

On reading pictures: Poussin's letter on *Manna*

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We read a letter, a poem, a book. What does it mean to read a drawing, a painting, a fresco? For, if the term 'reading' is clearly appropriate to a book, is it also applicable to a painting? If, by extension, we talk about 'a reading' with regard to a painting, the question of the validity and legitimacy of this extension of meaning emerges. However, whether it be as a simple figure of speech or as an abuse of language, the fact remains that in the expression 'reading a painting' a meaning persists; or if not a meaning, at least a place where we find a commonly held territory, partial and uncertain overlapping between the legible and the visible, between the written page and its reading on the one hand and the painting and its viewing on the other. It is to the exploration of these territories that I devote this paper: exploration through the implicit comparison contained in the expression 'reading pictures or paintings'.

This undertaking seems to me to have three characteristics. The first is to propose the operative nature of a comparison between a reading of a written page and that of a painting. This means not only that the term 'reading' might be valid when applied to a painting as well as to a book, but that it will teach something about the object of this reading, which is the painting. The second characteristic is to aim at instituting theoretical levels and areas where the differences and similarities between the two types of reading are pertinent. The present study proposes, then, to pass from a mode of expression common in criticism and discourse on art to a method of researching the relationships between literature and painting, and more precisely between the legible and the visible in a painting, by establishing levels and fields of pertinence for discourse thereon. The third characteristic of my undertaking is, finally,

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to put forth questions concerning the historical and cultural dimensions in which the similarities and differences between the two types of reading come diversely into play, in which the legible and the visible are variously bound together and opposed one to the other.

I would like to raise rapidly, and in a programmatic fashion (starting with these three characteristics), the questions and problems that the very notion of reading imposes when it is applied to the painting. First of all, the fundamental problem: Is there something legible in a painting? And if so, what is this something composed of? Of signs, in the sense of discrete elements from which we could construct a system – an articulated whole – of entities finite in number? If there *are* signs in a painting, does it then follow that these signs are separate entities, that these entities are of the same kind, that a painting possesses a sign-structure? Does it follow from this that there is a language of painting? If there are signs in a painting, are they 'legible'? Can we not wonder if these elements, forms and/or figures are indeed entities outside the language which names them, or, to speak in Peirce's terms, if the representamen has the property of a sign independently of the verbal interpretant it determines?

The second problem, even wider in scope, unfolds from the methodological research to which I referred above as it relates to theoretical levels and fields of pertinence. To read is not a simple activity: from the dictionary, we can discern for the term 'reading' three different directions of meaning applicable to the present analysis. First of all, to read is to *recognize* a structure of significance, to recognize that such and such a form, figure or trace is a sign; that it represents something else, without necessarily knowing *what* the something else is. Next, to read is to *understand* what we read, to give significance to this operation of recognizing signifying structures. If, ordinarily, we look upon a painting as a sign (first sense), do we also *read* this sign (the second sense)? Do we *understand* the meaning of this sign? Is a painting a pictorial statement, an 'énoncé', something like a sentence, a clause, a judgement? If the answer is yes, is there in the painting any element which would assume the role of the verb? Of the subject? Of the predicate? Finally, *the act of reading is decoding*, deciphering, interpreting the meaning of a discourse. Is a painting a discourse? By provoking a reading, does not painting assume the status of a discourse, a discourse of images whose figures should be analysed as so many tropes?

These last remarks lead me directly to the third issue which I would like to raise: a problem arising from what I called the historical and



Nicolas Poussin, *Israelites Gathering Manna in the Desert*.

cultural dimensions of 'reading' a painting. Is not reading a painting (at least in the West) from early antiquity to the eighteenth century tantamount to reading *in* the painting the story that the painting has attempted to 'translate' into 'visual images'?¹ And, by the same token, are not all the problems created by the expression 'reading a painting' more or less insidiously formulated as a result of this tradition? Even if the questions aim only at emphasizing gaps and ruptures, are they not posed in relation to this tradition?

According to this tradition, the artist, in order to paint his canvas, has read a text, and the spectator, in order to see the painting, ought to read the painting as he would read this text. My remarks should be seen in this historical perspective: they will take the form of a commentary on a letter from Poussin which has caused a great deal of ink to flow, particularly mine!² I shall annotate the text for its own sake, in order to understand it, but I shall also use it as a heuristic instrument, forcing the commentary at times on the text's ambiguities and obscurities, in order to put the problematic issue of reading a painting in its proper frame of reference. Such a commentary seems entirely relevant here, since I am dealing with a letter written by a painter concerning one of his paintings, and since at a central point in the letter, the issue of the relationship between the legible and the visible, text and painting, is raised in a famous sentence: 'Read the story and the painting.' The force of that statement will be maintained while I emphasize its ambiguities.

