Beyond the cloud. Gombrich and the blindness of Orion

Lucia Corrain

At his touch, words start up into images, thoughts become things.

William Hazlitt

I believed that art history must be rational, clear. And that one must not talk any nonsense.

Ernst H. Gombrich

The start of the problem

The essay that Ernst Gombrich wrote in 1944 about Nicolas Poussin’s Orion (Fig. 1) is a powerful one, built upon a limpid articulation of reasoning, particularly if we consider his controlled adherence to the iconological method. The crystal-like clarity and elegance of the linguistic expression, typical of all of the Austrian scholar’s work, in this specific case may also be explained by the context in which he was writing. While describing the work he had carried out during the war, Gombrich’s own words were: ‘I also wrote short texts, to give examples of each of these categories. Later I published a few – in fact, most – of these examples. For mythology, for instance, I had chosen the Orion of Poussin.’

His brief article begins with a citation from Bellori in which the seventeenth-century critic praised ‘Nicolas for the excellence of his landscapes’ and declared the

5 When interviewed by Eribon, Gombrich specifies his idea of rationality: ‘If you take the writings of my colleagues, particularly the critics or the historians, many of the things they say are untranslatable, they are metaphors, like poetry. Nothing but emotion.’ (A Lifelong Interest, 154).
6 A Lifelong Interest, 54.
subject of the picture: ‘the fable of Orion, the blind giant’. Gombrich then refers to Poussin’s primary source: a passage from the rhetorical description of a Noble Hall ‘by that fertile journalist of late antiquity: Lucian’. Immediately after that, Gombrich determines the differences between the painting and the description. He draws our attention to the addition of a divinity, Diana, who looks downwards from a cloud on high, and the fact that, in Lucian, the role of the spectator is instead assigned to Hephaestos, who ‘views the incident from Lemnos’, whereas Poussin instead chose to portray the figure at the giant’s feet in the act of indicating the path.\(^7\)

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Fig. 1.** Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with Orion*, 1658, oil on canvas, 191.1 x 182.9 cm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Courtesy of the The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In just a few lines Gombrich accounts for an extensive study on mythology that materializes in a decisive observation: in no version of the ancient myth is Orion’s blindness Diana’s doing. As the story goes, the giant is blinded by Oenopion, king of Chios, to avenge Orion’s attempt to rape his daughter (or wife) Merope. A temporary privation, however, for no sooner does Orion learn from an oracle that his sight will be restored (if he exposes the empty sockets of his eyes to the rays of the rising sun), than he undertakes his journey. In pursuit of the deafening noise of a forge – exploiting his ability to wade through the sea – he reaches Hephaestos on the island of Lemnos, and from there leaves with the blacksmith’s apprentice Cedalion, whom he carries on his shoulders. From that high

\(^6\) The passage in Bellori’s ‘Life of Nicolas Poussin’ states: ‘Great praise is due to Nicolas for the excellence of his landscapes. For Signor Michel Passart, His Most Christian Majesty’s chamberlain of the exchequer, he painted two landscapes: in one the fable of Orion, the blind giant, whose size can be understood from a tiny man standing on his shoulders, who guides him, and another gazing at him in wonder’ (Giovanni Battista Bellori, 1672, *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 471).

\(^7\) Lucian lists the frescoes on the walls of the room and writes: ‘On this there follows another prehistoric picture. Orion, who is blind, is carrying Cedalion, and the latter, riding on his back, is showing him the way to the sunlight. The rising sun is healing the blindness of Orion, and Hephaestos views the incident from Lemnos’ (Lucian, *The Hall*, ed. A. M. Harman, Loeb edition, London: Heinemann, 1913, 203).
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perch Cedalion guides the giant towards the rising sun. For his painting, Poussin chose the part of the tale in which the giant is actually moving in the direction of the sun.

Gombrich observed this variation on the theme of the myth, put himself in the shoes of the peintre-philosophe, and reflected on the books that Poussin may have consulted. His words are: ‘however, the presence of the goddess becomes perhaps less mysterious if we turn from classical authors to the reference books Poussin may have consulted, when trying to deepen his acquaintance with the myth to which Lucian alluded’. A myth, it would seem, that had never before been represented in painting. But for our detective, it was perhaps the cloud rather than Diana that struck Gombrich’s innate, early curiosity, as he notes: ‘the same cloud on which she leans also forms a veil in front of Orion’s eyes and thus suggests some kind of connection between the presence of the goddess and the predicament of the giant’.

Nearly fifty years later, when interviewed by Didier Eribon, Gombrich told of how he had come to identify Poussin’s secondary source:

At other times it is just a matter chance: one reads a book, and suddenly one thinks of a picture. For instance, my article on the Orion by Poussin. I don’t think I was looking for the answer. I was reading Natalis Comes about mythologies; I read this story and I suddenly thought: ‘Remember Poussin’.

It would appear to have been a veritable stroke of luck despite the fact that just afterwards – and still within the interview – he corrected himself by affirming that the ‘the logic of discovery’ was not a question of luck but rather: ‘well, let’s say it’s more a matter of reading. If you never read a book, it will not happen to you’.

