CONTAINED LIQUIDITY

FLUID INTELLIGENCE, SOLID FRAMING IN THE PORT SCENES OF CLAUDE LORRAIN

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ABSTRACT

Liquidity and solidity are not only physical states of matter, but also common epistemological metaphors. In the seventeenth century, philosophical and scientific debates often included such images; Blaise Pascal is a prominent example of a thinker seeking to destabilise received patterns of thinking through the power of what Jeff Wall later named "liquid intelligence". In painting, the emergence of fluid aesthetics can be interpreted as a rejection of the Renaissance ideals of firmness, stability and measurability. Claude Lorrain's port scenes are a case in point: in a truly dialectical way, Claude repeatedly depicts the sea as a liquid entity seemingly contained in – and contained by – a frame of sumptuous, rock-solid architecture, while subtly subverting the hierarchy of values such compositions might be understood to validate. Through this reading, Claude's paintings gain an unsuspected theoretical depth as a pictorial critique of human hubris and of the rigid, pretentious structures of humanist knowledge.

KEYWORDS

Claude Lorrain; Port scenes; Liquid and solid; Liquid intelligence; Blaise Pascal; Tower of Babel.

Claude Lorrain has always enjoyed a solid reputation of catering to conventional bourgeois taste.[1] J. M. W. Turner's sincere admiration for Claude notwithstanding, it is not for theoretical depth, unprecedented inventiveness or subversive politics that the seventeenth-century French painter was revered by rich collectors in his contemporary Rome, and later in English aristocratic circles: it is rather as the magician creator of ideal landscapes, of ethereal light and of facile nostalgia that Claude entered the canon of art history.

Every once in a while, the suspicion arises that there's more to Claude than this. The philosophical depth and sophistication recently uncovered in the works of his contemporary compatriots, Nicolas Poussin and Philippe de Champaigne, by art theorists and art historians such as Louis Marin and T. J. Clark;[2] our present-day interest in issues of nature, environment and ecology, the evident core of Claude's work; and perhaps even ordinary art historical *ennui* and the strive for disciplinary originality, might explain such periodical reversals of fortune. However, critical attention to Claude remains, all in all, focused on the beauty, technical mastery and socio-economic value of his deliciously escapist paintings.

A recent attempt to save Claude from the predicament of over-aesthetisation verging on anaesthetisation is included in Frédéric Cousinié's masterly *Esthétique des fluides. Sang, sperme, merde dans la peinture française du XVIIe siècle.*[3] Indeed, our civilised painter prominently figures in the chapter dedicated to excrement – who would have thought! – and the presence of some incongruous details – piles of detritus or a man defecating – is rightly taken to be proof of Claude's dialectical qualities, resulting in a critical stance – Cousinié calls it "mise en tension critique" – toward consecrated values such as the veneration for antiquity, the grandeur of Rome or the ideal beauty of undisturbed nature. It is, says Cousinié, precisely the coexistence, on a canvas, of mighty achievements of civilisation – ancient or modern – with the mundane, the marginal and even the outright disgusting and abject, that makes Claude's discreet undermining of social values potentially more powerful than, for instance,

1
This article owes its genesis and inspiration to Matthew C. Hunter and his project and conference on "Liquid Intelligence", which became a special issue of *Grey Room* (no. 69, Fall 2017). I take my cue from Hunter's distinction between "two opposing modes of intelligence: dry and liquid, modern and ancient, knowing and unknowable" (p. 7) – in turn inspired by Jeff Wall – and his claim that "liquid intelligence *has already been unconsciously afoot* in recent histories of the arts and architecture of early modernity" (p. 8, emphasis in original). Thanks also to Hannah Baader, under whose auspices, at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence, I started working on the research project this article is part of.

2
Louis Marin, *Philippe de Champaigne ou la présence cachée*, Paris 1995; Louis Marin, *Sublime Poussin*, trans. Catherine Porter, Stanford, CA 1999; T. J. Clark, *The Sight of Death. Experiment in Art Writing*, New Haven, CT 2006. In the case of Poussin, dozens of other examples could be given.

3
Frédéric Cousinié, *Esthétique des fluides. Sang, sperme, merde dans la peinture française du XVIIe siècle*, Paris 2011. For a slightly earlier period of French art, see Rebecca Zorach, *Blood, Milk, Ink, Gold. Abundance and Excess in the French Renaissance*, Chicago/London 2006.

some contemporary *Bamboccianti's* taste for "purer" scatological caricature.

