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Legacies of 'Sublime Poussin': Louis Marin's Plea for Poussin as a Painter

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'Le bien juger est très difficile, si l'on n'a en cet art grande théorie et pratique jointes ensemble.' (Poussin, Letter to Chantelou, 24 November 1647)¹

Introduction

Louis Marin's American sojourns in the 1970s, followed by further visits in the 1980s, have arguably obscured his period of residence in London in the 1960s. Among his generation of French thinkers, who began their careers in the 1950s and 1960s, Marin spent the most time in this country. Significantly, it was while he was Assistant Director of the French Institute in London (1964-67) that he began to carry out his research in art history, notably following his contact with Anthony Blunt, the Director of the Courtauld Institute in London (1947-74), and his conversations with Edgar Wind, Oxford University's first professor of art history (1955-67).²

Blunt was then best known for his work on French baroque art, especially Poussin, and for his volume in the Pelican History of Art, *Art and Architecture in France 1500-1700* (1953). He had devoted his 1958 A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts at the National Gallery of Art in Washington to Poussin, written the catalogue for the landmark exhibition at the Louvre in 1960 and was completing his work on the published version of the Mellon lectures (1966-67). The monograph which emerged reinforced the view of Poussin as a *peintre-philosophe*, delineating the 'intellectual climate' in which he worked (mainly in Rome), his circle of patrons in Italy and France, his ideas about painting, his religious views and, famously, his

stoicism.³ The landscapes in particular were seen as deeply meditative allegories of the human condition and of the mysteries of nature and the cosmos.

In a footnote to a paper of 1983 on the representation of storms in Poussin landscapes, written only a few months after Blunt's death, Marin would refer to Blunt's 'indispensable' work on Poussin's role in the change in the status of landscape painting, to which he adds the following:

'Toutefois, à notre sens, seul le questionnement qu'introduit le sublime permettrait d'interpréter cette relève, en particulier avec les figures de l'«informe», du «géant», du «serpent» ou de la «tempête». Il s'agirait donc de réarticuler par une nouvelle problématique à la fois historique, iconographique, philosophique, mais aussi formelle et plastique, l'immense travail fait par A. Blunt.'⁴

Marin adopts 'relève' from Derrida's critique of Hegel's dialectic, where relève carries both the sense of lifting up and of alteration, in order to refer to the change in landscape painting that occurred in Poussin's period, while 'informe' is the term Bataille used to refer to the challenge to concepts of ideal aesthetic form posed by abject objects and images.⁵ Marin employs them here to indicate the scope of his enquiry into the system of representation at work in certain of Poussin's paintings, which depict the powers associated with the sublime but also include their very own figures of internal disruption.

'Sublime Poussin' was not completed as Marin intended, but a plan of 1988 was included in the posthumous collection of essays that appeared in 1995 under the same title. The plan had the figures of the sublime as 'la tempête dans le paysage' (storms, or signs of them, but also *Winter* from the *Four Seasons* [Louvre]), 'le colossal ou le choc de l'ostentation' (combining ruins, giants and snakes) and 'la violence ou l'absolu de la force' (comprising plague, war and death).⁶ There were also to be four 'digressions' – which could

be compared with the 'contrepoints' used in his study of Philippe de Champaigne, as adopted by Ribard in this special issue – linked to previous essays on Giorgione's *Tempesta*, Leonardo's *Deluges*, Babel and the Medusa. *Sublime Poussin* as it appeared was less tightly focused on figures of the sublime, mainly collecting Marin's later essays on Poussin, on topics such as storms and ruins in landscapes, metamorphosis in early mythological paintings, reception and tension in the 1647 *Finding of Moses*, variations between the two self-portraits, the 'je ne sais quoi' in Boileau and Bouhours, and the two versions of Panofsky's essay on *The Arcadian Shepherds*, supplemented by an analysis from 1970 of *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* and an article on *The Israelites Gathering Manna*.

In both the projected volume and across the work on Poussin the evidence was being assembled to permit a rethink of the ambition of Poussin's paintings, moving away from the syncretist cosmology and intellectual historiography of Blunt to an interpretation based on the powers of representation. The concept of the sublime and the practice of variation were the particular keys Marin adopted to investigate representation in Poussin's paintings, using terms from diverse sources, including Longinus's discussion of poetry and oratory in *On the Sublime*, Félibien's *Entretiens* and Poussin's correspondence, as well as what he felt were anticipations of Kant's mathematical sublime, to address the challenges posed by the paintings themselves.⁷

I propose to consider the legacy of 'Sublime Poussin' in two principal sections: firstly, regarding the renowned art historian T. J. Clark's *The Sight of Death* (2006) and its discussion of Marin in relation to the two central landscapes treated in the book (*Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* [National Gallery, London, 1648] and *Landscape with a Calm* [J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 1650-51]);⁸ and secondly, bringing together three disparate parts of Marin's work which are linked to the sublime, variation, and the theory and practice

of painting: the *Finding of Moses* essay, included in the published volume but not present in the plan; the *Ordination* from the second series of *Sacraments*, a painting Marin intended to write an article on; and the *Four Seasons* discussion included in *Philippe de Champaigne ou la présence cachée*.