Whether it was a stroke of luck or of interpretation, the truth of the matter is that Natalis Comes, Mythologiae – published in 1551 in Venice and promptly translated into French – constitutes another written source for Poussin’s work. In his interpretation of Orion, Comes chose to refer to a ‘repulsive apocryphal story’,

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8 Reference to Orion may be found in Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey, in Ovid’s Fasti and in other ancient texts. Like for all myths, there are numerous variations as concerns his birth and his death. The synthesis of variations proposed by Karl Kerényi, Die Mythologie der Griechen, München, 1951, and Robert Graves, The Greek Myth, New York, 1955, have been referred to here.

9 The name ‘peintre-philosophe’, far from the interpretation given it by Anthony Blunt (The Painting of Nicolas Poussin. A Critical Catalogue, New York-London, 1966), has roots in the work of the artist’s earliest of biographers, Giovanni Bellori (The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects), as well as in that of André Félibien (Entretiens sur les vies et sur les ouvrages des plus excellens peintres..., Paris, vol. IV, 1725), who repeatedly point out the painter’s erudition. Besides in his letters, proof of Poussin’s theoretical competence may also be found in the Osservazioni di Nicolò Pussino sopra la pittura, published in the appendix to Bellori’s Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects, where citations from Quintilian, Tasso, Castelvetro, Alberti and others are reported.

10 A Lifelong Interest, 142.

11 Natalis Comes (1520-1582) in his Mythologiae affirms that all of the teachings of the ancients concerning both a knowledge of natural things and the rules of good customs were by the ancients ‘hidden under the integument of myths’. Along with Vincenzo Cartari (1556) and Girardi (1548), Comes is one of the three sixteenth-century mythographers whose works concern poets and artists, with the specific purpose of ‘suggesting themes and models of inspiration’ (cf. Jean Seznec, La survivance des dieux antique, London; Warburg Institute, 1940, 289).
in which the giant was sired by three fathers: Jupiter, god of air, Apollo, god of the sun, Neptune, god of the seas. Clouds originate from the union between air, sun and water, Comes explained, and Diana, goddess of the moon, evokes the rising up of the clouds into the atmosphere and the ensuing return to earth in the form of rain that Apollo (sun) then dries up, so that the perennial cycle may start over again. Ultimately, it is the phenomenon of the eternal cyclicity of water transposed in terms of the myth, of the ancient fable. Poussin translated it into painting while endeavouring – according to Gombrich – ‘to represent the exoteric and esoteric aspect of the myth in one picture’; he continues: ‘it constitutes the true achievement of Poussin’s genius that he succeeded in turning a literary curiosity into a living vision, that his picture expresses in pictorial terms what it signifies in terms of allegory’.13

This was a discovery that no other scholar ever questioned, but instead accepted as truth, and consequently was unwaveringly cited by anyone who has ever written on Poussin in general – from Anthony Blunt to Pierre Rosenberg – or on that painting in particular – from Richard Verdi to Hans Willem Van Helsdingen,14 and many others. We might venture to say, and thanks to art history’s

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12 The passage in Comes in which Orion is discussed – and which is cited by Gombrich, ‘The subject of Poussin’s Orion’, 121 – is as follows: ‘through the combined power of these three Gods arises the stuff of wind, rain and thunder that is called Orion. Since the subtler part of the water which is rarefied rests on the surface it is said that Orion had learned from his father how to walk on the water. When this rarefied matter spreads and diffuses into the air this is described as Orion having come to Chios which place derives its name from “diffusion” (for chéein means to diffuse). And that he further attempted to violate Aerope (sic) and was expelled from that region and deprived of his lights – this is because this matter must pass right through the air and ascend to the highest spheres and when the matter is diffused throughout that sphere it somehow feels the power of fire languishing. For anything that is moved with a motion not of its own loses its power which diminishes as it proceeds. Orion is kindly received by Vulcanus, approaches the sun, finds his former health restored and thence returns to Chios – this naturally signifies nothing else but the cyclical and mutual generation and destruction of the elements. They say that he was killed by Diana’s arrows for having dared to touch her – because as soon as the vapours have ascended to the highest stratum of the air so that they appear to us as touching the moon or the sun, the power of the moon gathers them up and converts them into rains and storms, thus overthrowing them with her arrows and sending them downwards; for the power of the moon works like the ferment that brings about these processes. Finally they say that Orion was killed and transformed into a celestial constellation – because under this sign storm, gales and thunders are frequent’.13

13 ‘The subject of Poussin’s Orion’, 122. Again in the Eribon interview Gombrich assesses the importance of his study as follows: ‘I discovered in the course of my research that Poussin had used a work by Natalis Comes and had illustrated the explanation that this author gives of the myth as referring to a cloud. That chance discovery actually provided an important insight into Poussin’s treatment of myth, which was later followed up by Anthony Blunt and others’ (A Lifelong Interest, 55).

renewed interest in the French painter, that the essay on Orion is without a doubt of all of Gombrich’s work, the one most frequently cited.

