing into the political in a way that the painting, with its carefully orchestrated resolved figures, despite its horror, manages to evade.

The witness of violence does not see something unveiled, but is caught in the veil. Again, it is not she who turns; she is an effect of something that turns, that is beyond Poussin, beyond the drawing, outside of things, of which she is an effect; she is the precipitate of a wind which encompasses the viewer too as an effect, and of which the drawing stages itself, too, as an effect.

Violence and witness to violence are staged quite otherwise by Poussin in his drawing known as 'Pluto and Proserpine with a River god' (Figure 23). The drawing has an extraordinary fierce freedom to it, even though it encompasses the entire composition. Here is a sort of violence in looking-on. Pluto is abducting Persephone, forcing her into the underworld on his chariot. The earth tears open. A groaning roar of that sundering of the earth's bonds is made in the drawing. The nymph Cyane, arms outstretched, rushes forwards to try to stop it all. In contrast, in the background a male figure lies, unperturbed and unperplexed (Figure 24). Quite unbothered, in fact. A river god, who oversees the violence, naturalises the sundering, makes it all something that is almost routine, taken for granted – not least by him – the changing of the seasons. Makes it all a matter of fact. Yet the lying back, complacent, while the earth cries and yowls, is grotesque to see. And its reverberation is amplified in these times when still the organ grinders of growth, consumption and off-setting turn a blind eye to the gaping abyss of climate catastrophe and the changing of the seasons.

The woman who running turns pauses looks again (Figure 2). Between us and her is the woman who flings herself hopelessly and in the corner lies neglected the body of a baby – its singularity nullified – abject and discarded.

And after all, where on earth are all the fathers? Where are they while this slaughter of the defenceless takes place? Can they really all be out at work, following orders?

What happens to her as she turns? Here is violence that exceeds death itself, starkly evidenced in the Latin verb *torquerer* (whence to torque, and distort' in English and nouns 'torture, torment' 'torque' 'torch and tort'

Figure 23. Nicolas Poussin, Pluto and Proserpine with a river god.

but normally translated as 'to twist').[32] To torture is to twist the body, to make it into 'a body broken to pieces by *tormentum*'.

The woman running is vulnerable, open to wounding and to caring; the vulnerable one exists in tension. Her vulnerability is generated by that tension. The saving and the running and the turning, which is also, surely, regardless of what she does, a turning to desolation.

The drama is one of 'conversion',not in the redemptive sense, not a 'turning towards', like Savoldo's Mary Magdalen (Figure 22), but one who turns to be forever altered by what she must and cannot confront, is indeed a 'trope' in the fullest sense of the term: a figure in which the proper, natural, or clear is turned obscure or averted. Like Jacques Prévert's wartime *Barbara*, her radiance and joy belong to a shattered time; and the shattering of time allows them still to shine through, *in spite of everything*.

I would like to take up Nancy's ideas of drawing, to return to the question of the historical. Of history as something that is not simply past or simply imminent in the way that is perhaps implied. He says something along the lines that a drawing has its own history in its own line. But what is that history beyond the immediate line? in what way is it historical? in what ways does history not get caught up in a simple pleasure of the line or in its mere extension? What is the history beyond something that is left behind in the line? what is at risk of being left behind if one follows Nancy's reading? How is the history of the line more than its past? Nancy