Generally speaking, Cousinié's project captures something essential for the understanding of what one might call, for lack of a better term, French Baroque art. It is, he claims, by way of representing bodily fluids – blood, sperm and excrements are the examples treated most thoroughly, but without excluding tears and maternal milk – that the Baroque counters the prominent, and very Florentine (but also, for centuries to come, quite French, typical of *L'Âge Classique*), Renaissance obsession with geometry, contours and measurability. And while this idea has obvious Wölfflinian roots, it is here articulated in an original way, through the flux of corporeal liquid intelligence.

It is, however, possible to broaden the scope of Claude's dialectics much further, while remaining in the realm of liquidity. Indeed, Cousinié himself hints at such a programme when in his introduction he states that numerous Claude landscapes depict architectural elements, shaped *comme il faut* by rigorous linear perspective, that are framing phenomena of nature – water, clouds, air, vegetation – described as not "géométrisables" and which thus resist the imperious domination of mathematics.[4]

Interested as he is in *bodily* fluids, Cousinié does not develop that promising insight, even as he admits that the excremental hypothesis, significant though it is, remains, at least for quantitative reasons, exceptional in Claude's *oeuvre*, and "sans lendemains explicites", that is, hardly a basis for generalisation and without obvious posterity.[5] Ultimately, Cousinié's hypothesis structures Claude's oeuvre around the dialectics of the "high sublime", epitomised by the painter's blinding suns beautifully analysed by Clélia Nau, and the "low sublime" of mundane, terrestrial matter.[6] While this is a seductive idea, it seems difficult to organise broad portions of Le Lorrain's artistic corpus around this binary opposition, especially in the later period of the painter's career – from around 1640 on – when low-life genre scenes by and large disappear in favour of historical and mythological narratives, thus definitively tipping the scales towards the more conventional type of sublimeness.

The duality of the geometrical and the formless, on the other hand, is extremely frequent in Le Lorrain's paintings, and is hence of prodigious theoretical fecundity. And while one can reformulate

4
Cousinié, Esthétique des fluides, 13–14.

5
Ibid., 261.

6
Clélia Nau, *Claude Lorrain. Scaenographiae Solis*, Paris 2009, cf. ead., *Le temps du sublime. Longin et le paysage poussinien*, Rennes 2005. Cousinié's more recent study of Claude's landscapes includes a chapter on the earlier seaports from yet another perspective, linking them to the context of French-Spanish rivalry in Rome. Cousinié interprets these scenes as political, even "diplomatic" paintings, displaying the principle of *Concordia discors* which the author defines as "a dialectical harmony". Frédéric Cousinié, *Paysage du paysage. Nicolas Poussin, Claude Gellée Le Lorrain, Sébastien Bourdon*, Dijon 2022, 101–192.

the two extremities of this axis according to numerous dialectical polarities – the finite and the infinite, culture and nature, geography and history, the spatial and the temporal and even the Apollonian and the Dionysian in this context[7] – one of the most fruitful pairings is the constant oscillation between the solid and the liquid.

I. Dialectical Seaports

How are these pairs of terms dialectical? Binary oppositions, of course, are at the heart of any dialectical structure; they are, as Fredric Jameson reminds us in his seminal treatment of the theme, "a fundamental weapon in the battle of a whole range of philosophical tendencies against an older Aristotelian common sense: and in particular against the notion of things and concepts as positive entities, as free-standing autonomous substances".[8] But more generally, the dialectic "inscribe(s) time and change in our concepts themselves", thus contesting reified systems and seemingly stable categories.[9] Each side is deconstructed by the other, leading to "the problem becom(ing) its own solution".[10]

While a dialectical tension thus broadly defined can be shown to be present in practically any painting by Claude, and while the painter's historical position in post-Renaissance Rome might easily explain the attractiveness, for him, of such anti-positivist thinking,[11] it is particularly prominent and useful as a reading grid for one category of subject matter to which Le Lorrain returned again and again all through his long career: seaports. In this case, quite obviously, the liquid and the solid are directly concerned as the two poles between which the dialectical tension operates.

The disruptive nature of liquids in self-styled systems, and more specifically in the system of pictorial representation gradually developing in Europe from around 1300 onwards, is well known and frequently commented upon, and was so already early on. While

7
Itay Sapir, The Birth of Mediterranean Culture. Claude Lorrain's Port Scenes between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, in: *Mitteilungen des kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, 56/1, 2014, 58–69.

8
Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, London/Brooklyn 2009, 17. In an interesting passage (pp. 31–35), Jameson describes how an artist can be dialectical just like a philosopher or a theorist. While his principal example is, needless to say, not Claude but Piet Mondrian, the general description of such a dialectical painting is not without similarities to what I describe below.

