

Commemorating Poussin

Reception and Interpretation of the Artist

EDITED BY

Katie Scott and
Genevieve Warwick



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I

Introduction

KATIE SCOTT

‘POUR LA GLOIRE DES ARTS ET L’HONNEUR DE FRANCE’:
COMMEMORATING POUSSIN 1784–1995

‘Farewell Poussin’

In the spring of 1995 the Courtauld Institute of Art in London hosted a series of lectures to mark its farewell to Poussin at the close of the year’s European-wide celebration of the 400th anniversary of the painter’s birth. Every Tuesday for ten weeks invited scholars addressed a crowded auditorium on aspects of Poussin’s practice and theory, on the patronage, reception and meaning of his work and on his posthumous influence and scholarly fortunes. The publication of the lectures below cannot recreate the atmosphere of that spring, the excitement of seeing Poussin’s paintings displayed nearby at the Royal Academy and the collective commitment to recall and to understand better the art of a painter widely admired. Publication strips away the passionate, ritualistic and collective character that accrues to scholarship on such occasions, leaving only its rational, individually expressed and historically supported arguments.¹ Yet the *année Poussin*, as Pierre Rosenberg dubbed it, was itself memorable for its exhibitions, its symposia, its catalogues and most importantly for the ways in which the French, and to a lesser extent the British, responded to the occasion. A brief history of the commemoration of Poussin in France from the end of the eighteenth century to the present framed by an account of the public and scholarly response to the 1994 Grand Palais exhibition of the painter’s work in Paris, thus seems an appropriate introduction to essays themselves once offered as commemorations in that anniversary year.

Reading a selection of the newspaper reviews of the Poussin exhibition held at the Grand Palais, it is difficult to miss the sharp sense of disappointment provoked by the event. It was not, as one might have supposed, Poussin or his works or the terms or effects of the display that disappointed

critics like Gérard Dupuy; rather, they were distressed by the public's apparent failure to respond to what should have been a major cultural event. 'This retrospective has intimidated, perhaps even bored [the public]', claimed *Libération*, 'Word of mouth – which makes or breaks reputations more surely than the media – dismissed the show despite the efforts of the organisers to render the works accessible.'² Thus, rather than creating consensus, a feeling of shared identity (between then and now and us and them) as the logic of commemoration dictates,³ the exhibition apparently exposed a double hiatus: one separating contemporary French society from classical culture, and another the public from specialists or connoisseurs.⁴ Moreover, Philippe Dagen, a critic for *Le Monde*, argued that though the very bulk of scholarly attention⁵ heaped upon Poussin by past and present generations, might have secured for the painter, as for other 'classics' of his era, widespread public familiarity – a banal hand to mouth fame on the official surfaces of banknotes and stamps⁶ – it had also rendered the artist '*de plus en plus étrange*'.⁷

The strangeness that Dagen had in mind was, I think, distinct both from the exotic 'otherness' to be encountered during the same months at La Villette, at the display of the treasures salvaged from the sixteenth-century ship *San Diego*, and from the opacity of history, from the essential difference of things long past. He was alluding not so much to the objective category of the strange as to the psychologically costly process of estrangement. In a follow-up article written with Emmanuel De Roux, Dagen attempted to explain the loss of Poussin by comparing the relative 'failure' of the exhibition with the 'success' of *Caillebotte*, a pendant show at the Grand Palais in the autumn of '94.⁸ For the public, looking at *Caillebotte* was apparently akin to flicking through the family photograph album. The flexible realism and agreeable modernism of *Caillebotte*'s depictions of daily life conjured up for viewers an image of the mythical, bourgeois golden age of their forefathers (always overlooking the fact that these same great-grandparents had had excessive difficulty in adjusting to Impressionism, to them so unacceptably *avant-garde*). Thus, according to Dagen and De Roux, *Caillebotte* in the nineties belongs to the warm, close, perennial and yet threatened realm of collective memory.

However, as the critics explicitly acknowledged, Impressionism's consecration as a 'site of memory' was artificially wrought. It had taken a hundred or so years of intensive re-education to bring about this arrival of the former 'refusés', a period which had concurrently witnessed the erosion and impoverishment of traditional culture upon which any attachment to Poussin invariably depends. It is not simply, according to Dupuy, that the

subjects of his paintings are no longer immediately accessible, concerned as they are with classical literature and Catholic theology, it is also that the visual language in which his ideas are expressed requires of the spectator time, concentrated attention and informed reflection.⁹ Today, in the ‘era of speed’ Poussin’s works are of a depth which, in the view of these critics, precludes the understanding and attachment of generations brought to value the surface and, by implication the superficiality, of Impressionism.¹⁰ We are presented, it seems, with the spectacle of a postmodern, commodity-driven world in which ‘Poussin’, a site of origin and real value, has been passed over, if not exactly for the degraded world of mass culture,¹¹ then for the derivative, the second order, and the commercially viable. Moreover, this betrayal of aesthetic norms and moral standards¹² had been achieved, as the reviewers take pains to underline, not *against* the best efforts of scholars and historicism but with their connivance. Caillebotte had been their ‘discovery’: the exhibition was the first major retrospective showing of the painter’s work in France and the catalogue the first sustained critical examination in the French language of his œuvre.¹³ In such circumstances of betrayal, concludes Dupuy, ‘Décidément, Poussin s’en va.’