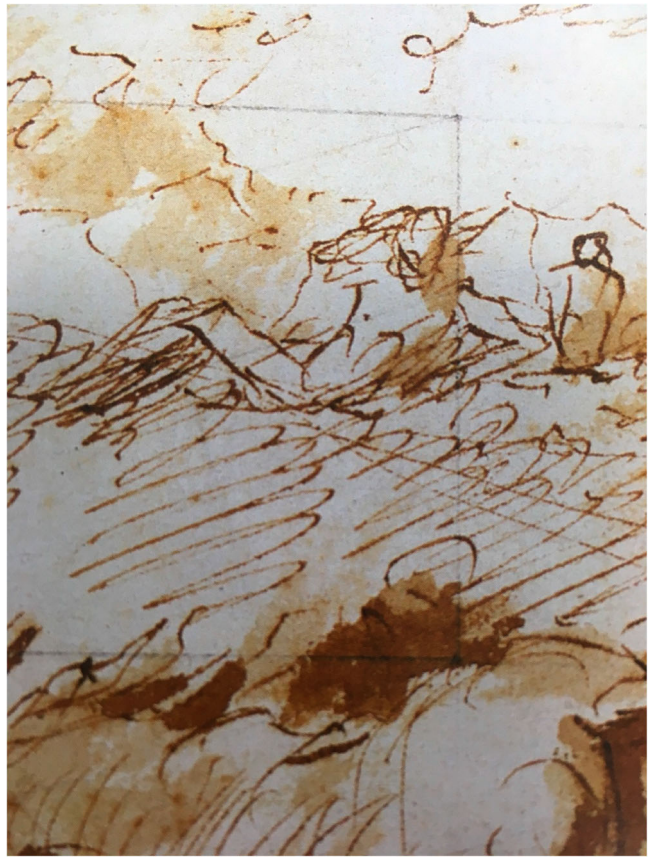

Figure 24. Poussin, *Pluto and Proserpine with a River god*, detail of the river god.

glosses rapidly over the question of history and the past and although he takes pains to insist that he is avoiding a celebration of drawing in terms of genius/ artist/ individual hand, it seems to lean perilously close to that. Or at least the risk is that the direction of his ideas seems to run parallel with the celebration of genius

The river god is the obverse of the woman who looks back (Figures 24 and 3). In looking back there is a tearing open. She is the tearing open of presence possibility. Whereas the river god is foreclosed; for him nothing is open; nothing is torn. The tearing open does not equate to genius or bravura; it is a line which opens a question, a moral line, that inevitably inveigles also the viewer.

As a messenger, the message of the woman who turns does not concern herself. The woman is the precipitate of what is passing. It might be tempting to call it love; to call the precipitate the truth or the passing (of the) truth. That which produces what Hélène Cixous, in a different context, has

termed 'the unstable allure' of a drawing.[33] Or it may be, rather, that one glimpses here the political of history, the multiplicity and unfixing of the truth, to turn to feel truth, at its closest always a little further away.

Notes

1. Louis Marin's brilliant analyses focus on text, architecture, and image in terms of representation in what is an insistently *dematerialising* approach.
2. Louis Marin and A. Lehmann, 'Classical, Baroque: Versailles, or the Architecture of the Prince', *Yale French Studies* 80 (1991), pp. 167–82.
3. Louis Marin, *Portrait of the King*, trans. M. Houle (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1988), p. 7.
4. Althusser's observes that the power of a society is often controlled by those who know how to handle ideology. 'By that term', suggests Tom Conley, 'he meant not, as Webster has it, a science of the history and evolution of human ideas, but rather the state of idealism in which subjects bathe themselves in their everyday lives'. Tom Conley, 'The King's Effects', Foreword to L. Marin *Portrait of the* King (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press: 1988), p. 5.
5. 'Power, in the most vulgar and general sense, is to be capable of force, to have […] a reserve of force that is not expended but that is in a *state* of being expendable'. Marin, *Portrait of the King*, 6.
6. The woman clawing at the man derives from Guido Reni (Fig XX: Guido Reni, Massacre of the Innocents, Bologna). Walter Friedlaender observed that the drawing shows two pentimenti of the soldier's arm: in the cancelled versions he is about to stab the child with a short dagger, in an attitude recalling Guido Reni's painting at Bologna, with which the mother's gesture of despair in the Chantilly painting is also connected. Walter Friedlaender, *Drawings of Poussin. Catalogue raisonné* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1949), vol 1, p. 31.
7. In recent years scholars have turned their attention to drawing and the theory of drawing as more than something related teleologically to 'finished' work elsewhere. See especially Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Pleasure in Drawing*, trans. P. Armstrong (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013). Poussin did not sign his drawings and seems to have had little long-lasting interest in them, which is not to claim that he was not interested in drawing. Giovanni Pietro Bellori's remark that 'the drawings that he made of his own invention were no more than spontaneous sketches, formed by rapid strikes and a simple chiaroscuro in coloured wash, which nevertheless proved entirely effective for the movement and the expression', tends to overlook the extraordinary rich range of tone, technique and finish of Poussin's drawings: G. P. Bellori, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori ed architetti moderni,* Rome 1672. Reprint, ed. Evelina Borrea (Turin: G. Einaudi, 1976), p. 453. Indeed, Poussin's drawings were not much celebrated either during his lifetime or subsequently until the invaluable work of Anthony Blunt and Walter Friedlaender (W Friedlaender and A Blunt, *The Drawings of Poussin,* 5 vols. (London: The Warburg Institute, 1939–74, vol.1. 1939; 2, 1949; 3, 1953; 4, 1963; 5, 1974); A. Blunt *The Drawings of Poussin* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1979). Pierre Rosenberg has written sympathetically about Poussin's drawings and accorded them importance in their own right (P. Rosenberg and Louis-