9
Jameson, Valences, 3.

10
Ibid., 4.

11
Claude left his provincial Lorraine as a teenager in 1613 and arrived in papal Rome; the city's spectacular architecture, but also its cultural and intellectual richness, could not but represent a great shock for him, and perhaps a dubitative counter-reaction, although, as in most aspects of Claude's career, we lack any evidence for the young man's experience. See Helen Langdon, *Claude Lorrain*, London 1989, 19–20.

the sky, literally left to its own devices in Brunelleschi's famous experiment demonstrating the device of linear perspective, belongs to yet another realm – that of air and gases – clouds, those fluffy in-between creatures of floating liquid, have been revealed by Hubert Damisch to be the epitome of recalcitrant matter refusing the sophisticated play of lines, points and angles in linear perspective.[12] Renaissance painters often preferred the safe option of exclusively depicting indoor scenes devoid of any atmospheric or aquatic elements, but the sky was difficult to completely eliminate, annoyingly present, as it is, even in purely urban, man-made settings. Water, however, is somewhat less intrusive, or at least less ubiquitous: its natural, unruly version in rivers, lakes and most extremely in the open sea, can be avoided – and was indeed excluded as much as possible all through the Renaissance – in all but some very specific cases of subject matter. And when the sea *had* to be depicted in the fifteenth or sixteenth century, anything possible was done to compartmentalise, delimit and tame it, so that the system organising the more disciplined entities of the visual world would not collapse under the liquid insurrection.[13]

The story of the cataclysm that, around 1600, bluntly contested the representational system of the Renaissance and created the basis for a brave new world that we would later call Baroque, is well known.[14] Liquids do not appear to belong to this story at all, and nor does the effete, gentle Claude, born though he probably was in that same fateful year 1600. Occasional excrements aside, Claude seems, on the contrary, to incarnate a phase of *retour à l'ordre* on the Roman scene after the Caravaggesque upheaval and its myriad of devoted followers.

If we would like to save Claude from that reactionary historical position, but without relying too much on the extremely rare appearances of indecorous materials, the irruption of liquid intelligence in the midst of a rock-solid framework might be our best bet. Claude being Claude, the destabilisation enterprise is subtle and discreet – indeed, *pace* Claude's unintellectual reputation, it is truly dialectical. Which does not prevent the cornerstones of the dialectical edifice from being as well defined and positive as can be: Claude's solids are indeed very solid, and his liquid elements, as we

12
Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/. Toward a History of Painting*, trans. Janet Lloyd, Stanford, CA 2002. For Brunelleschi's Florentine experiment – the panel depicting the Baptistery in linear perspective and seen through a mirror – and for the special status of the sky in it, see id., *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. John Goodman, Cambridge, MA 1994.

13
Seaports, before Claude, were almost exclusively represented either from a vantage point facing the land, or with the coastline perpendicular to the picture plane, thus limiting the menacing indeterminacy of the sea.

14
For an account of that turning point, inevitably centred on that destroyer of painting Caravaggio, see Itay Sapir, *Ténèbres sans leçons. Esthétique et épistémologie de la peinture ténébriste romaine, 1595–1610*, Bern 2012. That Caravaggio "came to this world to destroy painting" was, allegedly, Poussin's conviction.

shall shortly see, represent the very quintessence of fluidity and its refusal to be contained.

It is perhaps ironic that I just used the seemingly banal and unremarkable metaphor of the "cornerstones of the dialectical edifice". It is precisely such an idea of knowledge and its accompanying discourse – foundationalist and solid – that Claude's architectural pomposity seems to express and that its counterpart – one may call it, with Jeff Wall and Matthew C. Hunter, liquid intelligence – bitterly mocks, undermines and ultimately reveals to be untenable. That it does so on the same canvases where the mighty edifices of human hubris seem to be celebrated is precisely what makes Claude's dialectical statement so powerful. To be sure, dialectical does not necessarily mean symmetrical: as we will shortly see, solid matter is deconstructed by liquid intelligence in Claude's work more than fluidity is undermined by solidity. For one, this is in itself a common feature of dialectics: the to and fro typical of the temporal movement of the dialectic can include one term that is "more defective than the other one [...] the second term radiates a kind of essentiality or plenitude which cannot be ascribed to its alleged opposite".[15] Second, there is a *mise en abyme* at play here that makes symmetry impossible: the very notion of the dialectic implies some deconstruction of solid, fixed structures, so that the dialectic interplay between the solid and the liquid can never be wholly equal; in the words of Jameson, "even dialectics are dialectical".[16] The starting point of a dialectical process is that "thinking approaches the dilemma of incommensurability [...] the dialectic henceforth seems to be the shift of thinking on to a new and unaccustomed place in an effort to deal with the fact of distinct and autonomous realities that seem to offer no contact with each other".[17] And indeed, not only are the sea and the solid shore incommensurable with one another; the sea, and liquids in general, are, so to speak, incommensurable in themselves, universally incommensurable, as the element of measure that commensurability implies is lacking, by definition, from fluids. And third, as will become clear, the dialectic of Claude's paintings targets the pretensions of human culture, not nature or the cosmic order as such. It is thus logical that the subtle, infinite play of "yes, but ...", typical to any dialectical process, is incarnated in the opposition of solidity and liquidity within the ostensibly firm components of the port, the latter penetrated and destabilised by the liquid elements but, in turn, also dominating them and containing them. It is the port, and not the sea, that is the object of dialectics here.