1. Marin-Clark

After the sale of Poussin's *Landscape with a Calm* to the Getty Museum in 1997, the painting was lent to the National Gallery in London so that the artist Leon Kossoff could work after hours in the Poussin room in preparation for his Getty exhibition 'Poussin Landscapes'.⁹ This is the only time *Landscape with a Calm*, which re-emerged from a private collection in 1977, has appeared in the National Gallery alongside their Poussins (among them *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, *The Triumph of Pan* and *The Adoration of the Golden Calf*). The light and water colour of *Calm* were spellbinding and dominated the room, all the more so no doubt for being about to leave for California. It would, however, take the chance combination of the loan of *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* to hang in a small room opposite *Landscape with a Calm* during the Kossoff exhibition and the presence at the Getty Institute in 2000 of an art historian with a long-standing passion for *Snake* to bring about a sustained and deeply thoughtful encounter between the two paintings.¹⁰ T. J. Clark visited *Snake* and *Calm* regularly over a 3-month period and the journal he kept became a 240-page book, which included follow-up visits to the National Gallery to see *Snake* in 2001-03. *The Sight of Death* is an extraordinary work and potentially an important conduit for the legacy of 'Sublime Poussin', and Marin more generally. Serious engagement with Marin's work has been a little uneven in the large Poussin exhibition catalogues since the anniversary exhibitions of 1994-95, but he is a key

critical reference in *The Sight of Death*, second only to Félibien, historiographer royal and author of *Entretiens sur les Vies et Ouvrages des plus excellents Peintres anciens et modernes* (1666-68).

Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake, acquired by the National Gallery in 1947, attracted both Marin and Clark in the 1960s, leading in Marin's case to an article in 1970 ('La description de l'image: à propos d'un paysage de Poussin'),¹¹ and with Clark to 30-40 years of maturation while he worked mainly on Nineteenth-Century French painting. Clark's influential books on art and 1848, both published in 1973, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Second French Republic, 1848-1851* and *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France, 1848-1851*, followed notably by *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (1984), had emphasized a political reading of artistic production and social change. For a Marxist scholar like Clark, the choice of Poussin was surprising and indeed Poussin's politics are felt to be 'counterrevolutionary' in the period treated in *The Sight of Death*, primarily the tumultuous year of 1648.¹² Clark is more interested in 'an experiment in art writing' and as such focuses on the whole of the surface of *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* and *Landscape with a Calm*, in particular what may be called the material life of the paintings and which we may struggle to fix with words. It is possible to follow Clark's argument very closely because of the astonishing quality of the illustrations and the overall design of the book. We realise over the course of the book that the political dimension is located in the slowing down of the experience of looking, avoiding hasty interpretations and judgments from whatever perspective. Although the present article will take issue with Clark's treatment of Marin, *The Sight of Death* enacts a powerful re-encounter with the two principal paintings discussed.

In several ways *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* was the obvious choice for Marin's project in the mid-1960s, with his background in Seventeenth-Century French philosophy and literature, and at the time of his nascent interest in art history and theory, and of his conversations with Blunt and Wind. Marin was thinking about ways in which descriptions of the painting by Félibien, Fénelon and Baudet helped to open up a new method of reading a painting: he produced a detailed comparison of the narrative structures in these texts, including in his own scrutiny of the painting, together with an exploration of the gaps revealed in their attention to the painting. Marin undoubtedly profited from the absence of a source text and could instead focus on the reception of the painting in its descriptions. His essay concerns a plurality of possible readings, distinguished from particular interpretations: 'Si la description désigne le système ouvert des lectures, elle nomme également la cohérence objective du texte dans son indépendance radicale à l'égard de tout procès particulier d'interprétation' (p. 38). Marin is certainly steering the spectator away from an iconological reading of the painting.

In Marin's view, therefore, a description that engages with all the surface of the painting is a reading. Certain key areas are highlighted, setting others apart: 'Articuler en bref veut dire relier, mais aussi disjoindre, opposer' (p. 46). This leads Marin to a bold statement that would seem to confirm Clark's view, to which we will come to in detail, that he does not pay sufficient attention to incident and materiality in his reading of Poussin (in both paintings): 'L'intervalle entre deux termes qui est la marque, dans le tableau, de leur relation oppositive est insignifiante dans sa matérialité, dans sa continuité' (p. 46). You have to acknowledge the rigour of Marin's ideas here: for a particular reading, based on the selected 'termes' and their relation, some areas of the painting will be excluded and thus without a role to play in that reading. However, Marin goes on to argue how these

overlooked areas may be an integral part of a different account of the painting. This section is worth quoting at length (split into two sections): 'Le contigu n'est pas le continu: il suppose un intervalle, un blanc entre deux éléments. Or cette distance que laisse subsister le contigu à l'intérieur de lui-même ne peut pas être pur et simple écart dans le tableau qui est fondamentalement espace. Cette distance est l'insignifiance du continu que le discours analytique articule dans le sens' (p. 46). The medium is spatial and so 'empty' sections between figures are still parts of the painting; their relative insignificance depends on the way meaning is being constructed in the description, as Marin goes on to emphasize: 'Certes le texte de Fénelon, par rapport au titre du catalogue, couvre le tableau d'un réseau beaucoup plus dense de relations, mais le filet discursif aura toujours des mailles, et elles laisseront passer, comme insignifiantes, des parties de la surface picturale : il est heureux qu'il en soit ainsi ; sinon rien n'aurait de sens. D'autres descriptions, en déplaçant le réseau sur la surface, vont rendre ces parties signifiantes en les extrayant et en les retenant dans le jeu des relations' (p. 46). Thus the 'insignificance' of an area of the painting results from its reception, rather than any inherent quality, and to leave aside a section is potentially to defer its inclusion to a later reading.