**The cloud as Orion’s double**

But Gombrich’s article only explains a portion of this intriguing painting, indeed recognizing the dark cloud to be one of its most unique components, but not the only one, of course. How can the painting be given a voice so that it may reveal itself entirely?

We shall have to take over in order to bring forward a more accurate plastic analysis of the *Orion*, also keeping in mind – like Gombrich had – just what was said about the painting by other writers. Thus, availed with semiotics and with the article of 1944 clearly in mind, let us turn to the painting by Poussin.

The fact that Orion is a colossus inevitably entails the problem of size: to represent a gigantic figure in a human-size world is a veritable challenge for painting, because it at the very least implies the problem of proportion and equilibrium in relation to nature and the other figures. The importance of such problems increases if we observe Poussin’s landscapes, particularly those which he painted in his later years, where the landscape is the main character, while the human figures, reduced to small, minor roles, would appear to be secondary characters. The titles of such paintings are indeed always: *Landscape with…* something else: *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake, Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe, Landscape with Orpheus and Eurydice, Landscape with Agar and the Angel,* to name only a few.

It was not just the representation of the colossal figure of Orion that challenged Poussin. The paintings *Landscape with Hercules and Cacus* and *Landscape with Polyphemus* are two further examples in which gigantic figures are indeed present, but not in the foreground: situated in the background, distant from the viewer, their oversize is attested to mainly through their relationship with the tall

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15 The history of Christianity includes a long series of figures of superhuman size; one example is Reprobus, the giant who ferried poor wayfarers. Reprobus then became known as Christopher when he loaded onto his shoulders a child who became heavier and heavier as the ride continued, to the extent that he felt as though he were carrying the world on his shoulders: that child turned out to be Christ. Painting has often represented this iconographic motif, which Poussin was surely familiar with, setting it in a landscape scene, obviously divided by a river, where Christopher’s extraordinary size allowed him to carry the figure of the Christ Child as high up as possible. The written source is Jacobus de Voragine’s *Golden Legend.*

16 *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* (119.5 x 199 cm), London, National Gallery, painted for Jean Pointel and probably finished in 1648. *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe* (192.5 x 273.5 cm), Frankfurt, Städelisches Kunstinstitut, painted for Cassiano dal Pozzo in 1651. *Landscape with Orpheus and Eurydice* (124 x 200 cm, the original height was 146 cm), Paris, Louvre Museum, painted for Pointel, no later than 1650. *Landscape with Agar and the Angel* (100 x 75 cm), Rome, Galleria nazionale d’arte antica di palazzo Barberini – the consensus is that it was painted in 1660. Cf. for more on the topic Anthony Blunt (*The Painting of Nicolas Poussin*), the scholar who formally provided names for the paintings of Poussin, and Louis Marin (*Sublime Poussin*, Paris, 1995).

17 The former is preserved in Moscow at the Pushkin State Museum (156 x 201 cm); as concerns its date, scholarship wavers from 1648 to 1650, plus 1662; Pierre Rosenberg (*Nicolas Poussin 1594-1665, 508*) would tend towards its execution after the *Orion*. The latter, preserved in Saint Petersburg at the Hermitage (150 x 198 cm) may probably be dated 1649, also affirmed by Félibien (*Entretiens sur les vies*).
mountain on which they have been placed, and which the ‘rocky’ chromatism dilutes in a faraway vision.\textsuperscript{18}

In our case, Orion’s size is discerned through his relationship with the landscape, and not just – according to Bellori\textsuperscript{19} – ‘from that of a little man who stands on his shoulders and guides him, while another one gazes at him’; actors who are indeed about one-third the size of the giant-hunter. It is, rather, the foreground that suggests a comparison between the two giants depicted here: to the right, Orion, to the left, the mighty tree partially shrouded in shadow. This equal relationship, if we look closely, is the result of a series of stratagems. It is geometrically calculated; the median axis of the tree and the barycentre for Orion are equidistant from the vertical ends of the pictorial surface\textsuperscript{20} (Fig. 2). Their reciprocal arrangement also creates an arc that converges towards the centre; the tree’s bifurcation in the direction of the sky is an inverted reflection of Orion’s legs and, although less evident, Orion’s recessing vertebral column generates a rhyme with the particularity of the trunk. Furthermore, the joint relationship between the natural components and the ‘human’ ones is probably what led Keith Christiansen\textsuperscript{21} to modify the traditional title, \textit{Landscape with Orion} so that it became \textit{Blind Orion Searching for the Rising Sun}, emphasizing the narrative element over the landscape.

Fig. 2. Secret geometry of Nicolas Poussin, \textit{Landscape with Orion}.

\textsuperscript{18} Louis Marin (\textit{Sublime Poussin}, Paris: Seuil, 1995) in the book that he had only partially written, a portion of which was published after his death, overall, specifically in the second chapter ‘The sublime: figure II: the colossal or the shock of ostentation’ had foreseen dealing with the problem of ‘The giant and nature’, within which the New York painting would have seen a focus in the part entitled ‘Orion blind and the sun’. On the motif of the giant in Poussin, cf. Richard Verdi ‘Poussin’s giants: from romanticism to surrealism’, in Katie Scott, Genevieve Warwick, eds., \textit{Commemorating Poussin...}, 191-210.