15
Jameson, Valences, 19; see also Gérard Genette, *Figures II*, Paris 1969, 101–122.

16
Jameson, Valences, 35.

17
Ibid., 24.

II. A Failed Attempt at Containment

Before sailing on to the tempestuous ocean of the philosophical and scientific Baroque, let us cast an anchor for a little while in the more concrete, solid ground of a visual example, namely, Claude's illustrious *Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba* [Fig. 1] now in the National Gallery in London. If Claude's seaports can be considered a series in the sense elaborated upon in George Kubler's *The Shape of Time*, that is, a sequence of solutions to the same artistic problem, this painting, from 1648, might be seen as the pinnacle of that series.[18] Although Claude continued to paint seaports in the remaining thirty-four years of his life, they became much less frequent, as if the pictorial statement of the Sheba painting was in some way a satisfying enough solution to the issues that attracted Claude to seaports in the first place.

The basic structure of the composition is the one Claude used in virtually all his mature port scenes: spectacular architectural creations, mostly of classical style, flanking an opening into the infinite sea. The imaginary architecture is sometimes antique and in ruin – in this case on the left – and in other places evidently "modern", like the classically inspired palace on the right. Some medieval elements peacefully cohabit in the architectural hotchpotch with the remnants and reminiscences of antiquity: the tower proudly surveying the entry to the harbour in the Sheba painting is a case in point.

Our first impression is that the sea, that menacing *Territoire du vide* described by the historian Alain Corbin in his eponymous book, is thus securely contained by the reassuring solidity of the stone structures surrounding it.[19] It is contained in both senses of the English verb: literally held within, as the sea, in spite of its escape toward the inscrutable horizon, is mostly imprisoned inside the mighty stony mass; but also, and as a result, contained in the sense used by the United States when it hoped to achieve "containment" of communist peril during the Cold War: the sea, source of early modern anxiety according to Corbin, is controlled and restrained by the astute products of human ingenuity. Claude's painting, if we heed these first impressions, depicts the triumph of the human, of civilisation, perhaps of the Empire, against the malevolent forces of nature.

But if this were the end of the story, it would not, of course, be very dialectical. As we learned to suspect, there's more to Claude than this, and indeed, once we take a more attentive look, the

18
Itay Sapir, Claude Lorrain's Port Scenes. A Kublerian Case Study?, in: Sarah Maupeu, Kerstin Schankweiler and Stefanie Stallschus (eds.), *Im Maschenwerk der Kunstgeschichte. Eine Revision von George Kublers "The Shape of Time"*, Berlin 2014, 179–194.

19
Alain Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea. The Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World, 1750–1840*, trans. Jocelyn Phelps, Berkeley, CA 1994. According to Corbin, our present-day fascination with the sea is a relatively recent development, from around the turn of the nineteenth century. In order to establish the premises for such a claim, Corbin shows, in the first part of his study, how the early modern sea was a terrible, frightening (and concretely very dangerous) entity rather than the beautiful, desirable holiday destination it became.

[Fig. 1]
Claude Lorrain, Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba, 1648, Oil on Canvas, 149.1 × 196.7 cm, London, National Gallery, Photo Credit © National Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY.

fissures in the grand structure of civilisation immediately appear, starting with some very literal ones: the ruin of what was once an impressive edifice is full of cracks, and the latter are invaded by small-scale representatives of uninvited nature, of the power of the wild: where, in better times, polished stone proudly dominated the sea, little plants are now occupying every trace of the ravages of time. They are not exactly liquid, but certainly instances of the *informe*, and as plants, one can imagine their veins constantly transporting liquid matter, secretly surrounding the cool, dry stone with an incessant flow.