Not all the newspaper critics shared this bleak and guilt-ridden vision of the public’s (that is to say, the nation’s) indifference. Hervé Gauville, also writing for *Libération*, was haunted, on the contrary, by Poussin’s omnipresence. He argued on the evidence of the reproduction of the *Inspiration of the Poet* (c.1630) on the dust jacket of Lagarde and Michard’s standard textbook introduction to French literature of the seventeenth century, that, ‘Being part of the stock of schoolboy knowledge, Poussin has a reserved place in the intimate heritage of every citizen. Going to see an exhibition of his works is like finding oneself on the path to school again.’¹⁴ By thus suggesting that the history of the nation’s cultural and political maturation in the seventeenth century, symbolised by Poussin, was rehearsed or even reproduced in the lives of every citizen as he or she progressed toward a personal civilisation, Gauville recognised in the painter a very important ‘lieu de mémoire’, one that served to buttress identity at the national and, perhaps also, at the personal level.¹⁵ That appreciation of Poussin is still in some way related to modern constructions of masculinity is surely suggested by the fact that instances of remembering the original encounter with Poussin – such as Marc Fumaroli’s or Claude Lévi-Strauss’s – invariably play into the rites of passage of men.¹⁶

Gauville’s affirmation of the centrality of Poussin to French culture and to the construction of national identity was, so far as press coverage of the exhibition is concerned, a decidedly minority view,¹⁷ one that it may be

possible to explain away by reference to the generation of spectators the critic had in mind. He was writing after all about those educated very largely before 1968,¹⁸ whereas Dupuy, Dagen and De Roux apparently had a post de Gaulle generation more specifically in view. Pierre Rosenberg's sense of the almost impossible challenge presented to his Poussin by the success of the 'unforgettable' 1960 exhibition of the artist's work at the Louvre, would seem in some ways to support the view of a profound cultural as well as political breach effected by the student revolution.¹⁹ The quartercentenary would, from this perspective, appear novel above all by virtue of the relative failure of the public to identify actively and emotionally with the works of the commemorated artist. One might argue that, not even at the time of the first centenary, at the end of the seventeenth century, when the *querelle des anciens et modernes* was at its height, and Poussin on the losing side, was the artist met with such alleged insensitivity.

However, there is, I think, another sense in which the cultural landscapes described by Gauville, Dupuy, Dagen and De Roux may be viewed as largely compatible. Commemoration, after all, always registers a defeat: the commemorated object can never be sufficiently restored, admired, affirmed, narrated.²⁰ Commemoration is structured by the gap between the ideal, complete, full identification with the remembered object which is its intention, and the actual, inadequate and alienated invocation of a thing past which is its practice. This accounts, in part, for the compulsive, repetitive action of commemoration. Léon Coutil used the opportunity presented by his inaugural speech at the tricentennial Poussin celebrations at Les Andelys to launch a subscription for a future monument,²¹ thereby acknowledging in a supreme act of commemoration its inherent insufficiency. An anxiety of forgetfulness thus always haunts the moment of remembrance. Moreover, the argument here is not simply that the deliberate and recurrent invocation of loss and oblivion intensifies the emotional impact of commemoration but rather, that it is a necessary part of it. As this essay hopes to show, the history of the commemoration of Poussin from the early modern period to the present is also the history of an alleged forgetting, a supposed betrayal. Approached in this way, the 'rejection' of Poussin, observed by French critics in the winter of 1994–5 may ultimately appear as just the latest twist in a protracted family romance.

Rome

As the present and later sub-headings suggest, the story of Poussin's memorialisation will be told emphasising its spatial as much as its tempo-

ral dimension. Initially this decision was prompted by a procedural difficulty. H.W. Janson's iconographical index to Stanislas Lami's monumental *Dictionnaire des sculpteurs de l'Ecole française au dix-neuvième siècle* (1914–21) revealed a host of Poussins circulating in the shape of medals, busts, statuettes, architectural ornaments and public monuments from the nineteenth century alone.²² Of course not all these artefacts were properly commemorative. However, setting aside the portraits by David d'Angers, Pierre-Joseph Chardigny and Jean-Jacques Feuchère as *objets d'art* belonging as much to the market as to memory,²³ the remaining works nevertheless seemed initially to defy periodisation. Monuments to Poussin do not fall neatly into the 'hot' chronologies of statuomania.²⁴ Two, those of André Ségla and Pierre Julien pre-date the Revolution, the moment usually cited for the birth of the *grand homme* and his consecration in stone. Moreover, by the advent of the Third Republic, the acknowledged high point in the history of French public portrait sculpture, sculptural commemorations of Poussin were to all appearances on the decline. Only Constant Roux's unloved full-length statue and the amateur Léon Couetil's bronze medallion belong to this age of patriotic, liberal democracy otherwise so fecund in commemorative civic works. Attending instead to the places of commemoration seemed to promise both the benefit of focusing more nearly on the ritual of the act and the possibility of making sense of the broader issues of regional and national identity by reference to space as well as time.

Rome was the site of two of the earliest Poussin monuments. Separated by fifty years the memorials raised at the Pantheon in 1782 and San Lorenzo in Lucina in 1832 have much in common (figures 1, 2). Both were raised on the initiative and at the expense of private individuals and both were designed and executed by students at the French school in Rome. Moreover, in both cases the constituent elements of the monuments consisted of a bust, a niche and an inscription. The busts, by Ségla and Paul Lemoyne respectively, are overtly classical; the subject was portrayed semi or fully nude, the features were idealised, even stylised and the expression met squarely by the viewer was unflinchingly direct. The invocation of a classical regime as frame for commemoration was further amplified by the architectural settings into which the busts were fitted. Ségla's was incorporated into the very materiality of the antique by grace and favour occupation of one of the oval-shaped openings in the interior of Hadrian's second-century temple. In this sense, the substance of the frame trespassed on the identity of that which it enclosed. Poussin became ancient. A