Antoine Prat, *Nicolas Poussin, 1594–1665: Catalogue raisonné des dessins*. 2 vols (Milan: Leonardo Editore, 1994); P. Rosenberg, *From Drawing to Painting. Poussin, Watteau, Fragonard, David and Ingres* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). Rosenberg observes, '[the] division between painting and drawing, which has historical explanations, is not only arbitrary and artificial but also rests on a serious misunderstanding of the creative reality'. He argues that for Poussin drawing was a 'research tool' as well as 'a means of expression and a medium of transmission, in both the most abstract and the most practical sense of the terms'. P. Rosenberg, *From Drawing to Painting. Poussin, Watteau, Fragonard, David and Ingres* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. ix, 176, 29, 52.

8. The painting is mentioned in the 1638 inventory, a year after the death of Vincenzo Giustiniani (1564–1637): 'Un Quadro sopraporto con l'occisione dell'Innocenti, dipinto in tela alta palmi 8, lar. 9 in circa senza cornice sic rede di mano di Nicolo Pussin' (L. Salerno, 'The Picture Gallery of Vincenzo Giustiniani I. Introduction. II. The Inventory Part I', *The Burlington Magazine*, CII, 686, pp. 93–104). At that point it hung above a door with three other pictures, all related to death (Joachim van Sandrart's *Death of Seneca*, François Perrier's *Death of Cicero* and *Death of Socrates* by a certain 'Giusto fiammengo', perhaps Justus Sustermans or Joost de Pape (P. Rosenberg and V. Damian, *L'art et la manière de Nicolas Poussin* (Paris: Somogy, 1994), p. 20; P. Rosenberg and L-A Prat, *Nicolas Poussin. La Collection du musée Condé à Chantilly* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1994), p. 44. Although the painting was in Vincenzo Giustiniani's inventory, there is no evidence that he commissioned it, as Rosenberg rightly points out (P. Rosenberg and L-A Prat, *Nicolas Poussin. La Collection du musée Condé à Chantilly* (Paris : Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1994), p.50. The date of the painting has been much debated. D. Mahon dated it to 1628–29, which was accepted by Blunt and Friedlaender (Friedlaender, *Drawings of Poussin,* vol 1, *Studies of the Warburg Institute* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1939), p. 31; D. Wild, preferred 1634–35; Elizabeth Cropper weirdly claimed the painting must postdate the 1632 publication of GB Marino's poem on the Massacre of the Innocents; and J. Thuillier gives a much earlier date of 1624–25 (D. Mahon, 'Poussin's Early Development', *Burlington Magazine*, 102.688 (July), pp. 288–304; D. Wild, 'Les tableaux de Poussin à Chantilly', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, LXIX (Jan), pp. 3–44; E. Cropper, 'Vincenzo Giustiniani's "Galleria", the Pygmalion Effect', *Cassiano dal Pozzo's Paper Museum* II, London, 1992, pp. 101–26; J. Thuillier, *Nicolas Poussin* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994).
9. Adriana Cavarero suggests that horror, as the Greek myths show, 'required the feminine to reveal its authentic roots'. She draws on the gorgon Medusa and on Medea to argue that 'according to mythology, horror has the face of a woman' and draws attention to the particular horror of women inflicting violence on others, as well as the centrality of vulnerability, which has been almost overlooked in western philosophy (A. Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp.14–19, 21–46. But there is an unexplored further dimension to her observations that is of interest here. Poussin emphasizes the male infants as victims and the women, as mothers, horrified witnesses, unable to defend their own babies. The complete absence of men, apart from the assassin, locates the experience of horror in the feminine. However, the interrogative exchange of the viewer's gaze with the