Whereas the situation on the right side of the composition might seem less obviously fragile, signs of potential vulnerability and inevitable future decay actually abound there too. On top of the massive, modern and impeccable palace dominating that area, statues proudly stand. But here, as in most other seaport scenes, Claude seems to ironically emphasise not the ceremonial solemnity and firmness of these sculptures but rather their impossibly unstable position, constantly on the verge of a fatal fall, somewhat like tightrope acrobats. Classical culture is perhaps set in stone, but even stone – in fact particularly the rigid, heavy, inflexible matter that stone is – can fall and break.

Further toward the horizon, the drama is enacted in botanical terms: potted plants decorously decorate the little bridge leading to the medieval-looking tower, nature once again emerging in the midst of a built environment, but here in the tamed, meticulously shaped and almost parodically cute version seemingly ridiculing nature's wild powers. The counter reaction, however, is immediately visible in the form of the unrestrained, rebellious tree, ostentatiously higher than its palatial neighbour and arrogantly looming above its dwarfish, slavish relatives.

The series of descriptive vignettes can go on and on – I have yet to mention the foreground *terrain vague* peacefully yielding to the advancing waves, or, conversely, the foam subtly dramatising the frontal, more violent contact between the elements, water and stone, in their purest versions; the zoomorphic boat knobs, stylised depictions of nature, exploiting the mighty, menacing figure of a lion for a technological end, or even the wooden boats, processed natural material sent as outposts of culture to the heart of nature. But before delving into the almost inevitable interpretation of this painting in terms of the dialectics of culture and nature, a problematically anachronistic distinction, let us follow some of these details as they gently drift us back to the more specific aspect of liquidity that is at the heart of my interrogations here.[20] Among the numerous dialectical framings that Claude's seaports suggest, the possible binaries that they seek to present, then deconstruct and complicate,

20 For the relative, culture-specific nature of the distinction between culture and nature from an anthropological point of view, see Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd, Chicago/London 2013, cf. also Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cambridge, MA 1993.

nature and culture are indeed a fertile ground for interpretation. But for the purposes of reflecting on liquid intelligence, the polarity of fluids and solids can be shown to be highly productive as well; arguably, these being seaports, the quintessential interface between the two elements in the historical evolution of humanity, liquids and the intelligence with which they undermine our solid pretensions are perhaps the core of the story.

And after all, the details of the dialectic to and fro include one curious place in which Claude makes visible the intermingling of solid and liquid, or rather the presence of the confusingly fluid even at the heart of the built, well-ordered realm (complementing the very idea of a port, the presence of the solid on the verge of liquid, and sometimes invasively within the sea in peninsulas and jetties): on the far right of the foreground, close to the spectator in the putative space but perhaps as easy to miss as Edgar Allan Poe's purloined letter, the sea itself surreptitiously penetrates the continental domain. The abnormally high density of onlookers almost hides the watery inlet, making the liquid invasion perhaps even more ominous: right there and not clearly leading anywhere, trivial and yet strangely unsettling, possibly just a tiny bay but maybe a never-ending fracture, hardly impressive while sending the palace and the royal scene to a possibly inaccessible distance. In the midst of the sober representation of a mineral world and its hard contours, liquid is discreetly introduced: delimited and disciplined, and nonetheless potentially impertinent and destabilising.

III. Watery Dreams

The classical account of the fundamental importance of liquid imagery in Western, or perhaps more generally in human societies is Gaston Bachelard's *L'eau et les Rêves*.[21] And so, while heeding Steven Connor's contention in his *Book of Skin* that "Bachelard's work on the imagination of matter is in varying degrees unanalytic, archetypalist, aestheticist, ahistorical, idealist, self-indulgent, masculinist, rhapsodic, pottering and just plain soppy", I will also follow Connor's example in deploying, in spite of all these kind words, some of Bachelard's inspired insights on the complex realm called in French *l'imaginaire*.[22]

For Bachelard, water – the quintessential liquid material – is the epitome of the transitory, the unstable, the vertiginously perilous. Water itself – a female noun in French – is always flowing, always falling, always dying "a horizontal death"; "the pain of water

[21] Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams. An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, trans. Edith R. Farrell, Dallas 1983, 6.

[22] Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin*, London 2004, 41.

is infinite", Bachelard dramatically states.[23] And not only is water itself mortal: disappearing in deep, even infinite water, is the archetypal human nightmare; worse still, more than a nightmare, it is human destiny.

Even floating on water is a strongly disorienting experience: it is characterised by the innocuous word *rêverie*, but is above all – Bachelard quotes Jules Michelet here – the loss of time and space, the blurring of any knowledge. It comes as no surprise, then, that in seventeenth-century Rome, at a time still struggling with the artistic heritage of Renaissance Humanism – with the idea of art as the product of clear knowledge, of intellectual activity whose vectors are mathematical and precise at least as much as they are rhetorical and illusory – liquids are a complication and a (sometimes welcome) risk.