We are therefore dealing with a letter from the painter Poussin in Rome to his patron and friend Chantelou in Paris in 1639, a letter which announces to the latter that a painting, *his* painting, the *Manna*, is being sent: 'Je ne vous importunerai point de longs discours; je vous aviserai seulement que je vous envoie votre tableau de *la Manne*... Je l'ai enchaîné diligemment, et crois que vous le recevrez bien conditionné.' (I shall not bother you with any long speeches whatsoever: I simply advise you that I am sending you your painting of the *Manna*... I have wrapped it carefully and trust that you will receive it properly packaged.) The text accompanies the image to announce its transmission as a valuable object from a sender to a receiver, from Poussin, author and painter of the picture, who is writing the letter, to Chantelou, the privileged spectator and patron, commissioner of the painting and henceforth its owner, who is reading the letter. All the terms of our problems are brought together here, and in particular we already have the double split between painter and spectator, writer and reader. But it is not altogether true that the letter accompanies the painting: it precedes and announces the painting.

It speaks of the painting, first of all to speak its name, the *Manna*, the painting's proper name which gives it its title and grants it its own individual existence. But this name of the painting is its subject; its title is also that of a story the painting recounts. 'Your painting of the *Manna*' means: 'the painting that I, Poussin, have painted for you, Chantelou, and which tells the story of the *Manna* from Heaven, a story you already know'. This word, then, has a strange status: at the same time a proper name, a title, a nominal sentence, a declaration of an object, an abbreviation of a story which, once it has been read by Chantelou, certainly stands for the absent painting.

A reading of a painting is, above all, a reading of a name and a title, namely, of an author and a subject. Paul Klee asked a remarkable question: how does a painting gain access to its name?³ Through this initial or final encounter with language, the painting is constituted as a subject; it is no accident that for Poussin the proper name of the painting is itself not only a proper name, but also a name which categorizes it within a series, a genre, a class: the series of all the *Mannas* painted before the one by Poussin; the genre of religious painting; the class of historical painting. And simultaneously with this first reading of the painting as a name, every possible perception of it is announced and foreseen; every perception will be aroused and incited to the reading of a story, of a religious story, of an historical painting, a painting which refers to religious history and to the history of painting as well. Therefore, *a contrario*, we can ask what effects on our perception and reading are created by contemporary paintings whose title is 'Untitled', or by paintings which have no name or only the name of the painter or his signature.

In the letter Poussin addresses to Chantelou, his painting exists first of all as a name written therein, and this name, for Chantelou, supplies something missing which he desires to see, simultaneously supplying the absent object-painting and, to some extent, replacing it. The text of the letter appears thus as the deferred painting, the deferral of contemplating it. And if to contemplate the painting is to take pleasure in it, to delight in it, as Poussin would say, then to read the letter and the name of the painting is to have the anticipated benefit of a bonus of pleasure from the text. Thus the discourse which 'speaks' the painting even in its presence, a discourse which gives the painting a kind of access to language, has no other function than to fill in an absence, a lack of the image itself, or to make good a flaw consubstantial with the image. However, the letter also forewarns, instructs, regulates the act of contemplation, with a view to giving access to the painting's truth: a

value of passion on the one hand, of cognition on the other. For Poussin's letter does not speak exclusively of sending the painting; it speaks about the painting itself, but not in the first instance about its subject, about what the painting recounts, the *Manna*, but about the painting seen as the object of our gaze.

Quand vous aurez reçu votre tableau, je vous supplie, si vous le trouvez bon, de l'orner d'un peu de corniche, car il en a besoin, afin que, en le considérant en toutes ses parties, les rayons de l'œil soient retenus et non point éparés au dehors, en recevant les espèces des autres objets voisins qui, venant pêle-mêle avec les choses dépeintes, confondent le jour.

When you have your painting, I implore you to embellish it with a bit of frame. It needs it so that, when considering the picture in all its parts, the field of vision will be contained and in no way spill over, receiving the species of neighbouring objects which come pell-mell along with the painted objects and confuse the light.