\textsuperscript{19} Bellori, \textit{The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects}, 471.

\textsuperscript{20} The entire painting is governed by a structuring of precise lines; despite the general effect it seems to self-generate and not produce itself out of respect for a rigorous geometric set-up. In this case, like in many others, Poussin put his way of articulating the pictorial surface into practice, almost without letting it show, or, as Marin states (\textit{Sublime Poussin}, 145), on the basis of that which may be considered the painter’s dissimulated stylistic code.

Because of his gigantic stature, not only can Orion observe the sea, but he can stand between the sky and the earth, in direct contact with the clouds; in our case with precisely the cloud that was so meticulously interpreted by Gombrich. The scholar’s refined eye reveals perfect discernment of the sign when he affirms that ‘the long-stretched stormcloud through which the giant is striding, that conspicuously rises from under the trees, expands through the valley, gathers up in the air and touches Diana’s feet, this cloud is no other than Orion himself in his “real” esoteric meaning’. This is not just in his real allegorical meaning, but in purely formal terms as well: the darkest part of the cloud with its two-layered entry into the painting indeed presents analogies with Orion’s body, concretely taking shape to form his double (Fig. 3). The cloud, furthermore, emerges from the whole because it is a harbinger of rain, and its darkness is also evident because it overlaps with other brighter clouds, which the rays of the sun rim ‘in capricious contours’ considered by a number of art historians, including Alain Mérot, to be the ‘unforgettable boldness’ of the painter. Moreover, in addition to being Orion’s double, the cloud forms yet another double in the shadow it casts in the foreground.

![Fig. 3. Graphical rework of Nicolas Poussin, Landscape with Orion.](image)

The entire foreground is enveloped by the shadow. With the cloud in the sky and its shadow cast on the earth, and added to this the curved layout of both Orion and the tree, a sort of circular form is determined, something similar to a border or, more precisely, to an elliptical painting in a painting that has the role of encouraging a focus on the landscape (Fig. 4). The dark ‘frame’ surrounding the landscape pervaded with the light of the rising sun is – perceptively speaking – one

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of the causes of that surface effect that the painting is capable of restoring by re-echoing, on a plastic plane, the eternal cyclicity of the elements (air, water, sun) previously cited by Natalis Comes in the *Mythologiae*. The impression of its being a surface is likewise corroborated by the initial ‘blades’ of the cloud, to the extent that the shadow projected by the giant could also be the one transmitted by these blades, thus underscoring the close connection between the two. Ultimately the foreground manifests the equilibrium of the colossus or, to use the title of Louis Marin’s unwritten chapter, ‘Le sublime, le colossal ou le choc de l’ostentation’.

Fig. 4. Graphical rework of Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with Orion*.

Claude Simon, in his *Orion aveugle* of 1970, interpreted the intrinsic effect of the painting’s surface as follows:

 quoique les règles de la perspective soient apparemment observées pour suggérer au spectateur la sensation de profondeur, le peintre s’est contradictoirement attaché à multiplier les artifices qui ont pour résultat de détruire cet effet de façon que le géant se trouve partie intégrante du magma de terre, de feuillages, d’eau et de ciel qui l’entoure.24

24 Poussin’s painting (along with other artworks: Picasso, Dubuffet, Rauschenberg) was used by Simon in a comparison between text and image where the presence of the paintings calls up an inverted relationship between verbal and visual: ‘the paintings in the text refer the image of the text in the paintings, in an endless game of reflections’ (Christian Michel Amiens, ‘Texte et image dans *Orion aveugle*. Les corps conducteurs de Claude Simon: une inclusion réciproque’, in *La littérature et les arts*, Besançon, 1997, 160). The *Orion* occupies only a primary role and in the description offered by Simon (Claude Simon, *Orion aveugle*, Genève, 1970, 127-128) the accent is on the modalities of perceiving the
**Poussin the seeing blind man**

Our consideration of the shadow leads to a closer look at the relationship between light and shadow in the entire painting. But before doing so, we must turn our attention to the landscape in the background with which the left hand of the giant is juxtaposed. This acts as a deictic that ‘points out’ the lighthouse in the distance, which is in turn marked by the descendent line of the mountains in the background. Could the lighthouse be representing an eye, visible in the night? Orion is headed – Jacques Derrida says – towards the ‘rising star, the other eye, the eye of the other that sees him arriving.’

From this point of view the light may hence be considered like a delegate of the sun within the pictorial surface: the light of the day just beginning is that of a sun that is still low and hidden, obstructed by the mountains. A solution previously adopted by Poussin in the painting *Christ Healing the Blind*, which obviously shares with the *Orion* the motif of blindness. In that case light and shadow, skilfully pondered for the entire scenography, draw the viewer’s eye towards the centre of the action, the place from which the viewer could enjoy the entire range of colours presented by the painting. Bourdon had previously noticed this in André Félibien’s description: the glance thus ‘manipulated’ favours the parallel between the pleasure felt by the eyes when touched by colour, and that of the blind person after being touched by the hands of Christ.