Does Clark really ever engage with this part of Marin's investigation? There are two ways of approaching this issue: one is to consider what Clark first says about Marin in his book, regarding Marin's view of *Calm*, since Clark quickly establishes his perspective; the other is to uncover the chronology of when Clark actually read Marin's article on *Snake*. As it is an 'art writing' project, *The Sight of Death* avoids the thorough engagement with other historians commonly found in a work of art history, in order to look and describe anew, benefitting from the freshness of contemporary seventeenth-century texts, including the inventory of Pointel's collection which Champaigne was involved in drawing up.¹³

Nevertheless Clark's notes show his awareness of the critical context and some sort of engagement with Marin's analysis of *Calm* (and elsewhere Denis Mahon's connoisseurship) suits his purposes.¹⁴ His first entry on Marin is in relation to *Calm* and is informed by a long-held view that 1970s French art theory (and French theory in general) was all about scientism and structure, and that the concern of any work espousing such an outlook was to relate all the features of a painting to its underlying organisational principles.¹⁵ At the same time he begins his mentions of Marin by admitting openly to this fear: 'Marin's pages... which are fine and certainly anxious-making' (p. 82) – as might Clark's be for someone coming to his pages when working on an article on Marin and Poussin.

Clark is discussing Marin's view that the lake in the centre of *Landscape with a Calm*, at the same time as it is the site where architecture, the natural world and everyday life are brought together, so that Nature herself, as Félibien put it, seems to paint on the surface of the water, also carried a negative trace of impending disorder because of the absence in the reflections of the approaching clouds. For Marin the interference involved in seeing the serenity and realizing the lack – like in a moment of syncope in music – suggested that the painting offers a premonition of the change.¹⁶ In Clark's view, by contrast, acquired and developed over the months of viewing, Poussin's aporia are indications that logical and mathematical 'visual correctness' didn't always come first (p. 158). Otherwise the whole surface would be under pressure to play a role in the system of painting, a view that Clark links to the notion that Poussin never overlooked anything, which he wittily calls the "'je n'ai rien négligé" syndrome', on account of the patrons and critics eager to take up Poussin's reported comment and apply it across his work.

Clark suggests that the main difference between Marin and himself concerns the relationship between structure and incident, and between theory and practice. In general

he feels that Marin is all about theory and how paintings control their content, including any disturbance, whereas he sees painting as 'the momentary', to which he adds 'or these uncontrollable materialities always coming into contact with the understanding and maybe substantiating it, maybe putting it in doubt' (p. 85). His comments on Marin in the 10 February 2000 entry switch freely between *Calm* and *Snake*, while only referring to the article by Marin on *Calm*: 'The interesting thing is that Marin wants the disturbance too; maybe in *Calm* he wants it too much' (p. 84). And yet Marin doesn't see the sky in *Calm* as 'outright stormy' (Clark, p. 84), since he sees premonitory signs of a storm instead; nor does he say that the sky is 'almost volcanic' (Clark, p. 84), since it is the mountain in the background that looks volcanic, with smoke rising from it because of the effect of the painting's perspective on the cloud drifting towards it: 'la montagne escarpée (...) fume comme un volcan' (Marin, p. 142). Perhaps it is Marin's writing that is all shaken up, but Clark doesn't make that point.

The detail of Clark's reading of Marin's article 'La description de l'image' is revealing too. Rather than simply saying the man's 'whole body is already a sign' (p. 106), as Clark contends, Marin is in fact talking about the polysemy of the figures in *Snake*. How familiar Clark was with 'La description de l'image' in February 2000 is uncertain – it seems probable that he relied on Marin's well-known article about *The Arcadian Shepherds* to give him the essence of what he supposed Marin's structural approach to *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* must have contained.¹⁷ That a thorough reading didn't occur at the Getty is demonstrated by a remark he makes 13 months later, when he is back in London revisiting *Snake*, recorded under 20 March 2001: 'Today I was reading Fénelon's *Dialogue des morts* alongside Louis Marin's treatment of it, and at last I discovered what my gesturing figures in *Snake* – the ones deep in shadow by the lakeshore – are most probably up to' (Clark, p.

206). The activity is a game called 'la murre', involving guessing the number of fingers being held up at another player, which, following Fénelon (and Marin), he thinks the figures on the left of the lakeshore are playing. However Clark is definitely giving the impression that Marin's article doesn't mention 'la murre' and doesn't include the Fénelon, whereas Marin mentions 'la murre' three times in the article (pp. 58, 61 and 62) and he includes the relevant two pages of Fénelon as one of the appendices (pp. 67-69). Reading Marin in London, Clark must have realised his oversight and so began his entry with two awkward exclamations about explanations being lost over the centuries. Certainly a more accurate acknowledgement of Marin was warranted.