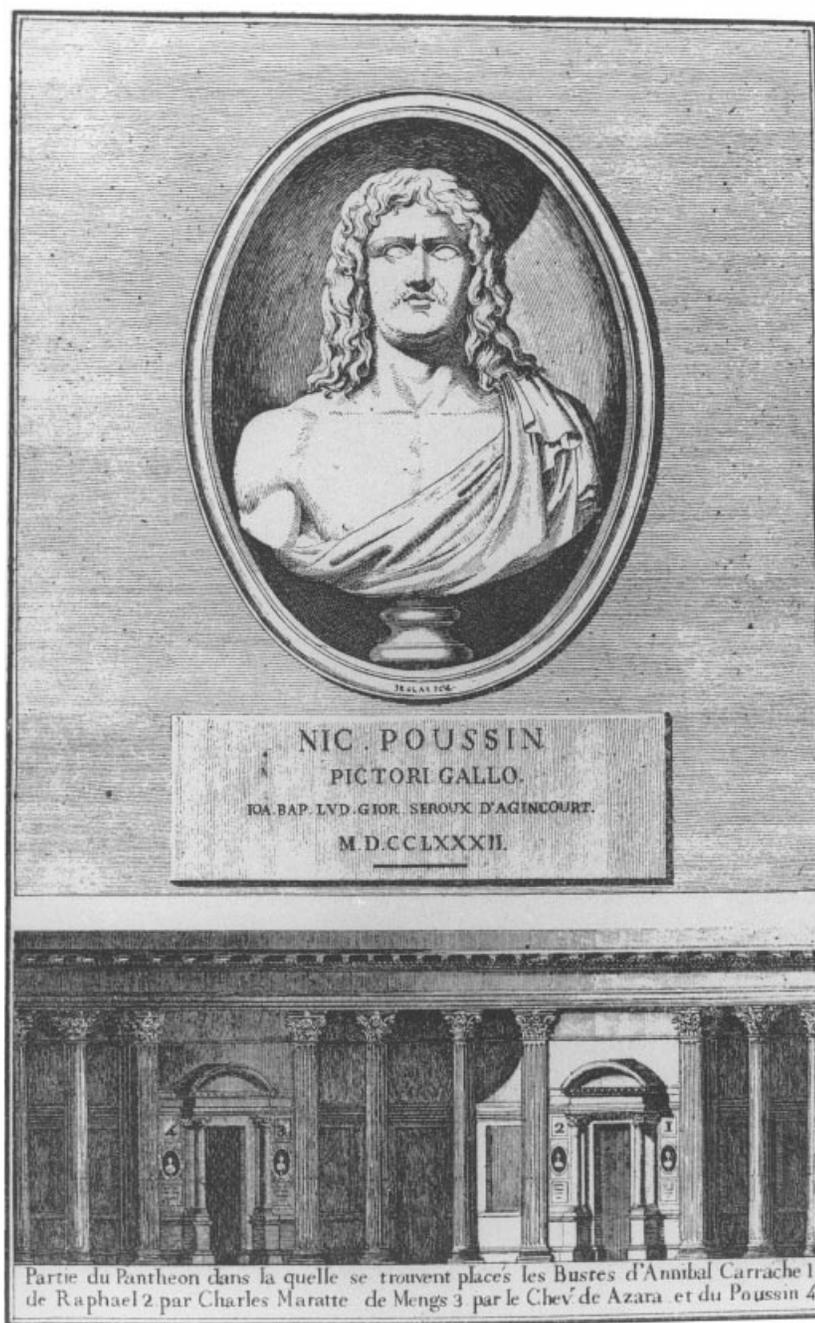


Figure 1 After André Ségla, Monument to Nicolas Poussin. Engraving. Erected by Jean-Baptiste-Louis-George Séroux d'Agincourt, 1782, Pantheon, Rome



Figure 2 Léon Vaudoyer, Paul Lemoyne and Louis Desprez, Monument to Nicolas Poussin. Marble. Erected by François-René de Chateaubriand, 1828–1832. San Lorenzo in Lucina, Rome

parallel case of ‘body snatching’ had been anticipated for Lemoyne’s Poussin via the recycling of ancient ‘Greek’ marble specifically excavated at *Torre Vergata* for execution of the bust.²⁵ In the event, the marble retrieved was of insufficient quality and sculptor and patron had to be content with a more distanced assimilation of Poussin to antiquity accomplished by Louis Vaudoyer’s attic-style mausoleum. Lastly, the patrons of the Pantheon and San Lorenzo schemes, Séroux d’Agincourt and Chateaubriand, shared the same motivation: to make good the commemoration of Poussin’s death and to reclaim the painter for France.

Jean-Baptiste-Louis-George Séroux d’Agincourt, a retired *fermier général* had arrived in Rome in 1779.²⁶ In a letter written more than thirty years later, d’Agincourt recalled inaugurating his new life dedicated to art and scholarship by visiting Poussin’s final resting place at San Lorenzo in Lucina ‘to pay homage to the memory of our illustrious compatriot’. There he found the artist’s ‘name on neither paving stone nor wall’, the place of his interment having been ‘completely forgotten’.²⁷ As a substitute for the monument d’Agincourt painfully searched the mortuary records of the parish for details of his passing; though he did eventually find his name, he noted with some concern the failure of the clerk to spell it correctly.²⁸ To make good the void of this double effacement d’Agincourt determined to raise a monument to Poussin in, for him, Rome’s most perfect, most permanent and best conserved classical ‘church’, the Pantheon, and later to send a transcript of his death certificate to Paris for safe deposit in the archives of the *Académie Royale de Peinture et Sculpture*. Commemoration was thus to be accomplished not just according to the rituals of Christian remembrance but also according to the strategies of historical research. D’Agincourt intended a copy of Poussin’s death certificate for the *Académie* for reasons that clearly exceeded the need for its preservation (for which the parish registers sufficed). Entry into the *Académie*’s archive was to accomplish at a symbolic level an incorporation too long deferred, and to facilitate the contemplative reading of the facts of the painter’s life.²⁹ The church and the archive are thus here revealed as equally productive sites of memory.

D’Agincourt’s commemorative ambitions did not end there. He would further have erected a monument on the Pincio, near the church of Santa Trinita dei Monti, the location of Poussin’s studio in Rome, had not its certain desecration by ruffians deterred him.³⁰ However, the mnemonic refiguration of Rome’s topography according to the priorities of Poussin’s biography anticipated here, was later realised over the course of the nineteenth century. At the initiative of the French ambassador, François René

de Chateaubriand, San Lorenzo in Lucina finally received a monument to mark the place of Poussin's entombment in 1832.³¹ Here indeed the master was portrayed as doubly present, firstly in the features of Lemoyne's bust and secondly as the mind behind Louis Desprez's bas-relief version of *Et in Arcadia Ego* used to decorate the monument's base.³² As Richard Verdi has noted, this change of context resulted in Poussin's shepherds being led to contemplate their own author's death, and invited the viewer to ponder the monument with the same solemnity and poignancy with which the shepherds brood on Death's incursion into Arcadia.³³ Moreover, by the 1820s Rome's arcadia – the surrounding *campagna* – offered the pilgrim further landmarks, natural monuments to Poussin's enduring legacy in the shape of the so-called *promenade Poussin*, along the banks of the Tiber upstream from the Ponte Molle, and the *fabrique Poussin*, an ancient castle some three leagues from Rome.³⁴

