OF THE SUBLIME
PRESENCE IN QUESTION

Essays by

Jean-François Courtine
Michel Deguy
Éliane Escoubas
Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe
Jean-François Lyotard
Louis Marin
Jean-Luc Nancy
Jacob Rogozinski

translated and with an Afterword by

Jeffrey S. Librett

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

Chapter 8

ON A TOWER OF BABEL IN A PAINTING BY POUSSIN

Louis Marin

> Hence can be explained what Savary remarks, in his *Lettres sur l'Egypte*, that we must keep from going very near the Pyramids just as much as we keep from going too far from them, in order to get the full emotional effect of their size. For if we are too far away, the parts to be apprehended (the stones lying one over the other) are only obscurely represented, and the representation of them produces no effect upon the aesthetic judgment of the subject. But if we are very near, the eye requires some time to complete the apprehension of the tiers from the bottom up to the apex, and then the first tiers are always partly forgotten before the imagination has taken in the last, and so the comprehension of them is never complete. The same thing may sufficiently explain the bewilderment or, as it were, perplexity which it is said seizes the spectator on his first entrance into St. Peter's in Rome. For there is here a feeling of the inadequacy of his imagination for presenting the ideas of the whole, wherein the imagination reaches its maximum, and, in striving to surpass it, sinks back into itself, but is thereby displaced into a moving satisfaction. (*CJ*, §26, 91; 90–91)

In the background of a painting by Poussin, *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe*, today at the Frankfurt Museum, one finds a strange edifice.[1] It is situated on a plain surrounded by a circle of mountains, which the gaze of the spectator discovers between a hill surmounted by a castle on the left and

buildings and monuments of a large city on the right. This edifice is illuminated by the light of a sun absent from the painting, but which one divines to the west, bronzing with its rays the incidental details of the terrain in the background. If one examines it closely, one notices that the edifice is rather strange: compared to the castle and the city, it seems ruined. One can discern, on two stories, an arcade with seven arches and, attached to this arcade, a multi-leveled structure rising obliquely up to some remains of a wall: a hesitation between vestige or ruin, and incompletion or interruption. Scanning Poussin's *œuvre*, the spectator finds without difficulty castles, farms, towers, dwellings, temples, and tombs, but no other example of the edifice at the back of this painting: at most a drawing which the master may have executed, a view of the Roman coliseum.[2]

The *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe*, painted in 1651 for Cassiano del Pozzo, is itself relatively uncommon: it represents a storm. This seems at least to be the "subject" of the painting, judging by what the gaze confronts: two flashes of diffuse lightning cut across a sky of ink, a lightning-bolt strikes a tree in the background, a furious wind, blowing from left to right, stirs trees and bushes. Poussin himself confirms that the "subject" of the painting is indeed a storm when he writes about it to Jacques Stella: "I have attempted to represent a storm on earth, imitating as best I could the effect of an impetuous wind." Pursuing the description of his picture, he inscribes in this attempt to represent the tempest, in the background, a lion's attack on shepherds and their flocks in flight, and finishes his letter by naming the two figures of the foreground. In the final analysis, it is their names that give the work its name: "And in the front of the picture, one sees Pyramus stretched out dead upon the ground and next to him Thisbe abandoned to her sadness."[3]

Thus, a tempest on the earth, this doubled stroke of lightning, this wind, and these swirling clouds of dust, but also the lion's attack, and Thisbe's abandonment to her sadness at discovering—dead—the body of her beloved: meteorological, animal, and human tempests; level by level, the atmospheric movements and their effects are consonant with those of instinct and those of passion: nature, animal, man. But with the latter, (hi)story (*storia*) enters the scene—at the front of the picture. It is figured by these two separated lovers whom only death can re-unite. At the back of the picture—outside of the tempest but perhaps also as the tempest's cultural emblem—a vast edifice, ruined or interrupted, is at once the document—the archive—and the monument of this (hi)story.

However, the subject of the tempest has its own history within the history of the art of painting and representation which marks the myth of its origin and, as it were, its transcendental limit.[4] In book 35 of his *Natural History*, Pliny tells us that Apelles—who is for modern artists, as is well known, the originary hero of mimesis (along with Zeuxis and Parrhasios), despite the fact that the works of these originary heroes can only be "seen" in the form of written descriptions—that Apelles succeeded in representing what cannot be represented: flashes and bolts of lightning, thunder, in a word, the—*nonrepresentable*[5]—tempest. This renders comprehensible the master's humility when he states to Stella both his intention to paint a tempest and the distance mimesis takes from itself when it reaches its limit: "I have *attempted* to represent...imitating *as best I could*."