Missing from Clark's version of Marin, therefore, is the latter's careful integration of contemporary or related text (notably Félibien and Fénelon), the effort made to construct an analytical language, a wish to stretch across historical boundaries and a playful note if dealing with authority. Clark notes that 'we need to possess the pictures' idiom to be able to find it in texts of the time' (p. 165), which Marin thought he'd found in Félibien and Fénelon, a point acknowledged by Maria Loh in her analysis of the scream in *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*.¹⁸ Taking up Marin's analysis of represented time in his studies of *Landscape with a Calm* and *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe*, we can see in *Snake*, as Loh has argued, what the man has just seen and 'we share in the simultaneity of the representation that haunts the subject' as he leaves the scene.¹⁹ Ultimately Loh and Clark point in different ways to a Marinian return to the London painting. In my view, Clark has increased our attention to details and to overall balance and returning from him to Marin enables us to see that Marin did attend to the material alongside his concern for story and space.

2a. *Finding of Moses*

The second part of *Sublime Poussin* addresses a series of topics that may seem less violent and awesome than the sublime, but which include desire, death, jealousy and possession – such, after all, is the variety of Poussin’s work. Jealousy and foreboding feature in the story within and surrounding the Louvre *Finding of Moses*, painted for Pointel in 1647.²⁰ The long letter from Poussin to Chantelou of 24th November 1647, which refers to the painting, is known as the letter on the modes because of the links made between the Greek musical modes and different subjects depicted in his paintings.²¹ Poussin outlined these ideas in an attempt to persuade his friend and patron Chantelou that he ought not to be jealous about his rival collector Pointel’s most recent acquisition, the *Finding of Moses*, which Chantelou deemed far more attractive than the latest *Sacrament* that he had been sent (*Ordination*, 2nd series of Sacraments, 1647 [Edinburgh]).²² The letter has not quite convinced modern critics about the accuracy of Poussin’s grasp of the modes but Marin quoted it often and extensively, mainly interested in modal variation between paintings (rather than specific modal characteristics) and in its comments on judgment, structure and voice. This part of the Poussin-Chantelou dialogue leads Marin to investigate how the ‘Pointel’ *Finding of Moses* can have aroused such a passionate response. We will examine Marin’s account before turning to the painting that so disappointed Chantelou.

In the essay ‘Récompenses d’un regard, ou Moïse tiré des eaux,’ written for the review *Corps écrit*, Marin describes the exchanges that occur between the spectator and a painting, suggesting that paintings deploy a variety of rhetorical strategies to attract and reward the spectator, strategies he compares to prayer, order and pleasure (he thereby starts off a plethora of trios in his article).²³ Dwelling on the repeated actions of giving, accepting and returning, involved in the process of engaging with and being engaged by a

painting, Marin lingers on the process of reception, which he relates to stoic reflections on liberality and gifts, with reference to Edgar Wind's analysis of Seneca's Graces in *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (1958), the source of Marin's revelling in trios. Making a painting about the act of receiving something beautiful and unexpected allows him to reflect on the rewards and promises regarding the future, as in Stendhal's phrase 'la promesse du bonheur' (from *De L'Amour*) cited in the epigraph from Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*. In Marin's view the 'suavité and douceur' of the hypolydian mode are present (as well as the hunting of a hippopotamus).

In this depiction of Moses's presentation like an offering or gift to the Pharaoh's daughter, the ladies-in-waiting exchange looks of surprise, gratitude and anxiety. This is no Bacchanal, but it is still in Marin's mind a dance: 'Il faudrait ici dire la danse des Grâces dans le tableau en mettant les mots dans la trace de leurs pas et de leurs gestes' (p. 182). In Marin's view, the impassive glance from the river god (whose presence Champaigne reportedly objected to in a lecture at the Académie on 2nd June 1668)²⁴ and the sphinx's inaccessible look away from the story, toward the Egyptian misfortunes ahead, echo Thermutis's uncertain gaze: 'C'est ce sentiment ou pressentiment que je crois lire dans les yeux de la princesse Thermutis, dont je n'arrive pas à accorder le regard au geste du bras. Celui-ci énonce la décision d'accueil que la compassion dicte; l'autre glisse en rêverie au-delà de la beauté de l'enfant condamné à périr, au-delà de la suivante qui implore, sans pour autant rejoindre mon propre regard' (p. 183). The ambiguity in the princess's gaze that is detected by Marin reminds us of how he explored both the romantic reveries and the self-reflexive hesitations and accidents in his work on Stendhal, autobiography, painting and the 'promesse du bonheur'. He was especially drawn to Stendhal's worries about narcissism, including the imaginary scenario, described in *Vie de Henry Brulard*, in which he would meet

Montesquieu in the afterlife and be told, 'Mon pauvre ami, vous n'avez pas eu de talent du tout,' which Stendhal says would annoy but not surprise him).²⁵ The painting's various stages of receiving the viewer and returning the view's gaze lead Marin to explore the pleasure of the viewing experience as well as the frustration at the secrecy of the figures on the right and the enigma of the princess's expression.