In the *Orion*, the luministic play is even more complex, articulated on a rather restricted choice of colours, prevalently realized by the infinite tonalities of green

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26 The painting (119 x 176 cm) is dated 1650, and is housed in the Louvre in Paris. Bourdon’s particularized interpretation – stated during the *Conferences de l’Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture* in 1667 and included in Félibien’s *Entrétiens* (1725) – which in many ways might also work for the *Orion*, concentrates precisely on the question of light: ‘Il fit donc premièrement remarquer combien la qualité du jour, que le peintre a si bien représentée, donne l’éclat à tout son ouvrage, car, comme le soleil doit être encore fort bas, puisque ses rayons ne frappent quasi qu’en ligne parallèle les montagnes et les autres corps qui lui sont exposés, on voit que le milieu du tableau est couvert d’une grande ombre à cause des bâtiments qui sont élevés sur diverses hauteurs, de sort que tout ce qui sert de fond aux figures étant privé de la lumière, elles paraissent avec beaucoup plus de relief, de force et de beauté. Et comme sur les lieux qui paraissent les plus éminents, le jour y frappe en diverses manières et qu’il éclaire certaines parties de la montagne, des arbres et de plusieurs palais, les yeux sont d’autant plus agréablement touchés que ces échappées de lumière font un contraste merveilleux avec les ombres et les demi-teints qui se rencontrent dans tous ces différents objets, car, parmi cette diversité de maisons et sur la montagne même il y a des arbres qui n’étant encore un air épais qui donne à ces lieux-là une grande fraîcheur et y répand une couleur douce qui unit tendrement toutes les autres ensemble’. For a more detailed explanation of the painting, cf. Antony Blunt, *The Painting of Nicolas Poussin. A Critical Catalogue*, New York-London: Phaidon, 1966; Oscar Bätschmann, *Nicolas Poussin. Dialectics of Painting*, London: Reaktion Books, 1990; Cristina Girardi, *Semiotica del paesaggio: da paraergon a genere autonomo*, doctoral dissertation in Semiotica dell’arte, Dipartimento delle arti visive, Università di Bologna, 2009.
and brown. Nearly everything is contemporaneously visible between shadow and light: the giant’s leg and part of his bust are in the light, but the rest of his body, including most of his face with the empty eye sockets, is in shadow; Hephaestos is between light and shadow; Diana is partially covered by the cloud; and more in general, the light constantly plays with the long shadows in the landscape. The two bystanders (whose busts are all that we see, and who are probably seated along a slope), are totally in the shade. In the shade of a tree is the small crouching figure situated between the foreground and the background in the light green oval.

Gombrich identified Diana on a cloud, Cedalion, the guide, on the giant’s shoulders, and Hephaestos at his feet. But because it was not the purpose of his study to do so, he did not discuss the two bystanders in the painting, unmentioned in the mythological version. Who might the two figures be? One has his shoulders to us as he looks towards Orion, while the other is seen from the front as he looks forward. These are echoing figures because their gestures rhyme with those of Hephaestos, Cedalion, Orion: the arms outstretched of the guide riding on Orion’s shoulders are a reflection of those of Vulcan, the guide on earth, and they are reiterated in the bystander seen from behind. The latter figure is likewise joined to Cedalion by the chromatic rhyme of the orange garment (and, although less obvious, the other seated figure seems to be dressed in blue, in chromatic rhyme with Hephaestos’ blue garment). Ultimately, all of the actors in the picture appear to be bound together, and for this reason the two bystanders must also have a precise role.

Another painting by Poussin, Landscape with Three Men, proposes a situation similar to that of the Orion as concerns the figures portrayed in a half-length format. In this case, a man seen from behind lying on a slope points to the city in the background, and one of the two frontal figures next to him, the one with a cane, points rightwards with his arm outstretched. Here, the chromatism of the first figure to the left – clothed in bright red and blue – is a hapax for the painting, catalyzing its viewing, regardless of the subject, and the vision of the first figure from the back and of the other two figures from the front are like two separate summonings for the viewer.

It is common knowledge just how carefully Poussin studied his scenographies and how figures were to be added to them, and how he would even use mannequins, dressing them up and then arranging them on a squared plan with a theatrical wing in the background. On this same stage he would arrange the architectural and naturalistic elements so that he could carefully study the relationships between the figures, their movements and how they, in turn, related to