In "the front of the picture, one sees Pyramus...dead...and Thisbe abandoned to her sadness"—in the front of the picture, but in the last sentence of its description,[6] i.e., at once as its *fullest measure* and as its *supplement*,[7] comes the literary reference, the names of the actors of a story in its *dénouement*, the name of the picture: Pyramus and Thisbe. A story told by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*:[8] two lovers, whom the mutual hatred of their families separates to the point where they can communicate only through the chink of a wall, which prevents them from seeing each other, decide to flee from the town in order to meet, at night, near the tomb and the spring indicated by a mulberry tree with fruits the color of snow. Thisbe arrives first, but she sees a lion, its jaws bloody from the carnage that it has just made of a flock of sheep. She runs to hide in a nearby grotto, but while fleeing, she drops her veil, which the beast tears to pieces and covers with blood. Pyramus arrives, discovers the bloody veil: Thisbe is dead, he thinks. He kills himself. Thisbe, the danger having passed, leaves her hideout to find the body of her beloved at the base of the mulberry tree where they were to have met. She kills herself. The blood of the two young people mingles finally in death and stains red the roots of the tree: its white berries turn black.

Rereading Ovid in terms of Poussin's letter, or rather rereading Poussin's painting in terms of this rereading, one realizes that the tomb[9] is the tomb of Ninus and that the town from which the lovers flee is the town of Semiramis, Babylon. In an instant, passing from the foreground to the extreme background, one discovers that the *colosseo*, the colossal edifice which had been so intriguing, is the ruin of the long-since interrupted construction of the tower of Babel.[10] Thus, in the—nonrepresentable—representation of a tempest on earth, several stories—the story of an original fulfillment of representation in painting and the story of an original fulfillment of languages, but also a story of love and death and a story of a metamorphosis—intermingle and intersect.

A word on the metamorphosis: it concerns the unhappy lovers only indirectly, commemorates only their disastrous destiny, and their mingled blood is merely an instrument. By means of them, the white fruit of the mulberry tree has become black. This metamorphosis does however directly concern the painter; it is the allegory of a genesis of colors between two contraries, white—the universal color of light, the absolute medium of visibility, the synthesis of the totality of mixed colors—and black—the noncolor of night and nonvisibility. But the passage from light to the night, from white to black can

only take place as mediated by the color of blood, the united blood of Pyramus and Thisbe, red of death's violence, one of the three cardinal colors. The painting thus tells also this story of color in general by telling the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, but as an inverted genesis, a palingenesis,[11] that of the absorption of light into the night by means of blood, the story, if you will, of the destruction of painting and its vision[12] by the representation of the tempest as the nonrepresentable par excellence. It is this story that will be told in its way by the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, on the edges of Babylon, and in the foreground of a painting the background of which presents to the view the enigma of a ruined, interrupted tower, a tower the name of which—Babel—will be superimposed upon the image of the Roman Coliseum.

Thus, the threads of multiple stories are interwoven here: the pictorial mimesis of the tempest, the Ovidian metamorphosis of white into black, oriental Babylon and ancient Rome, the dramatic pastoral of the shepherds attacked by the lion, and the passionate tragedy of the lovers. These stories have in common that they all tell at once the origin and the end, the commencement and the termination, the foundation and the possibility, united and separated at their limits: the origin of representation and its end in the nonrepresentable instance of the natural storm; the origin and the end of all color, white and its negation in black; the beginning of loves and their end in death; the foundation and the possibility of the project of all architecture where the ruin is a design and the trace a monument, Orient and Occident mixed and separated forever. Of all these stories, all of which for Poussin basically tell the same story, the spectator, in accordance with his or her vision or meditative contemplation, can choose—in the diverse parts of the painting or on its diverse levels—the emblems, allegories, and symbols that reciprocally respond to, emblematize, allegorize, and symbolize one another.[13]

Thus, the three storms—the meteorological, animal, and human—express one another reciprocally, or better, they represent each other so completely in their direct or inverted correspondences that there occurs in the work a presentation of the nonrepresentable. Thus, the blasted tree perpendicular to the body of the dead Pyramus; thus, the glow from the lightning-bolt which figuratively strikes Thisbe with its arrow and illuminates her with its instantaneous brilliance; thus the black of the grotto and the spring, the obscurities of the stormy sky, the blinding whites of the sheets of lightning over the town and over the protagonists of the drama, and the reds of the shepherds' coats, of the cavalier galloping on his horse, or of the bloody reflexions the master places here and there as effects of the lightning; thus the tragedy in the fifth act of its dénouement in the foreground, the dramatic pastoral in the middle ground, and the Lucretian cosmic poem at the base of the sky.