And the letter ends in the same way with this reminder: 'Before showing your painting to the public, it would be a very good idea to embellish it a bit [with a frame].' (Devant que de le publier, il serait fort à propos de l'orner un peu.) The painting is a name and a frame, something legible and visible in a state of reciprocal interaction under minimal conditions necessary to possible reading and perception. The text Chantelou reads formulates a double request: one from the painter to his patron: 'I implore you'; the other from the painting: 'It needs it.' The painter is the painting's mouthpiece for the painting's demand for a frame. The text first constructs the painting as a frame for an absent canvas. But it is the absent canvas which demands the frame as a necessity belonging to it by right. It is therefore an ornament, but a necessary one: that which embellishes also allows viewing. It is precisely the frame which gives the painting the finality of being viewed and shown. When the gaze of the spectator is substituted for the painter's eye, a frame is necessary because, instead of the artefact in the process of being produced, we now have the painting in its state of presentation, exhibition, as an object of spectacular entertainment.

Thus to the legibility of the painting which is its name, Poussin attaches its frame as a condition of its visibility. At this point, we can observe that if painting has no language (in the Saussurian sense of the term 'langue'), if it has no repertoire of signifying units to which painting has recourse to be performed, it has, nonetheless, means specifically its own to show what it presents, means which belong neither to the discursive plane nor to the iconic one in the mimetic sense of the word: hence, the framing, the perspective, the lighting, and so on. The

form of presentation can be produced, shown, if not described, by the means which are those of the image itself. With the frame and, at the end of the letter, with the perspective – Poussin writes: 'the painting should be placed just slightly above eye level' – elements of the icon which are neither mimetic, descriptive nor discrete, we have elements whose role is integrative (in the linguistic sense of the term) in representational painting. It is these elements and others of the same sort that modern and contemporary painting will dissociate from their function of constituting the image. Poussin, with the framing of the painting, proposes a semiotic condition of the painting's visibility, and further, as we shall see, of the painting's legibility. For the frame concentrates our rays of vision, thus neutralizing our perception of objects close to the painting. As enclosing the representation, the frame is not a passive instance of the icon. It is one of the operators of its constitution as visible object, whose ultimate goal is to be viewed by the eye which sweeps across the painting, considering its every part. It is noteworthy here that Poussin speaks about the eye and not the eyes, the rays or lines of vision and not gazes. The letter constructs a type of geometric and optical diagram which functions abstractly and comes to regulate visual perception. To look at a painting is not just simply to see an object. Three years later, Poussin was to theorize this brief notation into the distinction between 'aspect' and 'prospect': 'There are two ways of viewing objects, one is simply looking at them, the other, considering them attentively.' The frame is one of the processes on which the passage from viewing to contemplation, from mere visibility to legibility, is dependent. With the frame, the painting demands its own theory. But this condition of a painting's visibility and further legibility is not by its nature discursive or mimetic. It is an element of the iconic metalanguage that paintings demand as an ornament to be seen.

Voir simplement n'est autre chose que recevoir naturellement dans l'œil la forme et la ressemblance de la chose. Mais voir un objet en le considérant, c'est qu'outre la simple et naturelle réception de la forme dans l'œil, l'on cherche avec une application particulière le moyen de bien connaître ce même objet... ce que je nomme le prospect est un office de raison qui dépend de trois choses, savoir de l'œil, du rayon visuel, et de la distance de l'œil à l'objet.

To see simply is nothing else than to receive naturally in the eye the form and resemblance of the thing seen. But to view an object, to consider it [that is, a painting] is to do more than simply to receive the forms naturally with the eye: here we seek with special application the means to know an object well... This is what I call 'prospect', the office of reason which depends on three things: the eye, the line of sight and the distance from the eye to the object.*

Such are the conditions for 'pictorial' knowledge. Such is the theory of painting. Reading paintings: the term for the moment has not been pronounced but is defined by the painting itself as conditions for its exhibition: a frame and a perspective system, non-mimetic elements of the icon which are enclosing, for the moment in Chantelou's letter, a single name: *Manna*.

As you observe, Poussin uses the term 'consider' three times in the expression 'to consider the painting': in the first instance, to define what the frame and the perspective make possible: the act of knowing the depicted things; then to speak about the examination of the narrative, iconic figures in reference to a text: 'Moreover, if you will recall the first letter I wrote to you, touching on the movements of the figures... and requesting that you would at the same time consider the painting'; and finally to evoke the pleasurable effects of the painting on its spectator: 'And if after having considered it more than once, you take some satisfaction in it'. Thus three modalities of contemplation are clarified: the first is that of a gaze's journey round the painting, totalizing its parts, a journey regulated by the apparatus of framing and perspective, and by which the painting is constituted into a closed system of visibility; the second, founded on the first, is that of constituting the painting into a legible text where the gaze can recognize in the figures displayed those of a story the spectator knows from elsewhere, a contemplation where a double process takes place, of making an icon from a written text and of creating a text from a figurative arrangement. With the third and final modality, contemplation becomes diversified repetition of journeys of vision and reading, repetition in which is achieved a desire to see into the theoretical delectation of the work, where visibility and legibility live happily wedded to each other.