Where Marin had posited a stoical spectator observing the sublime calm or storms of nature, in this case, I would argue, the spectator is more implicated in the community of gazes, received into the shared psychological space.²⁶ Marin's exuberant style reflects the freedom of writing for *Corps écrit* and serves to underline the pleasure it is imagined, especially by Chantelou, that Pointel felt (Pointel's letters to Poussin are lost). Marin is not focused on hieroglyphs or Counter-Reformation readings of Egyptian religion;²⁷ instead he is opening up our experience of the painting by imagining the process of jealous looking and the painting's anticipation of the desiring gaze. This leads him to adopt Poussin's voice initially when he reworks the letter in his own words: 'Si donc le tableau... que possède M. Pointel vous a donné dans l'amour, voyez-vous pas que c'est la nature du sujet qui est cause de cet effet, jalousie amoureuse [for Poussin's 'et votre disposition' – Marin takes over from here] passion pour un objet de regard que le regard qui s'y délecte rend par là même inappropriable, la même passion, mais sur un mode tempéré, que je vois dans les yeux de Thermutis, dont je lis l'allégorie dans le couple du dieu Fleuve qui contemple en toute sérénité la scène de l'offrande et du sphinx qui l'ignore parce qu'il sait le secret des conséquences' (*Sublime Poussin*, p. 184). The 'inappropriable' would be a key element, according to Marin, in the model of friendship inspired by Montaigne and explored in the Poussin's gaze towards his absent friend in the more admired *Self-Portrait* (Louvre), painted for Chantelou.²⁸

2b. *Ordination II*

Marin is listening to Poussin, but he's also looking for variations within modes: 'chacun d'eux retenait en soi je ne sais quoi de varié,' as Poussin wrote in the letter of 24 November 1647.²⁹ While many commentators agree that the 'Pointel' *Finding of Moses* is not uniformly joyous, nevertheless all tend to agree with Chantelou that he had the raw deal, with some preferring the *Ordination* from the first series (painted for Cassiano dal Pozzo) to the second (Chantelou's).³⁰ Writing about *Ordination I* in a monograph marking its acquisition by the Kimbell Art Museum, Jonathan Unglaub shows restraint when comparing *Ordination II* with Pointel's *Moses*: 'The elegant ensemble of beautiful maidens attending the graceful Egyptian princess (...) must have made the solemn groups of apostles and edifying backdrop seem rather austere indeed'.³¹ Nevertheless, thanks to Poussin's letter we can consider the possible connections between the paintings. Indeed, according to a footnote in the 1988 article 'Sur une tour de Babel,' Marin had an article forthcoming on *Ordination II*.³² In addition, the record for Marin's seminar of 1984-85 states that he included the *Sacraments* in his work: 'Cette hypothèse [that investigating the sublime impacts on our understanding of the art of variation as practised by Poussin]... a été éprouvée sur des œuvres fonctionnant en duo (ex. *Orage et Temps calme*), en quatuor (le *Déluge* et les *Saisons*), en septuor (les *Sept Sacraments*).'³³

The footnote concerned the large bridge in *Ordination II*, directly behind Christ, if at some distance. Marin had mentioned this bridge 17 years earlier in his semiological essay of 1968, 'Éléments pour une sémiologie picturale'.³⁴ At the time he was discussing how pictorial language could be read by comparing figures across different paintings, enabling us to gain a sense of their respective functions and significance. Marin argues that the

'secondary' figure of the bridge in three paintings – the earlier Louvre *Finding of Moses* (1638), *Ordination II* (1647) and *Landscape with Orpheus and Eurydice* (1648-50) – acts as a passage across the space, between background sections; as a rhythmical division of space; and with the function of opening onto and closing off the space behind. The semiological approach announced itself as particularly apt for the consideration of modal changes.

Marin's 'forthcoming' article on *Ordination II* wasn't, however, written. How might we develop a reading of the painting in the light of Marin's remarks in the footnote, the analysis he provides of the Pointel *Moses*, and 'late' work on gesture, voice and framing in the *Arcadian Shepherds*, *Massacre of the Innocents* and *Self-Portraits*?³⁵ While the bridge in the 1638 *Moses* has a serenity and harmony unmatched in other examples in Poussin, the bridge in *Ordination II* is monumental; Marin noted that his article would need to tackle 'des effets ou des investissements symboliques ou idéologiques complexes'.³⁶ It has been argued that it functions as a link between Old Testament buildings on the right and New Testament villas and temples on the left, in a manner that emphasizes the transition brought about by the Catholic Church.³⁷ In terms of the semiological investigation, it does indeed operate spatially and is balanced. Thanks to the kneeling Peter, we can see through to the background via the intermittent figures and the arches of the bridge.

Marin's methods as they then developed lead us to underline the combined processes of articulation: the many different gestures of the apostles, Jesus's message to Peter and the cacophony of other voices, the looks in all different directions, including Christ's over Peter's head and Peter's in the direction of the sky. The hands of Christ and Peter reinforce what is being said, with Peter in submission, speaking the words that recognise Jesus's divinity and with Christ announcing Peter's role before he hands over the keys.³⁸ The bridge supports Christ's head, with Christ's eyes set against the entablature,

which extends left and right. Thus his position in the plane of representation, in relation to the bridge, intriguingly anticipates the framing of the artist's eyes in the Chantelou *Self-Portrait*.