The painting encloses within itself, then, a grand emblematization of pictorial mimesis—the theory of light and color, genres of painting (landscape, pastoral, and history), cultural history (ancient and modern, oriental and occidental), and the history of human passions the signs of which recount in painting the history of humanity (love, violence, and death). The entirety of this grand symbolic "system" turns, however, around another symbol: the central, immobile, unaltered lake, the calm surface of which reflects imperturbably the appearances of the things and living beings preyed upon by all these tempests, symbolizing the divine eye of the painter—or spectator—who regards apathically from his place of contemplation, *una tota simul*, like a god, "the prodigious efforts of nature," as Félibien says of another of the Master's storm-paintings—the animal power of instincts, the pitiful emotional errors of humanity.[14] Thus, in the background, the castle and its high tower in the midst of the storm, which the setting sun illuminates, and the town with its monuments from which the tomb of Ninus detaches itself, and between the two, in the painting, but further away still in the space it represents as also in the history it evokes, the tower of Babel from the Old Testament joined to the image of the Coliseum of ancient Rome. The meditative, immobile spectator—in the place of the painter, in the place of the Stoics' God, in his own place of contemplation—can thus situate now on the level of "enunciation" [*énonciation*], now on the level of "utterance" [*énoncé*], the self-representation of the structure of the painting in its "represented" terms: *suave terrae magna....*[*sic*–J.L.] Where does one stop within such representations, where is one to situate the law of the whole of what the painting presents to the gaze?[15] Babel, a tower, a strange edifice in the background of this painting by Poussin.

We shall have to abandon for a moment Poussin's miniscule and colossal tower of Babel in order to (re)construct it in accordance with a textual architecture that combines various components—Genesis, a treatise by Dante, and Hegel's *Aesthetics*—in order to extend across time an arch or an ark of theology, philosophy, theory, and history. This arch or ark has remained unbroken throughout the tradition from the Church Fathers, Augustin or Ambrose, from Philo of Alexandria or Flavius Josephus to medieval thought and to Dante, from the Renaissance and classical age theoreticians of art and architecture to the philosophers of the Enlightenment and the Romantic thinkers.

And in the beginning, as is only fitting, we should consult Genesis:

> Now the whole earth had one language and few words. And as men migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. They they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." And the Lord came down to see the

> city and the tower, which the sons of men had built. And the Lord said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth. (11:1–9; 7)[14]

The story that involves the tower of Babel is thus the story of an end and a beginning or of an origin which ends in order that a beginning should be also an origin: "Now the whole earth had one language and few words...there the Lord confused the language of all the earth." At the origin, one language and one speech, and with the end of this unity, within it, the confusion of languages and speech, their multiplicity and dispersion: "So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth." This story is the story of a limit; it is itself at the limit of a double limit: at the origin, there is a unique and universal language, but there are also unique acts of speech: the speakers repeat the same. This unity and identity annul all story in the very story which is told of them, or rather they install story only at the very moment when this unity and identity are lost. At the origin the earth is not merely language and monologue, but tautology: a single language.

By the same token, the speech-acts [*paroles*] of this language resolve themselves into or exhaust themselves in the repetition of one single Name, that which Adam uttered and never stopped uttering—if one is to believe Dante—at his creation: "*Quid autem prius vox primi loquentis sonaverit?* What did the voice of the first one to speak intone? I do not hesitate to assert that it is manifest for every man of healthy mind that it was precisely the word, God, that is, *El* whether in the way of a question or in the way of an answer."[15] Adam communicates nothing, and takes pleasure in making his voice resound in the pronunciation of a name that contains all names, all creatures, in the joyous effusion of the monosyllable *El*: a cry of ecstasy, the pure sonority of speech and its tonality formed as voice. In the cry of Adamic ecstasy where, in a unique Name, all names and all articulations of language are virtually present, Dante hears the storm of Nature rumbling in the alterations of the moving air:

> Therefore since the air is made to undergo such great disturbances by the ordinance of that lower nature which is the minister and workmanship of God, that it causes the thunder to peal, the lightning to flash, the water to drop, and scatters the snow and hurls down the hail, shall it not be moved to utter certain words rendered distinct by him who has distinguished greater things? (I, IV, 13)

The entire language of humanity is one vocal storm articulating the one sound; the entire convulsion of nature is a language of air, sounding and intoning through alterations of the one substance: the double resonance of a single voice, that of God in creative speech: "Let there be light and there was light,"[16] wherein Longinus, the Augustan rhetor, and Boileau, at the apogee of the classical century, hear the sublime. To be sure, Adam speaks, but the words and sentences he articulates will be forever formed of the unique sound, anterior to all names, the voice that does not speak but gives to be spoken as it withdraws into the universal cry. The one language is the storm which presents the nonrepresentable cry, the end of all language as its origin in the unnamable name. The universal deluge is the language of created nature which presents the nonrepresentable origin as its end. "So the Lord said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the ground, man and beast and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them'" (Genesis 6:7; 4).

And this death sentence applies to all humans, animals, beasts, and birds *except* for one couple of each species who will go—as we know—with Noah and his family into the ark to keep life alive under the protection of humanity. The architecture of this ark is God, and Noah, its attentive worker:

> Make yourself an ark of gopher wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its breadth fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above; and set the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower, second, and third decks. (Genesis 6:14–16; 5).

Divine speech is the *archē* of all architecture: the plan of the edifice is revealed, coming from on high, in an epiphany of transcendence that finds a material, takes on a form, encloses itself within an exact limit.[17] The sublimity of the ark takes place along this limit which appears in the form of a construction only insofar as it obeys Yahweh's commandment, responds through its architectural end to the end of Nature, the destruction of all creatures. Adam's cry of ecstasy, the universal storm of the deluge, the architecture of the ark; the sound at the border of the articulation of language, the air stirred for the effacement of all created flesh, the *archē* of architecture: a tri-unitary sublimity, tri-unitary presentation of the nonrepresentable origin-end, the first and last name that the first man—the most ancient ancestor, without father or mother—uttered, the sound he made resound, *El*.

One reads in the first pages of Hegel's *The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate* a reflexion on "the impression made on men's hearts by the flood": "a deep distraction and it must have caused the most prodigious disbelief in nature. Formerly friendly or tranquil, nature now abandoned the equipoise of her elements, now requited the faith the human race had in her with the most destructive, invincible, irresistible hostility; in her fury she spared nothing; she made none of the distinctions which love might have made but poured savage destruction over everything."[20] Two great figures take on this effect of the storm, two great figures of the domination of Nature: Noah, who secured his safety with regard to the hostile power by submitting it, as well as himself, to a more powerful instance, God, who promised him to put the elements in his service and to keep them within their bounds, and Nimrod, who secured his safety by dominating Nature on his own, as a "rash man and one boasting in the strength of his arm." And Hegel, following the text here of Flavius Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews*, adds:

> In the event of God's having a mind to overwhelm the world with a flood again, he threatened to neglect no means and no power to make an adequate resistance to Him. For he had resolved to build a tower which was to be far higher than the waves and streams could ever rise and in this way to avenge the downfall of his forefathers. He persuaded men that they had acquired all good things for themselves by their own courage and strength; and in this way he altered everything and in a short time founded a despotic tyranny. (374–75; 184)

In his commentary, the young Hegel notes: "He united men after they had become mistrustful, estranged from one another, and now ready to scatter. But the unity he gave them was not a reversion to a cheerful social life in which they trusted nature and one another; he kept them together, indeed, but by force" (375; 184). Noah's ark versus Nimrod's tower; divine architecture versus human architecture; the name of Yahweh at the origin of Adam's language versus the construction by men of their proper name: "Let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." An independent tower, a proper name, works of the community which realizes itself through them.