The moment has thus come for the reading of the painting: it is notable that Poussin, in order to approach the content represented in the work, the story, refers not to a written account that derives from Exodus 16, 4-36 but to a letter previously written to Chantelou, which was obviously a contract between the painter and the commissioner and the statement of the painting's subject (the *Manna*), as well as the definition (in the optical sense) of the image: I mean the painting as creating an image of the subject. The text of Exodus is not directly referred to in the reading-proposals made by Poussin to Chantelou. The sacred text is at the horizon of his letter as though it were its vanishing-point, a vanishing-point occupied by a name, *Manna*, which names simultaneously the painting and the story that the painting dramatizes.

Au reste, si vous vous souviendrez de la première lettre que je vous écris, touchant les mouvements des figures que je vous promettais d'y faire, et que, tout ensemble, vous considérez le tableau, je crois que facilement vous reconnaîtrez quelles sont celles qui languissent, qui admirent, celles qui ont pitié, qui font action de charité, de grande nécessité, de désir de se repaître, de consolation et autres car les sept premières figures à main gauche vous diront tout ce qui est ici écrit et tout le reste est de la même étoffe: lisez l'histoire et le tableau afin de connaître si chaque chose est appropriée au sujet.

Moreover, if you will recall the first letter that I wrote to you, touching on the movements that I promised you to effect there, and if at the same time you will consider the painting, I believe that you will easily recognize those who are languishing, those who are struck with admiration, those who take pity, who perform charitable acts, who carry out acts stemming from great misery, from the desire for bodily refreshment, for consolation and other things, because the first seven figures on the left will tell you all that is written here and all the rest is from the same cloth: read the story and the painting to find out if each thing is appropriate to the subject.

This is the central passage of the letter, but it is also central to the problems of reading the painting.

What is, in the first place, this other condition for a possible reading of the image which is inscribed into the set of the conditions for a possible viewing? The minimal reading unit of the painting in its represented content is the movement of a figure: not a character from the story, not a figure from the image which recounts the tale, but the movement. The figures in the painting are in the first instance complexes or aggregates of movements. Poussin used to say that: 'De même que les vingt quatre lettres de l'alphabet servent à former nos paroles et exprimer nos pensées, de même les linéaments du corps humain à exprimer les diverses passions de l'âme pour faire paraître au dehors ce que l'on a dans l'esprit.' (Just as the twenty-four letters of the alphabet serve to form our words and to express our thoughts, the features of the human body serve to express the soul's diverse passions, to make what is in the mind show forth externally.)⁵ Therefore what does a reading of a painting consist of? Recognizing the movements of the passionate figures that the letter describes as figures of languor, admiration, pity and so on: there is a single act of recognition from the definition of the figures' movements, the naming of the passions that the movements express and the painting as figurative presentation. To put it another way, the gestures and movements are *like* the letters of the alphabet, the figure which incorporates them is *like* both the noun and the verb of a passion and the whole assemblage of figures is *like* a narrative statement. However, this act of recognition by the contemplating gaze presupposes a natural and universal language of the body, whose gestures would be signifiers and whose signifieds would be the passions of the soul that characteristic

names would designate; it presupposes also that the figures' design as aggregates of gestures is absolutely explicit, that the design gives the eye a clear and distinct representation, that is, one immediately nameable. Such is the 'theoretical' scheme where the Cartesian conception of the soul's passions is recognizable, a scheme which would constitute the possibility of reading an historical painting. If so, to read a painting would be both to discern what in the painting is a sign and to enunciate the meaning of this sign. And the series of meanings (whose names Poussin puts in the mouth or eye of Chantelou, 'languor', 'admiration', 'pity' etc.), enunciated in the proper order, constitutes one sequence in the story here known as the descent of the Manna gathered by the Israelites in the wilderness.

But it is no less remarkable that at this stage Poussin does not speak of reading the painting. He merely underlines two concomitant operations: one of memory, the previous reading of a written text, and the other of attentive vision. It is the simultaneity of these two operations which ensures the easy act of recognition through which the gaze's contemplation both iconizes the text and textualizes the icon, a twofold process which constitutes the first level of a painting's legibility. However, an enumeration of nouns in no way makes up a narrative sequence of the *Manna*. Poussin then indicates something essential: 'the first seven figures on the left will tell you all that is written here and all the rest is from the same cloth'. First observation: Poussin has just enumerated seven collections of figures, those which languish, admire etc. Every passion is expressed by a plurality of figures and all the painting's characters are divided up among these seven collections.