2c. Four Seasons

As already stated, *Philippe de Champaigne ou la présence cachée* deploys various 'contrepoints' to bring his readings of the artist into relief. Poussin occupies two of them: the self-portraits, which the reader can reconsider in relation to Champaigne, Augustine and self-portraiture; and the 'absolute' landscapes of the *Four Seasons* (Louvre), to be compared and contrasted with Champaigne's remarkable if less celebrated four landscapes depicting the stories of Saints Pelagia, Mary of Egypt, Mary Magdalene and Thaïs. Marin reads the Champaigne series as spaces for exegesis and contemplation, following his analysis with a very carefully calibrated account of Poussin's four paintings. Both Poussin counterpoints carry the title 'Poussiniana', in homage to the title used by Denis Mahon for his reflections on the stylistic development of Poussin in the wake of the famous Paris retrospective of 1960.³⁹

The *Seasons* would have been the subject of a more substantial publication, but already, and in the light of the Mahon echo, we can see Marin's aim of combining Blunt's emphasis on stoicism with Mahon's connoisseurial interest in variations in the treatment of subjects within the same stylistic period.⁴⁰ In my view Marin's writing in this contrapuntal essay reminds us of the importance of praxis throughout his texts on Poussin and reinforces the argument that Marin's contribution to Poussin studies should be seen as giving due attention to both the painter and the 'philosopher'. Marin's interest in the trio, which is rhetorical and methodological, is reflected in the three moments of the analysis of the *Four*

Seasons. Throughout his ekphrastic account, the attention to phrasing and balance is very noticeable, with a tangible determination to register the relationship between the human figures and the landscapes in the right key, accompanied by detailed storytelling and ample Biblical quotation.

When at the start of 'Poussiniana II' we read of the linking of the two series of paintings by Champaigne and Poussin in relation to the idea of an 'absolute landscape', it is particularly the promise to treat the question of 'la puissance immanente de la nature' which is striking.⁴¹ How will Marin's approach differ from Blunt's or Thuillier's?⁴² Will we get an endorsement of a stoic aesthetics? Pairing *Spring* and *Winter*, we see the strong similarities in format and the juxtaposition of the reflections on beginnings and endings, and their reiteration. Story and its interpretation dominate the first part of the analysis, with the focus on the *Summer/Autumn* pairing, notably the temporal intricacy of the foreground in *Summer* and the tension in the taking away of the bounty in *Autumn*. The second moment of his analysis considers the cosmological dimension of the series, noting the linear time and the circular phases of life and death. In this case, in a swing back to the detail of *Spring* and *Winter*, we see how the figure of God in the clouds suggests change in its movement towards the horizon and accompaniment by potentially disruptive clouds, while Biblical quotations are deployed to highlight the features of the cycle from the grassy rocks (*Spring*) to cataract (*Winter*) to, in turn, the end of the curse on mankind.⁴³

Marin resolves the question of the place of humans in a stoic order by concentrating our attention so much on the passages from *Genesis*, *Ruth* and *Numbers*. Thus in the third moment of his account he argues that the human figures are elements in the stories rather than decisive actors and that the stories themselves are 'parerga' to the grand cycle of seasons. Fundamental to Marin's reading is the following claim, which draws on Poussin's

remark about the movements and gestures of the body being like the letters of the alphabet: 'nul affect, nulle passion n'inscrive ces signes, ces linéaments qui sont comme l'alphabet narrative de la peinture d'histoire' (p. 84).⁴⁴ The human stories enable the spectator to read the story of the overriding significance of the elements, which the figures for their part do not grasp; this is the stoical element but crucially it is not the final stage of the account. The figures are unaware of the deeper significance of their situations and for Marin that significance is that there is no transcendent idea of reason at work, but simply the continuation of the cycle of the seasons.

Another key to the whole interpretation – from the start – is how the paintings operate in relation to each other, through a system of variations on the themes of nature and time, without any counterbalancing affect or providence being represented by or through the figures: 'Elles les manifestent [les forces mystérieuses de la nature], non par une symbolisation ou une allégorisation qui permettraient d'en « épeler » la rhétorique figurative, mais par le jeu variationnel des paysages où elles « jouent leur rôle », c'est-à-dire par les différences modales que les deux paires du *Printemps* et de *L'Hiver* d'une part, de *L'Été* et de *L'Automne* de l'autre, découvrent à leur entre-deux, dans les écarts qui rythment le retour éternel de la nature et scandent le temps cyclique de ses morts et de ses renaissances' (84). As subjects of these final sentences, the figures are entirely occupied by their performance of a series of variations, which happen within and in between the paintings, and therefore partly beyond their immediate environment. Since the reading of *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* as a modulation of the space from foreground action to background decor, where the gaps enabled us to move across the surface of the paintings, we are now in 'absolute' landscape mode, with the gaps mainly operating between the paintings.