In his old age, Hegel takes up again in the *Aesthetics* this idea from his youth:

> What is the sacred? Goethe asks. And he answers immediately: it is what unites souls. One can say, letting this definition serve as one's point of departure, that the sacred, as the goal of this union and this union itself, constitutes the first content of independent architecture. We have the most familiar example of this in the legend of the tower of Babel....All men work here in common and it is this community that constitutes at once the goal and the content of the work. This union which they wanted to create...was supposed to mark the dissolution of a purely patriarchal association [that of Noah and his sons after the flood, bowed forever beneath the Law of the transcendent Name] and the construction which was supposed to rise up to the clouds was to have meant precisely the objectification of this dissolution and the realization of a greater union.[21]

An immense collective task, the rapprochement of all peoples:

> In order to realize this incommensurable work...to make all lands submit to a kind of architectonic transformation. If they dispensed with tasks which are required in our times by ethics, customs, and the legal organization of the State, it was solely in order to create among themselves a tie which was to have been indissoluble....But the same tradition adds that after having come together in a single center in order to realize this work of union, the peoples separated again, to follow each its own path. (14, 276; 2, 638)

Thus, the tower expresses the sacred, the bond uniting humanity, but the construction of this bond is at the same time its destruction; an interrupted edifice, a community that comes together only at the moment of its dispersion: both sublime precisely in this. "The sublime in general is an effort to express the infinite, an effort which in the world of phenomena finds no object which would lend itself to representation...inaccessible, inexpressible by all finite expression...the substantial unity which opposes itself to the totality of the phenomenal world," without any possible form in the external world, a-symbolic. "But if this inherent unity is to be brought before our vision, this is only possible if, as substance, it is also grasped as the creative power of all things, in which it therefore has its revelation and appearance and to which it thus has a positive relation" (13, 467–68; 1, 363). Thus, the universal tempest; thus, the plan of the architectural ark come from on high.

> But at the same time this essentially expresses the fact of substance's elevation above individual phenomena as such...with the logical result that...the substance is purified from everything apparent and particular and therefore from what fades away in it and is inadequate to it. This outward shaping which is itself annihilated in turn by what it reveals [*auslegt*], so that the revelation of

> the content is at the same time a supersession of the revelation, is the sublime. (13, 468; 1, 363)

At this point in his *Aesthetics*, Hegel finds a precise example of this negative or annihilating celebration of the Power and Glory of the one God in Hebrew poetry: "It cancels the positive immanence of the Absolute in its created phenomena and puts the *one* substance explicitly apart as the Lord of the world in contrast to whom there stands the entirety of his creatures, and these, in comparison with God, are posited as the inherently powerless and perishable" (13, 469; 1, 364).

To Hebrew sacred poetry, one must add the tower Nimrod had built, although Hegel situates them in two different places in his *Aesthetics*: one can do so because the erection of the tower is intimately bound up with language, the epideixis of discourse: it is a celebration of God, repeating without end even if in a singular fashion the Name of God, all the Names of God, that is, his infinite perfections. Or to follow in this point the Rabbinic tradition, the tower celebrates the Name of God by constructing an idol of it, that is, the proper Name of the community which edi-fies the Name in its universal immanence: the community which—in accordance with a process that always animates representation—takes the place of, substitutes itself for, *represents* the Name of the Other in its unique transcendence.

Each member of the community, according to Flavius Josephus (and this motif was taken up again in the Renaissance), wrote its name on each of the stones of the Tower. Once baked, the stones became the homogeneous material of construction. Language and architecture are inextricably intertwined by two inexorably coupled and inverted movements.

In his meditation on Babel, Dante evokes the "memorable" storm, the remarkable catastrophe of language in connection with the astonishing enterprise of the construction of the Tower, a division of speech in connection with the division of architectural work:

> For almost the whole human race had come together to the work of wickedness. Some were giving orders, some were acting as architects, some were building the walls, some were adjusting the masonry with rules, some were laying on the mortar with trowels, some were quarrying stone, some were engaged in bringing it by sea, some by land, and different companies were engaged in various other occupations, when they were struck by such confusion from heaven, that all those who were attending to the work, using one and the same language, left off the work on being estranged by many different languages and never again came together in the same intercourse. (I, VII, 19)

> And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built. And the Lord said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. (Genesis 11:5–7; 7)

And Dante continues:

> For the same language remained to those alone who were engaged in the same kind of work; for instance, one language remained to all the architects, another to those rolling down blocks of stone, another to those preparing the stone; and so it happened to each group of workers. And the human race was accordingly then divided into as many different languages as there were different branches of work; and the higher the branch of work the men were engaged in, the ruder and more barbarous was the language they afterwards spoke. (I, VII, 19–20)