Second observation: the first seven figures on the left *speak* visually in the painting; they say iconically what the painter has just written in his letter. Each one expresses one of these figures that Poussin has just named. Third observation: the seven figures are, if I might so put it, three times 'first'; they are the first *seen* in the space that the painting represents, for they are in the foreground; then they are the *first* read, for they are to the left and we read a text from left to right. Finally, they are the *first* understood, since they *enunciate* and *show* both individually each one and, as a group, *all* the painting's figures and everything we can say about them. A second legibility level is indicated at the point where contemplating and reading join tightly together: with the group of seven figures we have a group whose rigorous composition and figurative density allow an easy recognition of all the rest of the painting's figures, a group of a maximal legibility, since each figure in the

foreground, to the left, expresses a passion and represents a cluster of the painting's figures. In addition, this group functions as the narrative matrix of the rest of the painting: its scenario, whose development in the groups of figures will be sufficient to produce the entire narrative the painting recounts. Moreover, we could say that these seven figures constitute a kernel of legibility generating, according to rules of transformation to be made precise, the whole reading of the work. Finally, it follows that the whole painting is represented by one of its parts, the group of the seven figures standing as the iconic synecdoche of all seven figure-collections, and likewise, one part of the whole not only represents the whole but the part itself. It is represented by itself representing the whole. In other words, right at the beginning of the vision-journey and of the reading of the painting, a 'loop' of reflexivity is produced, whereby a symbolic structure is inscribed whose meaning has to be deciphered and interpreted. At the very moment when, in and through the figures, the painting's narrativity is articulated, when its legibility is ordered according to the series of the passions, a symbolic dimension of interpretation opens up in the narrative iconic text. The iconic narrative will actually be completed only in the symbolic dimension that is the reflexive one: this is the third level of the painting's legibility.

From that moment on, can we not consider that 'all the rest' of the painting, which, as Poussin wrote, is 'from the same cloth', is in some way the 'frame' for the group of the first seven figures to the left? Likewise, just as the gilded frame that the painting needed so much was the most primitive condition for the possibility of contemplating it, for its visibility along with the perspective apparatus, so the painting's figures in their representational space, in so far as they are reflected in seven of them, frame this group. I mean that, in that very process, they constitute the condition fundamental to the possibility of interpreting the painting, namely of its maximum legibility. The frame can inversely be considered as a self-reflexive apparatus of the viewed object, which it transforms into an object to be contemplated, and the matrix-group of seven figures to the left can be considered in the same way as self-reflexive of what the painting represents, an apparatus which structures it as an object of meaning.

We can now come back to that group of seven figures to the left which articulates at the same time the first sequence of the narrative, that of the misery of the Jewish people before the Manna falls, and the fundamental meaning of the whole story of the *Manna*, its symbolic

value. What do these figures let us see? First, a plastic composition and a figuration rigorous in its complex unity: two figures on the left and two on the right, tightly united by a flexible *contraposto*, encircle three other figures in the centre of the whole group, a pyramid of bodies interconnected by gestures and glances: a young woman giving her breast to an old one, her mother, and refusing it to her child, whom she looks at with both love and grief. Such a group is a topical motif known as that of the 'Caritas Romana'. This scene is frequently represented in the plastic arts from antiquity and again from the beginning of the sixteenth century.⁶ More often, though, it is the father of the young woman who, starving, is thus saved from dying. The two versions of the anecdote are recounted by Valerius Maximus in his collection of *exempla* in the chapter devoted to filial piety.⁷

In Poussin's painting, this group is contemplated by a man standing, who is to the left in the foreground, the first figure in the entire painting and the first of the seven-figure group. This man, as Le Brun was later to write, certainly represents a person surprised, astonished with admiration. The hand-gesture, palm open, signifies this in particular, as does his slight arrested movement backward, if I might use that expression, of his legs and feet. He sees, he contemplates, he admires the marvel of human charity, which is only admirable because it goes beyond the natural order of maternal love to the piety of a daughter for her mother. He admires that act of human charity, exhibited in the foreground of the painting, just as Chantelou will see, contemplate, admire the miracle of divine charity, the Manna from Heaven which the entire painting exhibits. In other words, this figure to the extreme left, in the foreground, represents admiration for Chantelou, the spectator of the entire painting, and it shows the modality of the gaze's passion that he, Chantelou, will or should have when looking at the painting.⁸

We must go a little further. Just as all the painting's figures are reflected in the group of the seven figures, in order to constitute the symbolic plane of interpreting the painting, so the perspective apparatus (connecting an eye at the view-point to a vanishing-point through a framed plane of representation) is reflected and represented by the first figure of the seven-figure group, a figure which, as a delegate of the viewer in the painting, shows him the modality of passion his gaze should have while contemplating the picture. This passion is admiration which is, as you know, the theoretical passion of the true vision of the painting. I would even say that this figure on the extreme left makes the spectator read what the true vision is: admiration.