Liquid subversion has an artistic history before Claude, of course. Titian and the Venetian school are the classic *locus* in which to start the narrative, and the role of the *Serenissima* – better named the *Liquidissima* – in liquefying the art of painting was recounted time and again from the sixteenth century onwards.[24] Less obvious, but at least as relevant to this story in spite of the contrary prejudice I hinted at just a few pages ago, is Caravaggio's tenebrism. Michelangelo Merisi's signature thick dark background is neither liquid nor solid, as it is nothing at all, and is located nowhere at all. It is just black paint surrounding flickers of drama.[25] Caravaggio suppressed, to devastating epistemological effect, both the calculable space of Florentine painting and the concrete materiality of Venice, almost single-handedly forcing a whole century of art-making to go beyond that dichotomy and to position itself afresh on questions of information and representation, certainty and doubt, systematic totality versus locality and fragmentation; ultimately, Caravaggio's provocation can also be formulated in terms of the pros and cons of solid and liquid intelligence, and of the dubious validity of the very distinction between them.

To better understand Claude Lorrain's position in the aftermath of the Caravaggist crisis, pictorial traditions and counter-traditions might not be enough; following the habitual disclaimer to the effect that no direct theoretical activity, or even interest, is attested for Claude – nor for Caravaggio, for that matter – and that no biographical facts link him to contemporary writers and thinkers, the philosophical climate of the seventeenth century, including the

23
In the french version: Gaston Bachelard, *L'eau et les Rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, Paris 1942 (p. 13 of the *Le Livre de Poche* edition).

24
An excellent account of the transgressive power of colour, obliquely but powerfully related to Venice and to its "liquid" culture, is Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *The Eloquence of Color. Rhetoric and Painting in the French Classical Age*, trans. Emily McVarish, Berkeley/Los Angeles, CA 1993.

25
See Sapir, Ténèbres.

kind of thoughts that became suddenly conceivable, is important if we wish to substantiate Claude's original ideas; ideas that were expressed exclusively by pictorial means, but that were nonetheless vehicles of thinking.

IV. Liquid Baroque Science and Philosophy

Among the figures of late sixteenth- to seventeenth-century philosophy sometimes proposed as supplying potential intellectual patronage to Baroque art one must mention Michel de Montaigne, whose sceptical enterprise could be read as analogous to the emergence of Caravaggesque tenebrism;[26] and of course Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, especially as described by Gilles Deleuze: the emblematic thinker of the sinuous figure of the fold, impossible to rationalise and to contain and hence the antithesis to René Descartes's dominant philosophy, which is, for Deleuze, rigid and, as it were, obsessively straight.[27]

However, Descartes himself unexpectedly emerges nowadays as the possible protagonist of a philosophical Baroque: in their recent study *Baroque Science*, a title that is still somewhere between a curiosity and an anathema for many historians of science, Ofer Gal and Raz Chen-Morris suggest that, far from being at the antipodes of seventeenth-century culture, the so-called (though less and less often so called) Scientific Revolution on the one hand and the irrational, bizarre, convoluted aesthetics of Baroque art in fact share much more than had been previously assumed.[28]

While numerous studies have depicted the new scientists as quite different from their traditional image as fanatically rational, exclusively logical and quintessentially solid thinkers – Horst Bredekamp's work on Galileo is a case in point, specifically coming from an art historian – the explicit link with the Baroque is rather rare, which is quite surprising given the exact contemporaneity of the two cultural phenomena.[29] And when Gal and Chen-Morris speak about Baroque, the aspect that is emphasised is clear from

26
Ibid., chs. 4–5.

27
Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold. Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley, Minneapolis, 1993.

28
Ofer Gal and Raz Chen-Morris, *Baroque Science*, Chicago/London 2013. Cf. also their edited volume (with a less committed title), *Science in the Age of Baroque*, Dordrecht 2013. Growing doubts about the adequacy of the term "Scientific Revolution" to describe the epistemological turbulences in seventeenth-century Europe are perfectly, and by now famously, summed up in the opening sentence of Steven Shapin's *The Scientific Revolution*: "There was no such thing as the Scientific Revolution, and this is a book about it" (Chicago/London 1996, 1).