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27 Preserved in Madrid at the Prado Museum (120 x 187 cm) and dated from 1648 to 1651, according to some scholars (compare Rosenberg, Christiansen, Poussin and Nature: Arcadian Visions, 252) it seems to have no evident subject: two wayfarers ask a man who is half lying on an escarpment for directions. Charles Dempsey, ‘The Greek Style and the Prehistory of Neoclassicism’, in Elizabeth Cropper, ed., Pietro Testa 1612–1650. Prints and Drawings, exh. cat., Philadelphia, 1988, XXXVII-LIX, instead believes that the source of the painting might be found in Diogenes Laertius, Lives and Opinion of Eminent Philosophers, vi, 56, and that on the basis of the clothing, the typical duplex pannum, Diogenes leaving Sparta for Athens may be identified. The philosopher would be answering the wayfarer that he still prefers virile Sparta to feminine Athens: this would be the meaning of Diogenes’ gesture as he stretches his arm out to the right.
the architectural and landscape settings. The stage would then be closed inside a kind of box in which slits were made for the purposes of scrupulously calibrating the lighting that Poussin checked from the peephole on the anterior part of his ‘small theatre’. It was only after obtaining a perfect simulation of what he wanted to represent, that he would proceed to produce his preparatory drawings, which – as stated by Oscar Bätschmann – firstly revealed the masses of shadow, while the white surface of the sheet of paper functioned as the light. In other words, Poussin left nothing up to chance or, as he personally affirmed referring to himself in the third person: ‘il ne travail point au hazard’. Essentially, and this is particularly evident in the Christ Healing the Blind, his scenographies were always the result of very careful directing, where the landscape was never simply a decorative component, but rather structurally defined the story.

Perhaps by reasoning on the viewpoint of the painting Landscape with Orion we might find a possible explanation for the two figures that Poussin chooses to portray half-length. Just how high up is the viewpoint? If we consider the way the tree stumps in the foreground are represented it cannot be too high up, which would instead be more fitting for a landscape of this breadth. But this lower and more illuminated point of view is specific to the foreground alone, to that portion of the painting where the viewer encounters, on one side, a frontal view of one of the half-length figures, and, on the other, a view from behind, with the figure’s face towards Orion.

If we endeavour to make a sort of ‘visual’ commutation, i.e. if we try to remove the two seated figures (Fig. 5), the painting undergoes a profound change because the two men are of essential importance to the viewer’s ‘entry’ into the landscape, emphasising by way of the oval of light, an effect of ‘concavity’ more than of depth. Here, the two seated figures reveal the role they play: they are accessories to the narration but of core importance to the spatial structuring of the painting overall.

28 Much has been written as concerns Poussin’s use of models. Bellori (The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects, 452) says: ‘When he prepared to execute his compositions, once he had conceived the invention he would make a rough sketch of it, enough to be comprehensible; then he fashioned small models in wax of all the figures in their attitudes, in bozzette of half a palmo, and composed the history or fable in the round in order to see the natural effects of light and shadow on their bodies. Following this, he made other, larger models, and clothed them in order to see separately the arrangements and folds of the drapery over the nude, and for this purpose he used fine linen or wet chambray, a few scraps of fabric sufficing him for the variety of the colours’. Poussin’s method of working is also attested to in a letter by Le Blond de la Tour of 1669 (Jacques Thuillier, Poussin, Paris, 1994, 181) and through a reconstruction of a ‘small theatre’, compare Oscar Bätschmann, Nicolas Poussin. Dialectics of Painting, 16-29; Avigdor Arikha, ‘De la boîte, des figurines et du mannequin’, in Rosenberg, Prat, ed., Nicolas Poussin 1594-1665, 44-47.

Returning to the viewpoint from lower down we promptly observe its fleetingness, because the viewer is immediately encouraged – by two ‘devices’ that are plastic before they are figurative – to raise his or her eyes. To the left, the bent branch with its corresponding shadow, to the right, Hephaestos, arms outstretched and head lifted upwards as well as the gaze of the figure seen from the back in the direction of the giant, will guide the viewer to move from the dark zone to the light zone of the upper portion of the painting. This is the place where the viewer will first encounter the frontal luminosity of Diana that the ‘lighthouse-eye’ (below her and in the distance) aims at with its verticality. Additionally, it will be precisely the goddess’ gaze that will lead to Orion-Cedalion: to the upwards point of view that allows for an extensive vision of the landscape. A play between light and shadow which can already be seen in the foreground and precisely between the tree stumps that Sacheverell Sitwell so poetically interpreted:

‘This was the vision, or allegory: / We heard the leaves shudder with no wind upon them / By the ford of the river, by the deep worn stonesus,[?] / And a tread of thunder in the shadowed wood; / Then the hunter Orion came out through the trees, / A tree-top giant, with a man upon his shoulder, / Half in the clouds’.30

Here we face a paradox. The painter, as well as the observer, with this point of view finds themselves simultaneously concomitant with the blind man (Orion) and the seeing man (Cedalion). But this point of view is the only place from which to contemplate the landscape and where an echo of the dark circular zone of the foreground may be found: the cloud indeed leaves an opening around the face of the giant, which while indicating the transitoriness of the cloud, of the opposing actant, may also recall the shape of an eye. The lighthouse is the eye of the night, the dispersing of the cloud on the face of the giant recalls the eye just as it is alluded to in the illuminated oval at the back of the two bystanders. The eye is also present in other paintings by Poussin. It is represented on the diadem of the ‘woman-as-

Painting’, along with the painter’s shadow cast on the empty canvas and on the sparkling diamond that Poussin wears on his right index finger in Self-Portrait, executed in 1650 for Chantelou. In the Self-Portrait executed for Pointel which, with the one for Chantelou – as clearly demonstrated by Louis Marin – consists in an intimate dialogue, the large book held up by Poussin bore writing (manipulated after the artist’s death) that was most probably the same as what is written on the spine of the book in the engraving that introduces Bellori’s ‘Life’ (also present in the other engraving in Bellori’s ‘Life’).