Let us imagine for an instant that the figure in the foreground on the extreme left is not that of an Israelite surprised with admiration for a marvel of charity, but rather a spectator looking at a painting representing a 'Roman charity'. The story that this spectator would deduce from the group of the two women and the child would be like a repetition of the story from Valerius Maximus, a story a bit displaced from prison to wilderness, and in which the compassionate jailer would be replaced by the young child excluded from his mother's breast. Chantelou will read this story too as his delegate does in the painting, but he will read it within another narrative taken from the book of Exodus in the Old Testament. In other words, here is a marvellous *exemplum* of pagan morality representing a miraculous episode in the history of the Chosen People and representing itself in the first sequence of the sacred story, the one concerning lack and deficiency. These two stories constitute, for the spectator contemplating the entire painting and for him alone, the two poles of a figurative relation, in the rhetorical sense of the term, whose meaning he has to understand in and through the painting itself. Now if we develop the synecdoche trope, which consists of the relation of all the figures of the painting to the foreground group to the left, we find related to the mother-group and its admirer the two figures of Moses and Aaron: Moses points his index finger towards the top of the painting indicating the source, outside the frame of the representation, of the miraculous nourishment, and Aaron, hands clasped, eyes lifted, gives thanks to God for his infinite charity. These two figures take up both the character who expresses admiration and that of the young mother who performs an act of charity, but they do so in order to point out the object of admiration and the food's origin outside the field of visibility, beyond the painting: something impossible to represent through an image which is only suggested by a gesture and looked at by a gaze, but which Chantelou will read in his Christian culture and faith as the Eucharistic mystery. The sacrament instituted in the New Testament account is, in a certain way, the invisible vanishing-point of legibility of an *exemplum* relating a pagan marvel displaced into the sacred miracle-story of the Jewish people.

'Read the story and the painting to find out if each thing is appropriate to the subject.' Thus we have returned to the centre of the master's letter, our point of departure. Substituted for the absent painting as a supplement to the painted work, the painter's letter has built a complex apparatus of enunciation in order to put the recipient, its reader, Chantelou, in the position of the spectator looking at the

value. What do these figures let us see? First, a plastic composition and a figuration rigorous in its complex unity: two figures on the left and two on the right, tightly united by a flexible *contraposto*, encircle three other figures in the centre of the whole group, a pyramid of bodies interconnected by gestures and glances: a young woman giving her breast to an old one, her mother, and refusing it to her child, whom she looks at with both love and grief. Such a group is a topical motif known as that of the 'Caritas Romana'. This scene is frequently represented in the plastic arts from antiquity and again from the beginning of the sixteenth century.⁶ More often, though, it is the father of the young woman who, starving, is thus saved from dying. The two versions of the anecdote are recounted by Valerius Maximus in his collection of *exempla* in the chapter devoted to filial piety.⁷

In Poussin's painting, this group is contemplated by a man standing, who is to the left in the foreground, the first figure in the entire painting and the first of the seven-figure group. This man, as Le Brun was later to write, certainly represents a person surprised, astonished with admiration. The hand-gesture, palm open, signifies this in particular, as does his slight arrested movement backward, if I might use that expression, of his legs and feet. He sees, he contemplates, he admires the marvel of human charity, which is only admirable because it goes beyond the natural order of maternal love to the piety of a daughter for her mother. He admires that act of human charity, exhibited in the foreground of the painting, just as Chantelou will see, contemplate, admire the miracle of divine charity, the Manna from Heaven which the entire painting exhibits. In other words, this figure to the extreme left, in the foreground, represents admiration for Chantelou, the spectator of the entire painting, and it shows the modality of the gaze's passion that he, Chantelou, will or should have when looking at the painting.⁸

We must go a little further. Just as all the painting's figures are reflected in the group of the seven figures, in order to constitute the symbolic plane of interpreting the painting, so the perspective apparatus (connecting an eye at the view-point to a vanishing-point through a framed plane of representation) is reflected and represented by the first figure of the seven-figure group, a figure which, as a delegate of the viewer in the painting, shows him the modality of passion his gaze should have while contemplating the picture. This passion is admiration which is, as you know, the theoretical passion of the true vision of the painting. I would even say that this figure on the extreme left makes the spectator read what the true vision is: admiration.