That the artistic memorials in this itinerary were regarded as highly personal achievements is evident from the monuments' inscriptions. Poussin's name appears in both alongside those of the patrons concerned. Indeed, at San Lorenzo in Lucina the inscription reads, 'F.A. de Chateaubriand à Nicolas Poussin', giving precedence to the giver rather than the recipient of the honours being paid. A painter with no direct heirs, no natural custodians of his posthumous reputation, left the perpetuation of his memory to all, and Séroux d'Agincourt and Chateaubriand were determined to proclaim a duty discharged. In the case of the latter, the monument was in fact planned as much as a self-commemoration, a trace of the diplomat's passage through Rome, as a memorial to the seventeenth-century painter.³⁵ Central to this identification of patron with artist was a passionate belief in Poussin's essential Frenchness. Though in the Pantheon Poussin was commemorated next to Raphael and Annibale Carracci, he was designated pointedly *Pictori Gallo* – 'to end', in d'Agincourt's words, 'clearly and precisely the question between the two nations, one of which has the pretension and the other the right to count Poussin among the masters of its school'.³⁶ That d'Agincourt's inscription failed to settle the matter – and that anxiety concerning Poussin's nationality persisted – seems clear from a letter written to Chateaubriand in January 1828 in which an amateur from Poussin's home town begged the author of the new monument's inscription 'FRANCAIS pour un FRANCAIS, tu peux, tu dois au monde/Parler Français' [French for a Frenchman, you can, you owe it to the world/To speak French].³⁷ With greater economy of words Chateaubriand reassured his compatriot that his views were shared and offered a foretaste of

the monument's chauvinistic eulogy: 'For the glory of the arts and the honour of France.'³⁸

Such conspicuous rehearsals of Frenchness abroad, underlined by the choice of the monuments' executants as well as by their inscriptions – not simply 'French hands' as Chateaubriand insisted³⁹ but students at an academy whose first director Colbert had fully intended Poussin should be⁴⁰ – requires some further interpretation. Specific ends were served by national prejudice and these evolved over time. In an article for the *Journal de Paris* published in September 1782 the abbé Pech set Poussin's life and the erection of the Pantheon monument in the context of a broader comparison of Paris and Rome. Having acknowledged Poussin's luck in his adoptive *patrie* which received, honoured and consoled him when Paris knew him not, Pech went on to argue that since the Renaissance it had been every artist's ambition to have his work recognised by a city where 'it is very rare for criticism not to be enlightened, where fashion never strangles talent, where nothing distracts from the pursuit of beauty, and where the genius of the Arts still dominates'.⁴¹ Paris was by inference a place ruled by bigotry, fashion and a militant Philistia. Moreover, the disavowal of the 1640s was shamefully matched by the neglect of the 1780s Paris having 'nothing [that] attests to the recognition of his [Poussin's] compatriots'. Rome was thus construed as exemplary, as a corrective to Paris. More specifically, the Pantheon emerged as a place where France's corrupted cultural values might, by remembrance of Poussin be transformed into a commitment to radical artistic and moral reform.⁴² To anticipate a little, just two years later Jacques-Louis David returned to Rome with the self-imposed task of accomplishing that reform and in painting the *Oath of the Horatii* (1785) there produced a classical history painting that seemingly derived from Poussin in all but scale. Thus truly, in the words of an anonymous critic, did 'd'Agincourt create in this monument a great work to connect the time of decadence in the Arts with the moment of their regeneration.'⁴³

Fifty years later the stakes were no longer the same. The cause of classicism had been thoroughly won and the name of Poussin largely restored. Paris was no longer culturally inferior to Rome. On the contrary during the Empire, the glories of the Holy City had been comprehensively eclipsed as a result of Napoleon's plundering, investing the nation with a cultural confidence which neither the return of the art works nor the advent of the Restoration did much to dispel. Moreover, from 1797 Poussin was the pocketed travelling companion of every academy student on his way to Italy, since from that date his profile adorned the medals received by

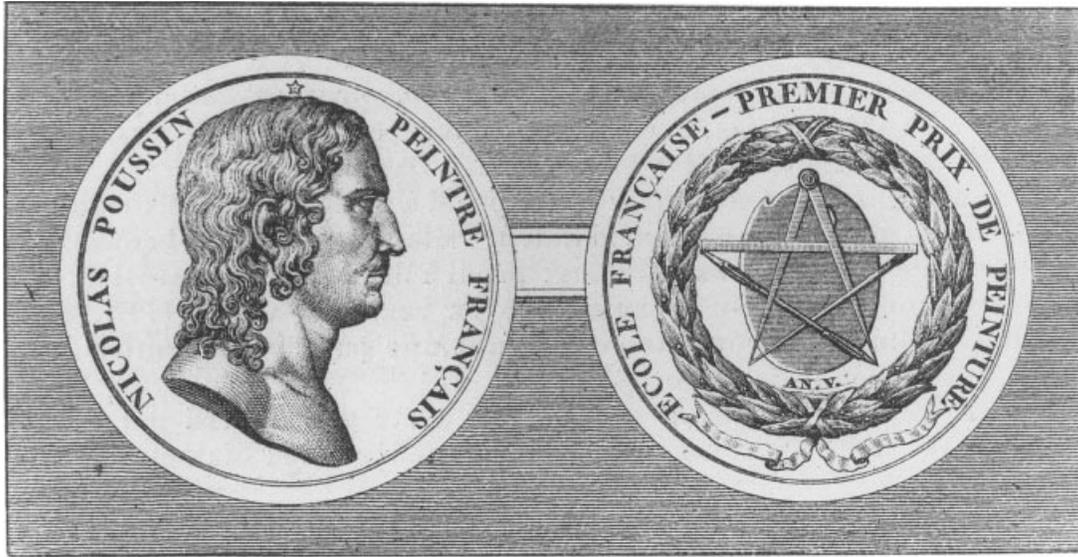


Figure 3 After P. Dumarest, *Medal for the Grand Prix de Rome* 1797. Engraving

winners of the *Prix de Rome* (figure 3).⁴⁴ If anything (as Antoinette Le Normand-Romain has argued), by the 1820s, Rome and the education it offered had come to be associated with an oppressive and narrow-minded traditionalism, the very opposite of the originality and independence that early biographers had so insistently attributed to Poussin.⁴⁵ It seems likely therefore that Poussin's Roman sojourn spoke of other things to Châteaubriand and his generation.