The painter identifies with the lower point of view as well as the higher one, because he knows everything, including what happens before and after the story. It is only thus that he may manipulate the viewer to journey with his or her eye inside the picture to fully discover – between light and shadow, seeing and not seeing – the marvellous landscape kissed by the fresh morning light that unfolds to the left, with abundant waters that cascade zigzagging from the mountains, with groups of houses and the long cove along which the houses of the city stretch. William Hazlitt’s description of the landscape is as follows:

Nothing was ever more finely conceived or done. It breathes the spirit of the morning; its moisture, its repose, its obscurity, waiting the miracle of the light to kindle it into smiles: the whole is, like the principal figure in it, ‘a forerunner of the dawn’. The same atmosphere tinges and imbues every object, the same dull light “shadowy set off” the face of nature: one feeling of vastness, of strangeness, and of primeval form pervades the painter’s canvas, and we are thrown back upon the first integrity of things. This great and learned man might be said to see nature through the glass of time.

31 Giovan Battista Bellori (The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects, 455) had this to say about the painting: ‘In the year 1650, he painted with his own hand the self-portrait that Signor de Chantelou sent to France, from which we have taken the one that appears printed above. But in the original, on the panel with the name can be read: EFFIGIES NICOLAI POISSINI ANDELIENSIS PICTORIS ANNO AETATIS LVI. ROMAE ANNO IVBILEI MDCL. [Image of Nicolas Poussin of Les Andelys at 61 years of age. At Rome in the Jubilee year 1650]. In the background, on the other panel on the opposite side, a woman’s head is depicted in profile, with an eye in the diadem over her brow: this is Painting; and two hands appear there embracing her, standing for love of painting and friendship, to which the portrait is dedicated’.

32 Marin, Sublime Poussin, 98-103.

33 Produced in 1649 and housed in Berlin at the Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie. The words that the most recent restoration work definitively removed, but that were, it seems, on several occasions manipulated are De lumine et colore. There is a great deal of literature on the topic, also because Poussin’s Self-Portraits encouraged discussion of the possible theoretical production of the French artist; compare, in particular Matthias Winner, ‘Poussin Selbstbildnis von 1629’, in Il se rendit en Italie. Études offertes à André Chastel, Roma-Parigi, 1987, 371-401; Thomas Puttfarken, ‘Poussin’s thoughts on painting’, in Richard Verdi, ed., Commemorating Poussin: Reception and Interpretation of the Artist, Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1999, 43-75; Pierre Rosenberg, Louis Antoine Prat, eds, Nicolas Poussin 1594-1665, exh. cat., Paris, 1994; Louis Marin, Sublime Poussin, Paris, 1995.

34 The path or the zigzagging torrent are elements constantly found in Poussin’s landscapes, cf. Marin, Sublime Poussin, 134.

The painting’s invitation is that neither the painter nor the viewer must remain in shadow, motionless, i.e. they must not behave like that minuscule, static figure that finds itself in the oval of the landscape that may be perceived solely by carefully scrutinizing the painting. Transitoriness is thus a device that the viewer is made to experience and that may even be considered a reflection of the transitoriness of the cloud and of Orion’s blindness.

What remains to be explained is Diana’s presence, which is not – as we have clearly witnessed and as Félibien states36 – the cause of Orion’s blindness, although it must be said that the French critic’s mistake is justified. Standing on a cloud, her left hand to her side and her right hand holding her head, the goddess indeed seems to be contemplating her work. In truth, her role may once again be explained by the insightful painter’s viewpoint. Because they are both expert hunters Diana and Orion both have a bow and quiver (to hold their arrows).37 Diana’s excellent aim when shooting her arrows will be the involuntary cause of the death of the giant, whom the goddess will promptly forever transform into a constellation. It is no accident that Orion’s quiver is portrayed in an oblique position, its extension (like that of Diana’s) skywards, the place where – in night time chronology – Orion’s constellation will find its place. We might venture to say that in addition to the source so wisely indicated by Gombrich, perhaps another one used by the ‘peintre-philosophe’ was Johann Bayer’s Uranometria (Fig. 6).