Let us imagine for an instant that the figure in the foreground on the extreme left is not that of an Israelite surprised with admiration for a marvel of charity, but rather a spectator looking at a painting representing a 'Roman charity'. The story that this spectator would deduce from the group of the two women and the child would be like a repetition of the story from Valerius Maximus, a story a bit displaced from prison to wilderness, and in which the compassionate jailer would be replaced by the young child excluded from his mother's breast. Chantelou will read this story too as his delegate does in the painting, but he will read it within another narrative taken from the book of Exodus in the Old Testament. In other words, here is a marvellous *exemplum* of pagan morality representing a miraculous episode in the history of the Chosen People and representing itself in the first sequence of the sacred story, the one concerning lack and deficiency. These two stories constitute, for the spectator contemplating the entire painting and for him alone, the two poles of a figurative relation, in the rhetorical sense of the term, whose meaning he has to understand in and through the painting itself. Now if we develop the synecdoche trope, which consists of the relation of all the figures of the painting to the foreground group to the left, we find related to the mother-group and its admirer the two figures of Moses and Aaron: Moses points his index finger towards the top of the painting indicating the source, outside the frame of the representation, of the miraculous nourishment, and Aaron, hands clasped, eyes lifted, gives thanks to God for his infinite charity. These two figures take up both the character who expresses admiration and that of the young mother who performs an act of charity, but they do so in order to point out the object of admiration and the food's origin outside the field of visibility, beyond the painting: something impossible to represent through an image which is only suggested by a gesture and looked at by a gaze, but which Chantelou will read in his Christian culture and faith as the Eucharistic mystery. The sacrament instituted in the New Testament account is, in a certain way, the invisible vanishing-point of legibility of an *exemplum* relating a pagan marvel displaced into the sacred miracle-story of the Jewish people.

'Read the story and the painting to find out if each thing is appropriate to the subject.' Thus we have returned to the centre of the master's letter, our point of departure. Substituted for the absent painting as a supplement to the painted work, the painter's letter has built a complex apparatus of enunciation in order to put the recipient, its reader, Chantelou, in the position of the spectator looking at the

painting. Poussin's letter does this three times: first, as an eye whose rays are contained by the frame, the primary condition for a possible vision; next, as a gaze directed towards the painting, recognizing a programme of painting and ascertaining its exact execution. This gaze views the painting and reads what it sees in what it contemplates: the visible and the legible interchange. Finally, the reader of the letter is shown as the spectator of the painting. Here he becomes the receiver-hearer of a narrative and figurative discourse, a story that the painter writing his letter only repeats, and which is none other than the epideictic discourse, the admirable demonstration of the painting in its figures. Put on the stage, so to speak, as the spectator of the painting, the reader of the letter is moreover introduced onto the stage of the story as the 'metafigurative' figure, who gives the spectator – which is to say himself – both the precise key to the true reading of what the painting represents, by designating the mystery which cannot be represented, and the rigorous manner belonging to the perfect viewing of a painting.

However, the painter writing his letter says nothing of this to his reader: he lets him understand, which is also to say, lets him wait to see, contemplate, read the work and arrive at its highest meaning. It is thus that in the *text* of the painting, in its canvas of representation, the legible and the visible are interwoven at all levels into a cloth whose woof would be the gaze's journey round the canvas and whose warp would be the painting's discourse.

'Read the story and the painting': the painter gives an order to the future spectator in the form of a challenge: 'to find out if each thing is appropriate to the subject'. Read the story from the Old Testament, one of whose sequences the painting makes visible (the Manna from Heaven), but while contemplating the painting, considering it in all its parts, you will come to another story, in the left-corner foreground, an *exemplum* of paganism. And it is because you will admire the visible example of 'Roman charity' that you can meditate upon what the painting neither shows nor recounts, but which nonetheless defines the rule of precise appropriation of each thing to the subject, the Eucharistic sacrament.