Poussin features in Chateaubriand's memoirs, the principal source of information concerning the San Lorenzo Lucina memorial, quite independently of these concerns. He is introduced rather conventionally as a man of property and a painter of the *campagna*. However this encounter is preceded by a wish, emotionally expressed by Chateaubriand, that he had been born a painter in order to inherit the solitude and independence of that estate, 'to live in the sun among ruins and masterpieces'.⁴⁶ It was, in fact, striking an attitude of melancholy contemplation in the vicinity of the Colosseum that Girodet de Trioson had depicted a wind-tussled Chateaubriand in 1809.⁴⁷ Vocation, independence and solitude were all essential constituents of the Romantic concept of the artist and ironically the facts of Poussin's life allowed this classic artist to be misconstrued precisely on romantic lines.⁴⁸ Poussin's determination to become a painter apparently against the wishes of his family, his rejection of the seemingly facile pleasures of the art of his Italian contemporaries and his alleged persecution by his compatriots in France was the very stuff of misunderstood

genius. Thus for Chateaubriand in the 1820s Poussin was no longer the restorer of the official French school, a paean of the establishment, but an exiled, anti-establishment hero.

Yet there was also, I think, a sense in which the independence and solitude which appeared incarnate in Poussin may also have acquired a political inflection for Chateaubriand. In the 1790s the writer's self-avowed political views had been those of republicanism. By 1828 and his return to Rome as ambassador he was, however, serving the cause of conservative monarchism, having in the interim both supported and defied Napoleon. For someone, like so many of his contemporaries whose political stance was deeply marked by contradictions and reversals,⁴⁹ the clarity and consistency of Poussin's position, out of place and also out of time, closer to the ancients than to the moderns, may well have suggested terms for an honourable if decentred perspective on the world. In that sense the psychological function of Poussin was not unlike that of the 'noble savage', or in Chateaubriand's case, more specifically the Iroquois in whose company the writer had sought salvation shortly after the Revolution. In the memoirs Chateaubriand claimed that Rome offered asylum to fallen powers, that it was 'a place of truth for persecuted glory and unhappy talent';⁵⁰ thirty years earlier the forests and plains of Canada had promised to extend similar consolation for the fallen ideals and 'criminal' violence of the revolutionary decade. Rome was Paris's opposite no longer by virtue of what it was but what it was not; by its lack of the troubles that so beset France. And the savage consistency of Poussin's aesthetic must have seemed a perfect metaphor for an utterly stable French identity despairingly beyond reach.

Paris

Writing in 1902, well over a century after Pech, for the extreme right-wing paper *Action Française*, Henri Mazet lamented the apparently persistent neglect of Poussin's glory by remarking that, 'In none of Paris's beautiful landscapes can one find his powerful physiognomy in order to salute him humbly and repeat the name of one of the great geniuses of our race'.⁵¹ Mazet, unlike Pech, exaggerated. Though it was substantially true that an autonomous public statue of Poussin had yet to be erected on the streets or in the parks of the capital, from the early 1800s his image had nevertheless proliferated throughout the city in a variety of forms. Visible from the street were the gigantic bust on the gateway of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts on the rue Bonaparte⁵² and a more distant full-length figure, standing in a

crowd of other *hommes illustres* gathered on the upper balconies of the Louvre on that portion of the façade stretching between the pavilions Denon and Mollien. Meanwhile, the painter's likeness could be hunted up inside the Louvre most notably in the *grande galerie* and the *salon carré* where busts and decorative medallions kept company with a selection of the painter's works.⁵³ For those with the appropriate access, life-sized and full-bodied statues of Poussin were to be discovered in the former antechapel and new *salle des séances* at the Institut on the quai Malaquai, while busts of the artist decorated the vestibules of Henri Labrousse's Sainte-Geneviève Library and Ballu and Deperthes's new Hôtel de Ville.⁵⁴

That Mazet could sustain his amnesiac fantasy in the face of such abundant evidence to the contrary – some of which he must surely have known – reveals, I think, something in addition to the sheer gall of rhetorical licence. Thus, beyond dishonestly implying that the Third Republic was contemptuous of 'true' French culture, the remark suggests more broadly that effigies of Poussin in Paris (unlike those in Rome) remained out of focus, at the periphery of vision, and that they were therefore unsuccessful in instigating rituals of individual or collective remembrance about themselves.⁵⁵ If they encouraged memory it was, apparently, a feeble and insubstantial thing which failed to integrate Poussin with the innermost selves of his nineteenth-century beholders. The memorials, in short, were unable to recuperate the past for the present and put an end to longing.

In a further sense, however, Mazet's forgetting was also a specific instance of the crisis of memory which Richard Terdiman has recently described as the nineteenth century's ruling obsession.⁵⁶ That the crisis produced an excess as well as a loss of memory is surely implied by the refusal to countenance any future Poussin monument which immediately follows Mazet's expressed desire for the sight of the painter's features somewhere in the city.⁵⁷ Such, indeed, had been the nineteenth century's faith in statuary's ameliorating power that Paris's cityscape had, since the 1840s, begun fairly to bristle with an expanding range of *grands hommes*. Mazet was among the growing number of critics during the Third Republic opposed to any further addition to the rapidly expanding catalogue of low-grade and vulgar sculptures cluttering up the capital, however worthy the subject.