29
Horst Bredekamp, *Galilei der Künstler. Der Mond. Die Sonne. Die Hand*, Berlin 2007. Although a manuscript that was a central object of Bredekamp's analyses was since the publication revealed as a forgery, the general argument and most of the specific observations in this impressive volume on Galileo's work on the frontier between art and science remain valid.

the start: their book, they state, is about the "tensions and inversions at the heart of the New Science", and about "loci of cultural discontent".[30] Indeed, the first target of their deconstruction is the popular image of the seventeenth century as the heyday of epistemological optimism, of unbridled faith in the capabilities of the human mind and body to perceive, process and produce knowledge. In fact, the use of optical instruments, and the corollary belief that those are necessary for the acquisition of knowledge, implied a growing doubt about the "naked eye" of the human observer, helpless in its impreciseness and easy victim of error.[31]

In the face of what Gal and Chen-Morris call "the overwhelming variety of new objects that the seventeenth century impressed on savants and artists alike",[32] it comes as no surprise, then, that some original, but perhaps irremediably marginal figures of the era, unimpressed by the solid ambitions of a new architecture of knowledge, were tempted by the liquid sirens of the Baroque. Montaigne and Giordano Bruno just before the turn of the century, Deleuze's Leibniz somewhat later and also, in his own medium, Caravaggio, belonged to this category; and so did Galileo, Johannes Kepler, Descartes and Isaac Newton, and even Claude Lorrain to whom we will shortly return, although the latter group of scientific and pictorial thinkers is less often recognised as adopting Baroque strategies to confront new epistemological challenges. Descartes, we learn now, did suffer from genuine perceptual anxiety; he thought that sense representation was not transparent, and that sensations needed to be deciphered.[33] The aspiration to true and complete knowledge was, then, neither a cause nor a product of the New Science; rather, it was the very ideal that the epistemological revolution of the seventeenth century definitively annihilated.

General doubts about knowledge could not but crystallise around the sensorial field considered most apt, in Western thought in general and in the Renaissance in particular, to produce sense data of rich epistemological value: namely, sight and visuality. One can imagine the devastating, but also liberating, consequences for visual art of a new doctrine depriving the eye of its legitimacy as a source of knowledge, as a purveyor of reason, and even, with the advent of scientific instruments, as a main point of reference for visual phenomena. "If the senses are conduits of opaque images, of mediated and meaningless natural effects, if mathematics is a human art, enforcing artificial order on recalcitrant phenomena," conclude the authors of *Baroque Science*, "then knowledge can

30 Gal and Chen-Morris, Baroque Science, 1, 10.

31 Ibid., 15–51.

32 Ibid., 11.

33 Ibid., 48–49.

no longer be considered reason's strive for certainty [...] Human knowledge has to be considered as the product of an active pursuit of the 'soul and body *together*'."[34]

It is also easy to see how the "Denigration of Vision" – to use Martin Jay's phrase in a rather different context – and the novel reliance on the passions while suspecting reason's tendency to lead us astray, went hand in hand with a dissolving process, a tendency to value ways of knowing one can metaphorically – and sometimes almost literally – define as liquid. Frédéric Cousinié cites Descartes's assertion that in the human body there is no essential difference between fluids and solids other than the speed of their movement.[35] More generally, Gal and Chen-Morris attribute to Kepler and Galileo the understanding that the tranquil, beautiful fixed forms dreamt of by Leon Battista Alberti are actually obstructed by the inevitability of natural motion.[36] The solid anchor that perspective provides for images in the Renaissance – the calm assuredness that it made possible – was thus replaced with an epistemological, as well as an aesthetic, state of flux. And while Kepler still believed in the feasibility of revealing the "foundations", the necessarily rock-hard "divine infrastructure of our world", Newton, later in the century, knew that the firmament was anything but firm, that the cosmos could be chaotic, and that its complexity was irreducible.[37] He was thus interested in reaching flexible, human-scale approximations rather than the "fixed foundations of (God's) work". Once these limits are recognised, a more fluid scientific system could be just as ambitious and productive as the discarded dream of solid metaphysical structures and perfectly neat contours.

Cousinié proposes, as Claude's philosophical contemporary pendant, no other than Francis Bacon – a thrillingly interesting idea, fittingly accompanied by Bacon's famous frontispiece of the *Novum Organum* [Fig. 2], an image structurally reminiscent of Claude's seaports in many ways but lacking the spectacular architecture so essential to the latter's dialectics. The two columns are perhaps a synecdoche of those impressive classical buildings, but visually they fail to create the same dramatic décor needed to thematise the incessant struggle of civilisation and wilderness, metaphorised by architecture and the sea in Claude's work.[38] A quote from Bacon included in *Baroque Science* suggests another direction

34
Ibid., 277.

35
Cousinié, Esthétique des fluides, 329; quoted from René Descartes, *La Description du corps humain. De la formation de l'animal* (1648).