The catastrophe of language is measured exactly by the ana-strophe of the tower. The wall of sense separating the society of speakers is built of the cut and piled stones of the wall of the tower that unites the community of workers. The architectural articulation of the tower, which is supposed to make of it a great organized body, can be put into effect only through the articulations of particular, specialized languages, the languages of technologies and arts, which by their very articulation disarticulate the originary unnamable Name, the name cried out in Edenic ecstasy with all the names of creation, because humanity wanted to make of this Name their proper name, because they wanted to appropriate it for themselves, to appropriate it to their immanence, to construct its representation. The community of this representation would have been its autonomous and independent subject: the noncommunication of languages on the site of the tower and the town is nothing other than the presentation of the noncommunicable instance of the other Name, and if the mutual translation of languages will attempt to surmount their mutual radical estrangement, will attempt to break down the forever disjointed wall of sense, trans-lation will remain an infinite, interminable task, forever opaque, as the interrupted edi-fication of the tower on the plain of Shinear testifies, the head, summit, or *archi-tectum* of which was supposed to have occupied the infinite and formless—sublime—place of the clouds.

Dante will make the storm of languages resound in the hollows of hell: "strange tongues, horrible language, words of pain, tones of anger, voices loud and hoarse, and with these the sound of hands, made a tumult which is

whirling always through that air forever dark, as sand eddies in a whirlwind."[22] In this storm we encounter a second flood of which an interrupted and colossal tower will be the trace on the plain, the sublime Tower of Nimrod. Dante and Virgil discover him, between the two last circles of hell, among the giants ranged about Lucifer's pit: Nimrod, the first earthly potentate and tyrant, the figure of the totalitarian absolute of the politician, planted like his tower up to the waist in the soil. "'Raphel may amech zabi almi,' began the savage mouth to cry, for which no sweeter psalms were fit." The speech of the unique tyrant, untranslatable and incommunicable, a cry which, in hell, is like the nocturnal echo of the Adamic cry in the light of Eden, the "negative" presentation of the unnamable Name he wanted to appropriate for himself in having its representation constructed.[23]

> My Leader towards him: "Stupid soul, keep to thy horn and vent thyself with that when rage or other passion takes thee."...Then he said to me: "He is his own accuser. This is Nimrod, through whose wicked device the world is not of one sole speech. Let us leave him there and not talk in vain, for every language is to him as his to others, which is known to none." (XXXI, 67–81, 385–87)

Through the confusion of the unique language, "*the people unique unto themselves*" becomes *the peoples each unique for the others.* But to accompany Dante just one more moment in his account of Babel, not the entire human race was gathered around the iniquitous work: *almost* all participated. The totality, from the beginning, involves a remainder. On the site of Babel there were those who preserved the vague memory of the sound that contained all others, the guardians of the henceforth inarticulable Name:

> But those to whom the hallowed language remained were neither present, nor countenanced the work; but utterly hating it, they mocked the folly of those engaged in it. But these, a small minority, were of the seed of Shem (as I conjecture), who was the third son of Noah; and from them sprang the people of Israel, who made use of the most ancient language until their dispersion. (I, VII, 20)

Sublime by virtue of its very withdrawal or retreat, this language is a "form of language...created by God together with the first soul (I, VI, 16). It is the unique and singular articulation of the Name. "With [the Hebrews] alone did it remain after the confusion, in order that our Redeemer (who was, as to his humanity, to spring from them) might use, not the language of confusion, but of grace" (I, VI, 17).

Thus, from the origin, there has been an infinitesimal division, a secret limit, just as Noah was the sole just one on the eve of the universal flood, at the moment when the natural elements were entering into the discord of the flood: a marginal distance on the border of the whole, through which the undeniable intervention of Transcendence manifests itself, the blank of the nonrepresentable, which is the incommensurable memory. It is this unattainable measure that Dante seeks in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* through all the cities of Italy, in order to found the sublimity of the illustrious vernacular the odor of which he senses everywhere without ever being able to see the panther itself: "we say that in every kind of things, there must be one thing by which all the things of that kind may be compared and weighed, and which we may take as the measure of all the others" (I, XVI, 54). Thus, for example, one uses the concept of *unity* in order to compare numbers. So "also in colours all are measured by white, for they are said to be more or less visible according as they approach or recede from it" (I, XVI, 54). How is one to discern this vernacular