Disenchantment with figurative sculpture as an affective means of commemoration was, however, a long time in arriving.⁵⁸ The number as well as the prestigious locations of commemorative effigies of Poussin, particularly those of the Louvre, suggest that successive political regimes of very different types – from absolutism to male-suffrage democracy – all

invested heavily in the chiselled features of the artist as potent signs of national identity. In January 1775, when the recently appointed *Directeur des Bâtiments du Roi* announced to the *Académie* the king's plans for a series of large, monumental sculptures of great men, of which Poussin was subsequently one, it was confidently anticipated that the resulting works would 'rekindle virtue and patriotic feeling' in the kingdom.⁵⁹ Had it not been for the Revolution, Julien's Poussin (figure 4), commissioned in 1787, would have taken its place with the other *grands hommes* in that portion of the *grande galerie* adjacent to the *salon carré* being reserved for the French school.⁶⁰ Arranged in the manner suggested by Charles de Wailly's now familiar watercolour on either side of the presiding figure of Louis XVI, the statues were visibly to bespeak the benefits of posterity that accrued to those loyal to the crown. Though Julien's statue ultimately took up residence at the Institut, it was not long before moves were yet again afoot to commemorate Poussin in the *grande galerie*. In 1805 Barthélemy Blaise was instructed to produce a bust for display in Percier and Fontaine's soon to be completed remodelling of the space.⁶¹ Taking its place the following year in a sequence of heads of predominantly classical artists such as Raphael, Giulio Romano and Annibale Carracci, Blaise's bust was intended to remind the nation not only that it had artists to rank with the best of the Italians but that since the seventeenth century it had inherited the task of preserving and perpetuating the grand tradition.⁶² The final destiny of Blaise's bust, like Julien's statue, was however, one of exile and some forty years on, in May 1848, the provisional government of the Second Republic commissioned a much larger bust of Poussin from Auguste Préault (figure 5) to take its place.

If Préault's portrait is arguably less ambitious than Julien's or Blaise's the commemorative project seems to have been more complex.⁶³ At an iconic level the bust participated straightforwardly in the Republic's heroic commitment to regenerate and complete the Louvre as the Palais du Peuple.⁶⁴ However, by selecting Préault for the task, a revolutionary artist in both senses of the term, the suggestion was also made that the political and aesthetic prejudices that had deprived Préault, like Poussin before him, of official and public recognition under corrupt monarchies, had been swept aside. Préault, unlike Poussin, could thus anticipate a reputation in Republican France not entirely of posthumous construction. The bust, however, whose exaggerated presence did not receive widespread approval, outlived the Republic by little more than a decade, being dispatched in 1864 to the comparative obscurity of the provinces.

Faith in the mnemonic power of stone having not been substantially

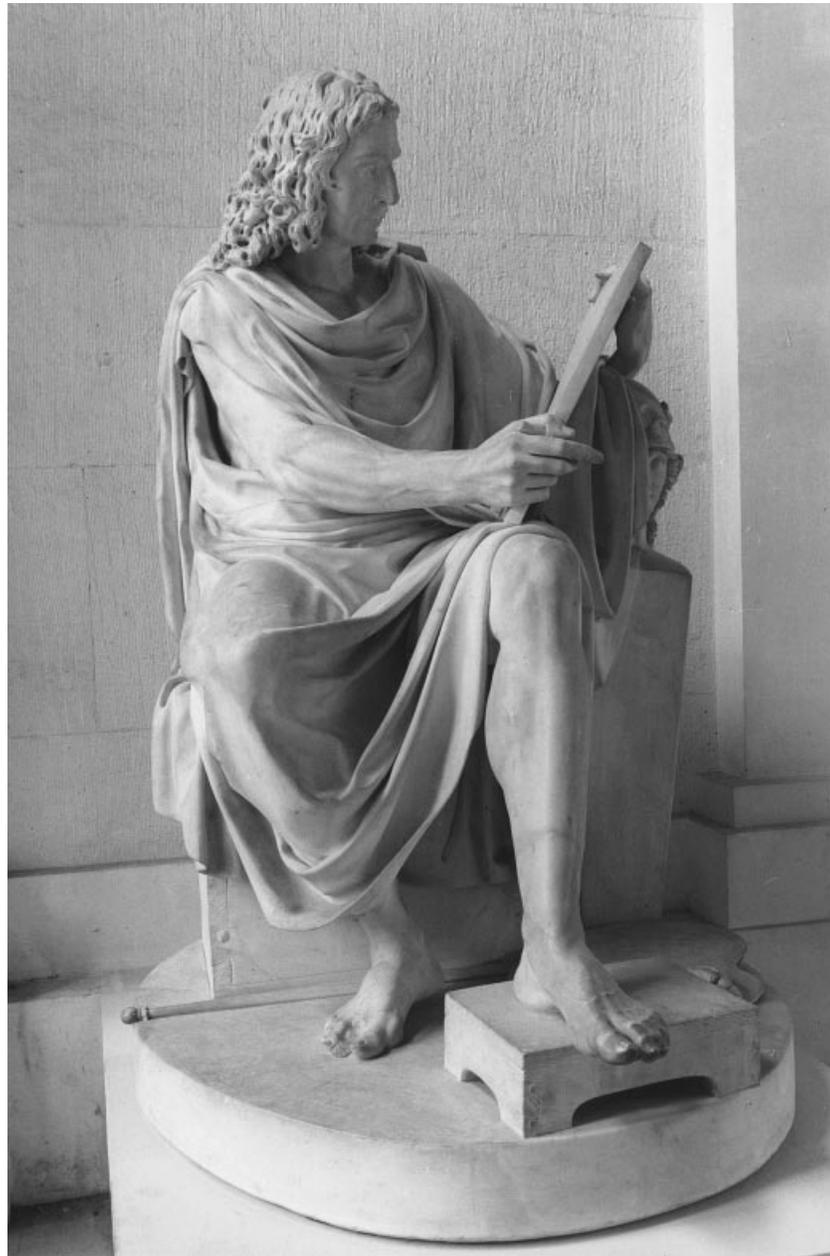


Figure 4 Pierre Julien,
Nicolas Poussin. Marble.
1801–1804, Musée du
Louvre, Paris

shaken however, the Second Empire had meanwhile demanded of François Rude in 1854 a full-length Poussin: *homme illustre* for the exterior decoration of the Louvre.⁶⁵ In an ostensibly depoliticised repetition of Louis XVI's *grands hommes*, Napoleon III's architects assembled rows of statues of French artists, French writers, French scientists etc. in a quanti-