woman who looks back situates a different sort of horror in the looker-on (the viewer of the artwork) who takes some sort of aesthetic pleasure in what is a horrifying scene of women suffering horribly. That pleasure is perhaps exposed as particularly horrible – or horrible in a particular way – when it is a woman's.

10. This is, of course, different from claiming, as an external reviewer incorrectly assumed, that the woman's and viewers' modes are identical.
11. A Blunt, *The Drawings of Poussin* (New Haven & London: Yale UP, 1979), p. 35. Blunt argues that the *Massacre of the Innocents* was made partly from studies of from wax models. Ibid, pp. 97–98.
12. Blunt, *The Drawings of Poussin,* 1979, p. 35.
13. There is a woman, turning, fleeing, half her face obscured in bistre wash, who bears some resemblance to the woman fleeing in the *Massacre* drawing in another drawing by Poussin of a shepherd driving young women away from a well (or *Moses Driving the Shepherds from the Well*). W. Friedlaender, *The Drawings of Nicolas Poussin. Catalogue Raisonné,* vol 1 (London: Studies of the Warburg Institute: The Warburg Institute, 1939), plates volume p.6, fig.10; text volume p.8. For the *Mars and Venus* drawing, see Pierre Rosenberg (ed), *Nicolas Poussin. La collection du musée Condé à Chantilly* (Paris : Réunion des musées nationaux, 1994), pp. 84–85.
14. Adriana Cavarero has introduced the term 'horrorism' in relation to contemporary discussion of 'terrorism' to pay attention to the point of view of victims of such attacks. From the military perspective we witness terrorism; from the 'insurgent' point of view, martyrdom; but from the point of view of the helpless victims 'the picture changes: the end melts away and the means becomes substance. More than terror, what stands out is horror'. 'The viewpoint of the defenceless must not only be adopted here, it must be adopted exclusively; that is what really matters', Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* (Press, New York: Columbia University, 2008), pp.1, 3.
15. See A. Warburg, 'Francesco Sassetti's Last injunctions to his sons'; A. Warburg '*Dürer und die italienische Antike*', in *Die Erneuerung*, 443–9, 623–5 (English translation, Aby Warburg, 'Dürer and Italian Antiquity', in *The Renewal*, 553–8, 729–31).
16. In this sense she was always already a memory of something seen.
17. The Ancona Medea sarcophagus was known in the fifteenth century, and it was located probably in front of SS. Cosma e Damiano, where it was recorded by Pirro Ligorio in mid-16C; after 1560 it was in the Vatican Belvedere (P.R. Bober and R. Rubinstein, *Renaissance Artists and Antique Sculpture. A Handbook of sources* (London: Harvey Miller, 2010), p. 153. Other versions of the Medea sarcophagus survive, eg Altes Museum, Berlin, but it is highly likely that this was the version Poussin knew.
18. This sarcophagus was in Rome, perhaps in the Farnese garden, Trastevere, from at least the first half of the Quattrocento, althought its precise location is unknown. P. R. Bober and R Rubinstein, *Renaissance Artists and Antique Sculpture. A Handbook of Sources* (London: Harvey Miller, 2010), p. 132.
19. Marcantonio Raimondi's engraving and Guido Reni's painting of The *Massacre of the Innocents* (1609–12, Pinacoteca, Bologna) were referred to as sources for Poussin by W Friedlaender and A Blunt (Friedlaender, *Drawings of Poussin,* vol 1, *Studies of the Warburg Institute* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1939), p. 31) and by M. Jaffé (M. Jaffé, 'Poussin and Reni', in A. Châtelet

and N. Reynaud (eds.), *Études d'art français offertes à Charles Sterling* (Paris, 1975), pp. 213–6).