Conclusion

The bibliographical listings for Marin in the major Poussin catalogues of the last twenty years may be incomplete and the coverage in catalogue entries uneven, but his work has not been rejected. Nevertheless as today's publishing climate is challenging for anyone wanting to investigate alternative Poussins, perhaps with a gender or social orientation, reigniting interest in Marin's work will contribute to the development of Poussin studies in a plurality of directions.⁴⁵ While variation enabled Poussin to explore the instructive pleasures of representation, for Marin the sublime opened up the drama and range of his artistic practice. At this critical juncture in the legacy of Marin's work, interventions in Poussin appreciation like T. J. Clark's invite us to revisit Marin's consistently rigorous and distinctly varied essays on art.⁴⁶

¹ N. Poussin, *Lettres et propos sur l'art*, ed. by Anthony Blunt (Paris: Hermann, 1964), p. 123.

² 'Biographie,' Association Louis Marin (<www.louismarin.fr> [accessed December 13, 2015]). In 'Notes sur une médaille et une gravure' (1969), *Études sémiologiques : Écritures, peintures* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971), p. 109 n. 1, Marin acknowledged his 'artistic, intellectual and philosophical' debt to Wind, which recognised meetings in Oxford about the French translation of Wind's *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (London: Faber & Faber, 1958). Unfortunately it was not completed and the first French translation didn't appear until 1992 (F. Marin, email message to author, December 12, 2015).

³ A. Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, 3 vols (London: Phaidon Press, 1966-67); *Nicolas Poussin: Text*, p. ix for the quotation. See M. Kitson, 'Anthony Blunt's *Nicolas Poussin* in context,' in

Commemorating Poussin: Reception and Interpretation of the Artist, ed. by Katie Scott and Genevieve Warwick (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), pp. 211-30.

⁴ L. Marin, 'Le Sublime classique : les « tempêtes » dans quelques paysages de Poussin,' *Sublime Poussin* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1995), p. 131 n. 4.

⁵ On 'relève' as the translation of 'Aufhebung', see J. Derrida, 'Différance', *Margins of Philosophy*, translated, with additional notes, by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 19-20, n. 23 (translator's note); on 'l'informe,' see G. Bataille, 'Informe', *Œuvres complètes I: Premiers Écrits 1922-40* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 217.

⁶ *Sublime Poussin*, pp. 223–24.

⁷ Longin, *Du Sublime*, traduction, présentation et notes de Jackie Pigeaud (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 1993); A. Félibien, *Entretiens sur les Vies et Ouvrages des plus excellents Peintres anciens et modernes* (London: D. Mortier, 1705). On Marin's recourse to both Longinus and Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790), see N. Saint, 'Louis Marin, Poussin and the Sublime,' *Art History*, 34: 5 (2011), 919-21 and 931.

⁸ T. J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006).

⁹ See <<http://www.getty.edu/news/press/exhibit/kossoff.html>> [accessed December 14, 2015].

¹⁰ The best illustrations of the paintings are to be found in Clark's book. See also the websites of the National Gallery and the Getty Museum:

<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/nicolas-poussin-landscape-with-a-man-killed-by-a-snake>; and <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/106381/nicolas-poussin->

[landscape-with-a-calm-un-temps-calme-et-serein-french-1650-1651/](#) (accessed March 22 2016).

¹¹ *Sublime Poussin*, pp. 35-70.

¹² Clark, p. viii.

¹³ Clark, pp. 72-79.

¹⁴ See D. Mahon, *Poussiniana: Afterthoughts arising from the exhibition* (Paris and New York: Éditions de la Gazette des Beaux-Arts, 1962).

¹⁵ Clark, pp. 82-85. Clark expounded this view in two public dialogues, with Malcolm Bull (Dulwich Picture Gallery, 1st September 2011) and Griselda Pollock (University of Leeds, 25th October 2011).

¹⁶ L. Marin, 'Le Sublime classique,' pp. 145-50.

¹⁷ L. Marin, *Détruire la peinture* (Paris: Galilée, 1977) and 'Towards a Theory of Reading in the Visual Arts: Poussin's *The Arcadian Shepherds*', in S. R. Suleiman and I. Crosman, *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 293-324.

¹⁸ M. Loh, 'Outscreaming the Laocoön: Sensation, Special Affects, and the Moving Image', *Oxford Art Journal*, 34: 3 (2011), 411 and 413.

¹⁹ Loh, p. 412. On *Pyramus and Thisbe*, see L. Marin, 'La description du tableau et le sublime en peinture', *Sublime Poussin*, pp. 71-105, and 'Sur une tour de Babel dans un tableau de Poussin,' in J-F. Courtine et al., *Du Sublime*, préface de Jean-Luc Nancy (Paris: Belin, 1988), pp. 237-58.

²⁰ See <http://www.photo.rmn.fr/archive/08-522318-2C6NU0I7RGF1.html> (accessed March 22 2016). This is the later of the two paintings of the same subject in the Louvre. *Sublime Poussin* erroneously includes a photograph of the earlier one.

²¹ 'Annexe 3,' *Sublime Poussin*, pp. 228-30.

²² See J. Montagu, 'The Theory of the Musical Modes in the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture,' *Journal of the Courtauld and Warburg Institutes*, LV (1992), 233-48.

²³ L. Marin, 'Récompenses d'un regard, ou Moïse tiré des eaux,' *Corps écrit*, 4 'La récompense' (Paris: PUF, 1982), 123-32.