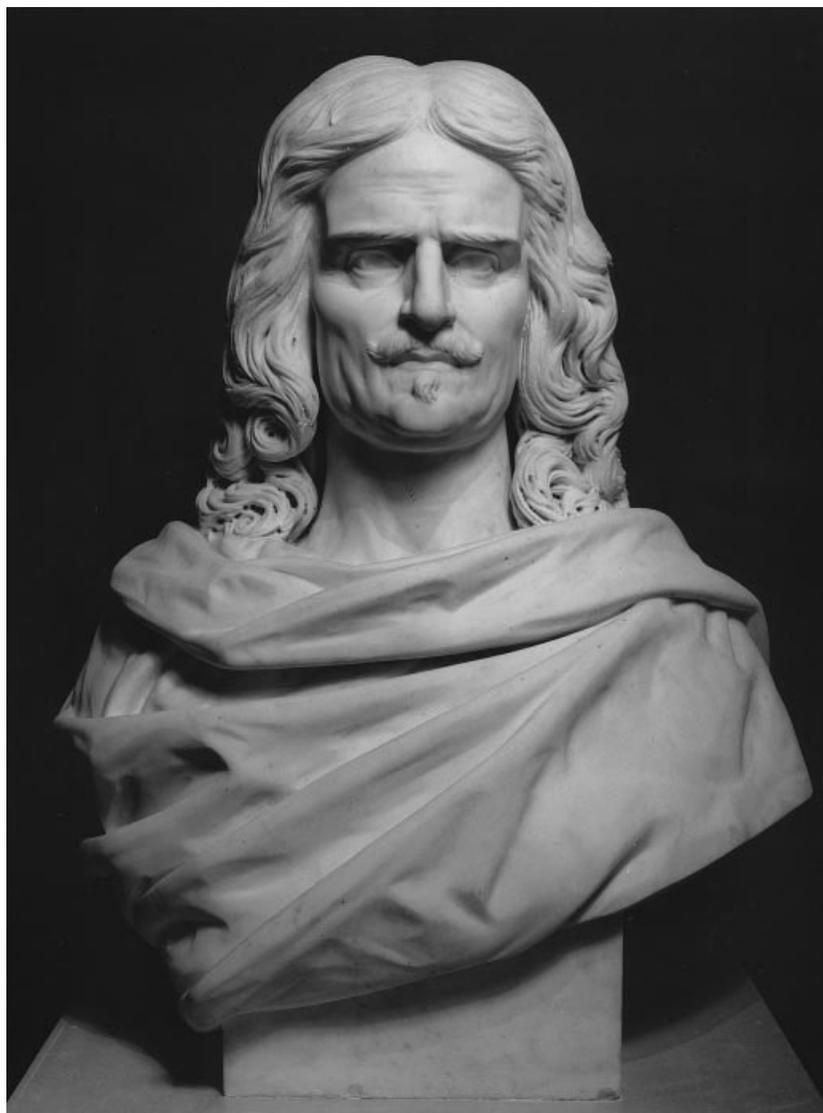


Figure 5 Auguste
Préault, Nicolas Poussin.
Marble. 1848–1849,
Musée de Picardie,
Amiens

tative affirmation of the nation's cultural integrity. However, when in 1907 the Third Republic somewhat belatedly commissioned from Constant Roux a statue for the so-called 'Campo Santo' in the Cour Napoleon (the last in this chronological overview), such complacency had retreated in the wake of political assaults from the extreme Right.⁶⁶ Poussin was, as we shall see, now conscripted into what Herman Lebovics has termed 'the wars over cultural identity' which prevailed in France at the turn of the century, serving the interests of both the Left and the Right.⁶⁷

How do we explain a phenomenon which had all forms of political government commemorate ‘greatness’ in the same man, in the same place and in more or less the same terms? The qualities of the works provide clues. To return for a moment to the earliest image, the most memorable aspect of Julien’s Poussin in its original context⁶⁸ was almost certainly the costume. D’Angiviller had insisted upon dress consistent with the subject’s lifetime⁶⁹ but Julien’s Poussin appears classically draped, a misconception which the sculptor disingenuously sought to dispel by explaining in the Salon *livret* that the painter was in fact wearing a cloak, hurriedly thrown about his naked body, having risen from sleep on a hot summer’s night in Rome, inspired to commit the fully formed idea of the *Eudamidas* to paper.⁷⁰ The patent speciousness of his ‘explication’ notwithstanding, Julien’s portrayal of Poussin as a classic and an ancient established an important precedent later followed by Rude’s similarly ‘cloaked’ figure and, more surprisingly, by the romantic Préault’s monumentally mature head.

‘Classicism’ in relation to Poussin was used to mean a variety of things in nineteenth-century debates about the French tradition, as John House has most recently pointed out: an elevated, clear and rational style at the service of moral instruction for the *Académie*; an independent and original stand, a ‘true’ style, for those working outside the ‘false’ mould of official art.⁷¹ Though the facts of Poussin’s life and the prioritisation of his works certainly received significantly different inflection from the broadly establishment and anti-establishment camps to have matured in the 1830s and forties from the initial conflict of classics and romantics, both sides readily recognised in him a point of origin. The identification of Poussin as France’s first, its original artist implied by the idealising strategies of the statues above had, of course, been made explicit in paint by Jean-Dominique Ingres’s *Apotheosis of Homer* (1828), a ceiling for Charles X’s museum of Antiquities at the Louvre in which Poussin is the only modern artist included.⁷² The diagonal which links Poussin with Homer via the palette of the ‘primitive’ Raphael spoke of continuities and discontinuities – a heritage momentarily stalled, relocated and restarted. Likewise, in the case of sculpture, Poussin, a man without natural or artistic progeny was recreated as the Father of the French school by the location of his likeness in the Beginning – historicising French art as it unfolded from the portraits of Blaise, Préault and Rude for instance, or summarising French art by his emblematic portrayal as Painting personified on the ceiling of the *salon carré*.⁷³