20. See Rosenberg and Prat 1994, vol.1, xi, fig.1; John Gere pointed out this drawing in *Drawings by Raphael and his Circle from British and North American Collections,* exh. Cat. (New York: Pierpont Morgan Library, 1987), p. 82 under no.16. The drawing in the Uffizi is a copy; the original is in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, inv. P II 541. See Rosenberg, *Drawing to Painting,* 166, 230 n.52. Raphael's Melpomene appears holding a tragic mask in his *Parnassus* fresco (1509–11) in Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican.
21. Despite the claims of many art historians, 'sources' are not necessarily key to the interpretation of an artwork.
22. Erwin Panofsky pointed out in 1936 that while Poussin is 'generally labelled as a "classicist" […], in his pictures the classical figures, too, are "metamorphosed" so as to preserve what strikes us as their "innermost style", while the tangible motives are thoroughly changed […] Poussin paints apparently classical figures which, in reality, are free inventions, or rather reincarnations of a classical entity'. E. Panofsky, 'Et in Arcadia Ego', in *Philosophy and History. Essays presented to Ernst Cassirer*, R. Klibansky and H. J. Paton (eds.), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), pp. 244–5.
23. 'Toujours fuyante, toujours là cependant. Inaccessible, volatile mais revenante jusqu'à hanter, jusqu'à s'enter, se fondre en toute chose : essentiellement fluide, donc. Telle est Ninfa'. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ninfa fluida. Essai sur le drapé-désir*, Gallimard: Paris, 2015, 7.
24. Alain Mérot noted the absorption and isolation of the figures. Alain Mérot, *Nicolas Poussin* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1990), p. 9.
25. A reader has raised the point that the trauma of horror means that many people undergoing it in real life are themselves not always able to 'see' it or feel it when it is unfolding. Indeed, multiple theorists have argued that horror may be seen or experienced only after the fact, and that its reality might be grasped largely through symbolic figuration. This does not detract from my claim that the horror the women experience, either during the moment that is depicted or subsequently, is not ours. Nor does it alter the point that the horror of horror is its proleptic quality. Indeed, it seems to confirm it. The same reader asks that reference be made to T. J. Clark's, *The Sight of Death. An Experiment in Art Writing* (Yale University Press, 2006). Clark's fascinating project analyses a finished painting in what are fundamentally psychoanalytical moves, far away from the aim of this essay. For a critique of Clark's book, see Helen Hills, 'The Uses of Images: TJ Clark & WG Sebald', in *Melilah: Manchester Journal of Jewish Studies*, 2 (2012), pp. 57–80. http://www.mucjs.org/MELILAH/2012sebald/7hills.pdf
26. My thanks to Jane Hawkes for her thoughtful observations on this figure.
27. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Pleasure in Drawing*, trans. Philip Armstrong (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), p. 6.
28. Anne Lester asks whether the looking through the legs may intimate the rape yet to come (Anne Lester in a personal communication 28.3.2021).
29. Ian Storey, 'The Reckless Unsaid: Arendt on Political Poetics', *Critical Inquiry*, 41.4 (2015), p. 871.
30. Hannah Arendt, 'What is Permitted to Jove', *Reflection on Literature and Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 223–56.

31. A comparison could be made in this regard with Savoldo's *Magdalen* in which the Magdalen's turning is the moment when she is about to be dazzled by, to see, and to recognise the risen Christ – a recognition and revelation anticipated by the viewer, who sees the dazzling shine on her cloak already, and who is thereby imbricated in the work of the painting as conversion. For a brilliant reading of the Savoldo painting, see Mary Pardo, 'The Subject of Savoldo's *Magdalene*', *Art Bulletin*, 71 (1989), 67–91.
32. Cavarero, *Horrorism*, p.32
33. Cixous, *Stigmata* 28.

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