²⁴ *Conférences de l'Académie royale de Peinture et de Sculpture*, tome 1, 1648-1681 : volume 1, ed. by Jacqueline Lichtenstein and Christian Michel (Paris: Ecole nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 2006), p. 251. Félibien attended Champaigne's original lecture, whose manuscript has been lost, while the remark about the river god is recorded by Guillet de Saint-Georges who attended the re-readings of the lecture in 1694.

²⁵ Stendhal, *De L'Amour*, ed. by Henri Martineau (Paris: Garnier, Frères, 1959), p. 41; *Vie de Henry Brulard*, ed. by Béatrice Didier (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 31. See L. Marin, *La Voix excommuniée : Essais de mémoire* (Paris: Galilée, 1981) and *L'Écriture de soi*, ed. by Pierre-Antoine Fabre et al. (Paris: PUF, 1999).

²⁶ For further discussion of Stendhal, viewing and space in relation to the Moses painting, see D. Packwood, "Louis Marin," *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, 2nd Edition, vol. 4, ed. by Michael Kelly (Oxford: OUP, 2014), pp. 250-53.

²⁷ Cf. *Poussin et Dieu*, ed. by Nicolas Milovanovic and Mickaël Szanto (Paris: Éditions Hazan and Louvre éditions, 2015), cat. 56, pp. 313-15.

²⁸ L. Marin, 'Variations sur un portrait absent: Les autoportraits de Poussin 1649-50,' *Sublime Poussin*, pp. 186-208.

²⁹ Poussin, p. 124.

³⁰ P. Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin 1594-1665* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1994), cat. 159, p. 374. By contrast, Hugh Brigstocke found it has greater 'symmetry' and 'dramatic focus' than *Ordination I*: see *Poussin: Sacraments and Bacchanals*, ed. by Hugh Macandrew and Hugh Brigstocke, cat. 53, p. 96. See <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/artists-a-z/p/artist/nicolas-poussin/object/the-sacrament-of-ordination-ngl-067-46-e> (accessed March 22 2016) for a photograph of *Ordination II* in the Scottish National Gallery.

³¹ J. W. Unglaub, *Poussin's Sacrament of Ordination: History, Faith, and the Sacred Landscape* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 63.

³² L. Marin, 'Sur une tour de Babel,' p. 242 n. 9.

³³ For the content of the 1984-85 seminar, see:

<<http://www.louismarin.fr/spip.php?article31>> (accessed December 10, 2015).

³⁴ *Études sémiologiques*, pp. 27-8.

³⁵ See L. Marin, 'Aux marges de la peinture : voir la voix,' *De La Représentation* (Paris: Gallimard/Le Seuil, 1994), pp. 329-41.

³⁶ 'Sur une tour de Babel,' p. 242 n. 9.

³⁷ Elizabeth Cropper and Charles Dempsey, *Nicolas Poussin: Friendship and the Love of Painting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 142.

³⁸ Cf. T. Green, *Nicolas Poussin paints the Seven Sacraments twice* (Watchet, Somerset: Paravail, 2000), pp. 301-10. The second *Ordination* represents a moment slightly before the

giving of the keys, which is shown in the first *Ordination*: see D. Carrier, *Principles of Art History Writing* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), p. 184.

³⁹ Mahon's other well-known title is 'A Plea for Poussin as a Painter,' in *Walter Friedlaender zum 90. Geburtstag*, ed. By G. Kaufman and W. Sauerlaender (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1965), 113-42. Marin refers to Mahon in 'La description de l'image,' p. 45 n. 1.

⁴⁰ Mahon, *Poussiniana*, pp. 127-29. See the 'permaliens' provided by the Louvre's website for photographs of Poussin's *Four Seasons*: <http://www.photo.rmn.fr/archive/11-537970-2C6NU00GC7I6.html> (Winter); <http://www.photo.rmn.fr/archive/11-537965-2C6NU00GNX5E.html> (Spring) <http://www.photo.rmn.fr/archive/08-522308-2C6NU0I7RQ2U.html> (Summer); <http://www.photo.rmn.fr/archive/11-537968-2C6NU00GCRYAL.html> (Autumn) (all accessed March 22 2016).

⁴¹ L. Marin, *Philippe de Champaigne ou la présence cachée* (Paris: Hazan, 1995), p. 78.

⁴² See J. Thuillier, *Tout l'œuvre peint de Nicolas Poussin* (Paris: Flammarion, 1974).

⁴³ Cf. Milovan Stanic, "La mode énigmatique dans l'art de Poussin", in Olivier Bonfait et al., *Poussin et Rome: Actes du Colloque de l'Académie de France à Rome et à la Bibliothèque Hertziana, 16-18 novembre 1994* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1996), p. 112.

⁴⁴ Cf. *Sublime Poussin*, p. 23 and n. 1.

⁴⁵ See for example Phillippa J. Plock, 'Regarding Gendered Mythologies: Nicolas Poussin's Mythological Paintings and Practices of Viewing in Seventeenth-Century Rome,' (Ph.D. Diss., University of Leeds, 2004);

<http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/1196/1/uk_bl_ethos_406899.pdf> [accessed December 2 2015]).

⁴⁶ I would like to thank Maria Loh, David Packwood and Phillippa Plock for their help with this article.