> whose fragrance is in every town, but whose lair is in none. It may, however, be more perceptible in one than in another, just as the simplest of substances, which is God, is more perceptible in a man than in a brute...in fire than in earth. And the simplest quantity, which is unity, is more perceptible in an odd than in an even number; and the simplest colour, which is white, is more perceptible in orange than in green. Having therefore found what we are searching for, we declare the illustrious, cardinal, courtly, and curial vernacular language in Italy to be that which belongs to all the towns in Italy but does not appear to belong to any one of them, and by which all the municipal dialects of the Italians are measured, weighed, and compared. (I, XVI, 55–56)

The language of the poem, its voice, is thus to be found on the limit, the border, that is, the sublime of a Babel which is at once pre- and post-Babelian, transcendent and immanent, belonging to all of us and to no one—a voice white like the white of the mulberry's fruits of old, before the lovers' death, an incommensurable unit of measurement, the white of the nonrepresentable outline of beautiful form, which Poussin will seek in turn for painting in terms of the—at once contradictory and complementary—definitions of the musical mode and the sound of speech.[24]

The totalitarian city, the colossal tower will remain forever the ruin of lost unity and the project of the immanent totalization of this unity. As in the background of Poussin's painting, the Babel-Coliseum will rise almost indiscernibly in the distance upon a plain between the tower of a castle on a hill and the monuments and buildings of a town on the flanks of a mountain.

But perhaps by means of the emblem of this monument one can comprehend the inexplicable eruption of the storm in Ovid's story, which Poussin

presents to the spectator's gaze as to his own: the storm, figure of the nonrepresentable in the history of representation in painting, figures an excess which does not transgress the limits of such representation but does indeed transgress the fulfillment of its mimetic measure: the storm figurally presents the limits of this measure. "I have attempted to represent a tempest on earth, imitating as best I could the effect of an impetuous wind." Poussin's tempest figures in the painting of history what Babel figures in the painting of architecture and language: the equivalence of ruin and project, confusion and dispersion. The nonrepresentability of this equivalence is clear: it disperses all in an instantaneous fragmentation; it mixes all in confusion and continuity, without articulatory distance; it is the stroke of the absolute force of differentiation which, in a word, neutralizes all differences:[25] as in the brilliance of the lightning-flash in relation to the solar milieu of light; as in the clap of thunder in relation to noise, sound, and voice: light that blinds instead of rendering visible, noise that deafens instead of rendering audible. The presentation of the tempest in the painted tableau is the permanent risk of its destruction which, in its own way, Ovid's metamorphosis of white into black also allegorizes.

Still, in the dramatization of painting into which he fashions the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, Poussin puts into play, or *represents*, the tempestuous figure's effects of dissemination and confusion, dispersion and condensation, effects which the Tower-Coliseum in the extreme background of his painting recall. He puts them into play twice, in the space and in the time of representation. One will recall that Ovid had situated the lovers' assignation outside of the town of Babel, Babylon, by the tomb of Ninus, at the foot of the mulberry tree with white berries, near the spring and the grotto. The master, however, disjoins and places at the two extremes of the representational scene the marks of the single meetingplace of the young lovers: the tomb of Ninus rises on the edge of the town in the background on the right, whereas the mulberry, the spring, and the grotto are placed in the foreground to the left. Dissemination of spatial signs, Babelian effects of the (nonrepresentable) tempest. One will recall also that Pyramus kills himself because he discovers Thisbe's veil smeared by the lion with the blood of the shepherds' flocks. Poussin, however, chooses to represent Thisbe in the foreground abandoning herself to her sorrows as she discovers Pyramus dead, while at the same representational moment, in the middle distance, the lion is in the process of attacking a white horse the rider of which has been thrown to earth. In the representation, the cause is contemporary with its most distant effect—a conjunction or rather a condensation, of all the forces at work in the narrative—in a single represented moment, the very moment that summarizes them in their dramatic development and their tragic dénouement.

I see in Poussin's attempt to represent the nonrepresentable tempest—by means of the story of an Ovidian metamorphosis and to the rhythm of the confusion and dispersion of causes and effects, places and moments, to the

rhythm of the dissemination and condensation of significations and symbols—the archaic memory in classical modernity of an origin and end of all language [*du langage et des langues*], of architecture and its monuments, of society and culture, of history and narratives. The lake, that immobile mirror at the center of the picture, is the symbol of the presence of this memory in the painter's divine gaze; the Coliseum or tower of Babel in the background is its iconic monogram.