The highest meaning, the most sublime meaning, is at work within the gap between *the visible* (what is shown, represented, depicted, put on the stage) and *the legible* (what can be said, formulated, asserted, put into words and sentences); a gap which is at the same time a place of the opposition and of the exchange between these two domains; a gap about which, to cite Hubert Damisch, I can ask the question of the

signifier of that painting, the Manna from Heaven, since 'mân hû' ('what is this?') was the question which the Jews asked when they saw that whitish, sugary, granulated 'thing' falling from Heaven,⁹ a question which becomes the name of that 'thing', the 'Manna', the 'what-is-this', an unknown, unnameable, illegible thing, which nonetheless appears as a visible 'signifier' in the painting. That strange 'noun-question' is answered by the Eucharist formula, 'this is my body', but the answer is invisible, out of the painting, a ritual formula which articulates the mysterious signifier, something like an edible word, in a legible way. For it is a signifier which cannot be produced and recognized unless the beholder, entering into the painting at the foreground on the extreme left, identifies himself with the man depicted there who contemplates and admires what is happening in front of him.

NOTES

- 1 Cf. Meyer Schapiro, *Words and Pictures: On the Literal and the Symbolic in the Illustration of a Text* (The Hague and Paris, 1973); Hubert Damisch, 'Huit thèses pour (ou contre) une sémiologie de l'image', *Macula*, 2 (1977).
- 2 Nicolas Poussin, *Lettres et propos sur l'art*, edited by Anthony Blunt (Paris, 1964), pp. 35–6. Cf. my article, 'La lecture du tableau d'après Poussin', in *Cahiers de l'Association Internationale des Études Françaises*, 24 (1972), 251–66. Françoise Siguret, 'Lisez l'histoire avec le tableau', *Études Françaises*, 14 (1975), 1–2. Cf. for a more complete bibliography of the theme and Poussin's painting, Anthony Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin: a critical catalogue* (London, 1966), p. 18, n. 21.
- 3 Paul Klee, *Das bildnerische Denken* (Basle and Stuttgart, 1970); translated into French by S. Girard as *La pensée créatrice*, in *Écrits sur l'art* (Paris, 1973), 1, 90.
- 4 Poussin, *Lettres*, pp. 62–3.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 184.
- 6 Cf. Félix Thürleman, 'La fonction de l'admiration dans l'esthétique du XVII^e siècle, à propos de la Charité romaine dans la "Manne" de Poussin', unpublished article (Zurich, 1976).
- 7 Valerii Maximi, *Dictorum factorumque memorabilium libri IX* (Antwerp, 1614). On the 'Caritas Romana' motif, W. Deonna, 'La légende de Pero et Micon et l'alaitement symbolique', *Latomus*, 13 (1954), 140–66 and 356–75; E. Knauer, 'Caritas Romana', *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen*, 6 (1964), 9–23; A. Pigler, *Barockthemen* (Budapest, 1974), vol. II.
- 8 On admiration, Félix Thürleman, 'La fonction de l'admiration', *passim*; Descartes, *Les passions de l'âme*, in *Oeuvres philosophiques* (Paris, 1973), vol. III; Charles Le Brun, *Conférence sur l'expression générale et particulière* (Paris, 1698), republished in *Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse*, 'La Passion', 21 (Spring, 1980), 93–121, with a study by Hubert Damisch, 'L'alphabet des Masques', pp. 123–31. We may observe that, although in his lecture Charles Le Brun begins the list of his

definitions of passions with admiration ('As we said, Admiration is the first and the most temperate of all the passions', p. 100), the first drawing illustrating the lecture is the one of Tranquillity, followed by those of Attention, Respect (esteem) and Admiration. It would be worth analysing why there is a discrepancy between the lecture (the legible) and the drawings (the visible). In philosophical consideration of passions, there is *nothing to say* about tranquillity, which is a 'non-passion'. On the contrary, for the painter, the various passions (and admiration itself) can only be shown or *made visible* through modifications of some parts of the *calm face*, basically eyes and eyebrows on the one hand, and mouth and lips on the other. I would add that the series of Le Brun's drawings is awaiting a thorough study. The notes by Prof. Jennifer Montagu in the *Catalogue de l'exposition Charles Le Brun* (Versailles, 1963), pp. 302-7, though interesting, do not constitute a thorough study.

- 9 Exodus 16, 14-15. Cf. L. Richeome, *Tableaux sacrez des figures mystiques du très auguste sacrifice et sacrement de l'Eucharistie* (Paris, 1609), a book which Poussin knew (cf. J. Vanuxem, 'Les tableaux sacrés de Richeome et l'iconographie de l'Eucharistie chez Poussin', in *Nicolas Poussin* (Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique), edited by A. Chastel (Paris, 1960), 1, 151-62; pp. 176ff are cited by F. Thürleman in his study.)