The first atlas of the entire celestial sphere published in Augsburg in 1603 indeed presents an analogy with our painting: the figure that dominates the stellar arrangement of the constellation is seen from the back, while traditionally his face was always earthwards. It is precisely the position of the shoulders that, however different, recalls that of Poussin’s Orion.38

36 André Félibien describes the painting as a landscape ‘with Orion blinded by Diana’ 1725.
37 After gaining back his sight, Orion decides to get his revenge. While returning to the island of Chios he meets Diana who convinces him to go hunting with her. Apollo, the goddess’ brother, concerned that his sister might fall under the spell of the hunter, goes to Mother Earth andequivocally tells her of some of things that Orion has been boasting about (ridding the earth of all ferocious and monstrous animals); she therefore sets a very poisonous scorpion on him. The pain caused by the scorpion bite is so strong that Orion jumps into the sea. Apollo tricks his sister (by calling Orion with his Boeotian nickname Candaon) into hitting the black object floating on the water near the island of Ortigia. Diana shoots her infallible arrow. She then swims out to her victim, and only then realizes who it is. All that is left for her to do is place the image of Orion amidst the stars, forever pursued by the scorpion. Compare Karl Kerényi, Die Mythologie der Griechen, München, 1951 and Robert Graves, The Greek Myth, New York, 1955.
38 Bayer’s Uranometria is considered to be the most complete measurement of the heavens after the one by Ptolemy. Made up of fifty-one stellar maps it also contains the synopsis of the sky of the boreal and austral hemispheres.
By way of a conclusion

From eye to hand; from light to shadow. Perhaps this Orion, when placed alongside the ‘painter-viewer’, wishes to visually speak of the art of painting. This art was, for Poussin at least, conceived by the blind eye of the intellect through a detailed, systematic and documented mental elaboration of all that was to be shown on the canvas, through the work of the painter’s hand.

Poussin had created a painting with a subject that – from what we know - no one had ever realized before: that is, he worked within a terrain that was deprived of a direct tradition, thus unleashing his great creative freedom. In between the mesh of the mythological narration, of the loss and of the recovery of the giant’s eyesight, ‘autobiographical’ traces concerning Poussin’s artistic activity are inscribed. On the other hand, that the end result of each of Poussin’s paintings

40 Some scholars (Blunt, The Painting of Nicolas Poussin, 328-331) believe that Tommaso Campanella’s La città del sole played a significant role in the elaboration of the painting. I believe that the Dominican philosopher’s work simply constituted a reference point in the definition of an iconographic motif that was unprecedented for painting, and not an actual source.
amounted to an ‘advancing with attempts along…the paths of creation’ is confirmed in many of his letters. When writing to his patron Chantelou in 1647 the ‘peintre-philosophe’ specified: ‘Pour ce qui est de mon portrait je m’efforcerai de vous donner satisfaction et de la vierge que vous désirez que se vous face, dès demain e me vous mettre la cervelle dessous pour trouver quelque nouveau caprice et nouvelle invention pour exécuter à son temps’; and in another letter to his patron: ‘Pour ce qui est de la Madonne je donnerai commencement cet hiver dieu aydans, et n’y mettrai point la main que premièrement je ni aye bien pensé car jy veus employer tout mon talent’. Two examples, among others, that testify to how his indubitable pictorial qualities are always the result of very complex meditations, of long periods of gestation in a search for the new, to achieve ‘dernières parties’ of the painter, that ‘ne se peuvent apprendre’ because – as he personally writes in one of his last testimonies – ‘c’est le Rameau d’or de Virgile que nul ne peut trouver ny ceullir sil n’est conduit par la Fatalité’.

If we accept the hypothesis for the interpretation proposed, in line with the sixteenth-century mythographer Natalis Comes, inscribed within the painting would be a ‘moral’, especially because the painter: ‘Qu’il est bien-aise qu’on sache qu’il ne travail point au hasard, et qu’il est en quelque manière assez bien instruit de ce qui est permis à un Peintre dans les choses qu’il veut représenter, lesquelles se peuvent prendre et considérer comme elles sont encore ou comme elles doivent être’.  

To conclude let us go back to Gombrich. The purpose of this essay is to pay tribute to the Viennese art historian, to his everlasting article on the Orion, without which we could never even have attempted to gain a better understanding of Poussin’s painting, making an effort in the meantime to put into practice what the French artist had firmly theorized. The argument proposed here is that this also reflects how Gombrich worked. The Viennese scholar never stopped at the ‘aspect’ of things, he never stopped before ‘recevoir naturellement dans l’œil la forme et la rassemblement de la chose vue’, but always tried to see the image with the modality of the Poussinian ‘prospect’, that is, beyond the simple receiving of its form in the eye – as the French painter continues – instead searching ‘avec une application particulière les moyen de bien connoistre ce mesme objet’.

An enemy of the widespread tendency to deliver art to a simply intuitive and emotional reading, Gombrich deserves to be recognized for having always placed at the centre of his research the fundamental problem of the intelligibility of visual objects. By promoting a more rational development of the debate on art, analyzing art through the works themselves rather than simply through the principle of a causal and temporal connection and favouring a return to a visual reading of the pictorial text, these became Gombrich’s principles of virtue, with which – although he never actually said so – the semiologist loved to weave his way amidst art historians.

41 Simon, Orion aveugle, 133.
42 Jouanny, Correspondance, n. 175, 406-407. Reported by Félibien (Entretiens sur les vies, 41) the letter to Jacques Stella is an impassioned defence by Poussin of his painting Moses Bringing Forth Water from the Rock.
43 Gombrich, Eribon, A Lifelong Interest, 154.
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