The discourse of origins, as Mircea Eliade has shown us, is a sacred

one.⁷⁴ Society attributes to those who come first a magical and exemplary perfection which lifts them out of the ordinary sequence of historical events, and endows them with a mythical function around which collective identity may form. The Poussins at the Louvre personified the birth of France as a culture to rival, even surpass, Italy and incarnated an orthodox pattern and standard for all subsequent artistic developments. Such symbols of origin, deployed and not simply remembered, are, according to Eliade, most often concentrated at the Centre, at the fulcrum of power and knowledge.⁷⁵ The Louvre, initially the palace of kings and later 'la Mecque de l'intelligence', to use Victor Hugo's phrase, was self-evidently just such a site. That such sites occupied a conceptual rather than an actual space is, however, suggested by the fact that connections were rarely, if ever, made between the locations occupied by the commemorative statues of Poussin in the Louvre and the place of the painter's frustrated endeavours to deliver to the nation an heroic decorative scheme.⁷⁶ The Louvre was a kind of palimpsest, the site of the hard, continuous, even obsessive symbolic work of successive *régimes* and governments, each more or less bent upon erasing what came before. Memory of Louis XIII's palace and Poussin's unfinished decoration of the long gallery was dim even before the last Herculean fragments of it disappeared with the eighteenth century. Thus, the Louvre and the topography of Paris more generally did not have the associative power of Rome's monuments and landmarks. Paris constituted a pure centre to which Poussin belonged principally by virtue of the institutions of which he was a mythical founder: art (the museum), the academy, and its school.⁷⁷ Pilgrims could not therefore retrace his steps in the city and discover the world as he was supposed to have seen it. Rather, they operated in a world framed by his symbolic presence.

To identify the symbolic function served by Poussin is not, of course, to explain it. In a general sense his commemoration participated in a broader cult of the individual in stone which by the time of the First World War had resulted in a population of some 843 statues in the capital alone.⁷⁸ Maurice Agulhon has recently sought an explanation for this sculpture-mania in mapping its historical contours onto the progress of liberal political ideology in France as it swelled towards hegemony with the Third Republic.⁷⁹ Agulhon thus directly links the memorialisation of the nation's *grands hommes* with the progressive democratisation and secularisation of nineteenth-century French society. However, the serene complacency with which Poussin was invariably commemorated at the Louvre remains disarming and, oddly, much less familiar than the fraught atmosphere of par-

tianship which attended the consecration of *grands hommes* at the Panthéon.⁸⁰ The consensus that so often evaded the efforts of successive *régimes* to instil a national identity through the recollection of national figures in Soufflot's church–temple was, apparently, easily forthcoming at the Musée du Louvre. A whole host of factors no doubt account for the differences, not the least of which were firstly, the fact that the Panthéon was for some a mausoleum which made the psychological stakes correspondingly higher, and, secondly, that having set its face against the commemoration of great men from the distant past it was much more self-consciously in the business of inventing rather than simply perpetuating tradition. However, the contrast also suggests that during periods marked by profound political disjunctions the more stable structures of culture were invested with a greater burden of mnemonic work. To put it another way, Poussin may have emerged as a particularly stable 'lieu de mémoire' during the nineteenth century because the relative autonomy ascribed ideally to the cultural sphere and his reputation for personal and artistic independence allowed the nation to experience through him continuities between the past and the present which the mixed fortunes of the state and its political heroes denied.

This is not, of course, to say that one person's Poussin was the same as another's, but that from the early nineteenth century onwards there existed a broad consensus for the view that understanding the character of true Frenchness was only to be had via recollection of its 'ancient' culture. As Roger Marx was to put it at the time of the tricentennial, 'Poussin is the very genius of France. One finds summed up in him in their most elevated forms the essential qualities of the spirit and taste of our race, clarity and measure, elegance and power, conciseness of thought and nobility of form. All begins and ends with Poussin.'⁸¹ Ironically, by 1894 Poussin was on the verge of an identity crisis. The old arguments concerning the totemic value of his art that had served the art establishment so well came under unprecedented pressure in the debates concerning French nationalism deeply soured by the Dreyfus affair.⁸² From these bruising struggles, which, according to James Herbert and Mark Antliff, saw Poussin, classicism and monarchism broadly ranged against the avant-garde and the Republic,⁸³ Poussin actually emerged split. A northern, rationalist Poussin was advanced by the self-styled *Union de la Vérité* of the Catholic Left, eloquently and persuasively defined by the academic Paul Desjardins;⁸⁴ a southern, classical Poussin was promoted by *Action Française* of the monarchist Right, militantly broadcast by Charles Maurras, Adrien Mithouard and Mazet.⁸⁵

Was Mazet's failure to see Poussin in Paris in 1902 thus a failure of perspective? Were his regrets no more than the predictable feelings of one on the reactionary Right for whom republican Paris was necessarily a place from which Poussin, symbol of France's classic Latin heritage, had been expunged? If there was a certain will to blindness here,⁸⁶ there was also surely evidence of commemoration gone awry. A bust in a crowded gallery, a roundel on a congested ceiling, a statue on a distant balcony; the sculptural images of Poussin at the Louvre were not of easy access nor did they willingly accommodate the desires of those like Mazet who wished to pay their humble respects. Moreover, the difficulties for commemoration did not end with the decorative function of the objects. All the Paris Poussins, even Constant Roux's public monument in the cour Napoleon, belonged in some senses to a series. They were planned as part of a sequence, if only a sequence of two. At the Institut and the Sainte-Geneviève Library, for instance, Poussin took his place among men of letters.⁸⁷ At the Ecole des Beaux-Arts Poussin and Puget guard the gate in an alliteration of origins which frames Félix Duban's more generous and complex illustration of the history of French architecture from the Beginning.⁸⁸ There were, however, no actual, historical connections between Poussin and the other *illustres* of these commemorative schemes. He may have been linked by analogy or in fiction with a Montaigne, a Corneille, a Pascal or a Puget but no past event sanctioned such relationships.⁸⁹ Organising remembrance in this way tended to direct attention to the formal similarities of the works as a metaphor of their shared moral values, rather than at the unique context of origin to which each 'great' subject belonged. Thus, in effect, seriality may well have operated to suppress rather than preserve the memory of specific individuals because what made Poussin (in this case) uniquely commmorable was sacrificed to a definition of mnemonic worthiness based on the lowest common denominator: canonicity, Frenchness. Moreover by thus organising the individual into a category, by systematising commemoration under headings (arts, letters, sciences etc.) memory was assigned to the discipline of history and to the protection of institutions which shouldered the task of remembering for society as a whole.⁹⁰ The citizen was thus free to forget, to neglect that which was so officially and conspicuously being preserved elsewhere. Mercier's Poussin (figure 6) has been recently effaced by graffiti. The half-hearted transformation of the revered physiognomy into the jaunty mask of a drag queen failed to degrade, however, because memory of Poussin so clearly inheres in the corporate body of the 'school' and not the stone figure of the gate.