36
Gal and Chen-Morris, Baroque Science, 135.

37
Ibid., 165–167, 173–178. Newton's work on hydrostatics should be mentioned in this context too.

38
Cousinié, Esthétique des fluides, 323–324.

[Fig. 2]
Francis Bacon, Frontispiece of *Instauratio magna* (including the *Novum Organum*), 1620, Engraving, 23.8 × 15.4 cm, Photo Credit © Image Select / Art Resource, NY.

in which the English philosopher could be one of the Baroque standard-bearers of a less-than-firm epistemology:

> The universe to the eye of the human understanding is framed like a labyrinth; presenting as it does on every side so many ambiguities of way, such deceitful resemblances of objects and signs, natures so irregular in their lines, and so knotted and entangled. And then the way is still to be made by the uncertain light of the sense, sometimes shining out, sometimes clouded over, through the woods of experience and particulars.[39]

V. Pascal's Floating

As far as Claude is concerned, the Baconian hypothesis remains undeveloped by Cousinié and certainly deserves future elaboration. The thinker to whom I will now turn to seek philosophical assistance in the contextualisation of Claude's pictorial dialectics of liquidity is one whose "Baroque" idiosyncratic credentials have always been undeniable, but who was anything but a marginal figure in seventeenth-century culture. The French polymath Blaise Pascal has dedicated scientific treatises to the physical characteristics of fluids – the *Traité de l'équilibre des liqueurs et de la pesanteur de la masse de l'air*, for instance – but it is in the more abstract meditations of the *Pensées* that a liquid intelligence can be seen at work.

Louis Marin, that fabulous detector of structures, has described the *Pensées* as a text whose fragmentary, structureless nature is not the random result of its piecemeal process of composition, but part and parcel of its very essence.[40] Pascal's work is Umberto Eco's *opera aperta – avant la lettre* – and it is the philosopher's acute, modern consciousness of the universe's infinity that brings home to him the absurd pretentiousness of striving to build knowledge in the image of a solid, architectural, measurable structure. Pascal mocks his contemporaries who when philosophising use their *esprit géométrique*, believing that firm foundations – "beginning with definitions and then following with principles" – will make their construction valid; "which is not the way to proceed", Pascal wryly prescribes.[41] For Marin, the author of the *Pensées* thus demonstrates a *fin de siècle* kind of thought, a strange delight at the unstableness of foundations,

39 Gal and Chen-Morris, Baroque Science, 240; quoted from Bacon's *Instaurazio magna* (1620).

40 Louis Marin, *Pascal et Port-Royal*, Paris 1997, in particular 11–91, 155–213.

41 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, fragment no. 1 in the Brunschvicg edition (to which all further citations refer), trans. W. F. Trotter, New York 1910. Some of the translations are modified.

the *jouissance* of losing oneself in the infinite void or in immeasurable diversity.[42]

Pascal's epistemological pessimism, and its corollary religious fervour, are the direct result of the recognition that our place in the world is painfully insignificant. The idea that the universe is infinite, already defended by Giordano Bruno a few decades earlier, was becoming more acceptable; and the epistemological consequences of this metaphysical acknowledgement were by now apparent. Significantly, that infinite universe can be understood as essentially liquid. One of the most famous brief *pensées* describes, just like Caravaggio's mature paintings, the background to our existence as not exactly liquid, but as one that resembles nothing less than Ptolemaic rigid spheres or Alberti's rigorous linear perspective: "the eternal silence of these infinite spaces horrifies me", says Pascal, who describes here the human predicament as being surrounded by silent, limitless space, lacking the sonic and the visual coordinates that solid elements would provide; the most immediate association here, at the pre-space-travel era, must have been drowning and being swallowed up by water.[43]

Some of Pascal's metaphors, however, are more directly, and evocatively, liquid. In one version of the "being-lost-in-the-middle-of-nowhere" nightmare, a man (with whom Pascal identifies) is described as being taken, while asleep, to a desert island. Our real situation, Pascal suggests in another memorable image, is that "(w)e sail within a vast sphere, ever drifting in uncertainty, driven from end to end. When we think to attach ourselves to any point and to fasten to it, it wavers and leaves us; and if we follow it, it eludes our grasp, slips past us and vanishes forever. Nothing stays for us."[44] What is this evasive, slippery environment, this incessant to and fro of floating and oscillating, if not a liquid *milieu*, requiring, in order to make some sense of it, a good dose of very liquid intelligence?

As befits a fragmentary, chaotic writer, Pascal's thoughts are often ambiguous, even contradictory. He famously declared that all human misfortunes are the result of our incapability to stay at rest within a room, "dans une chambre"; seafaring – directly confronting the liquidity around us, the *gouffre infini* filled with water – would in that case, of course, be the most dangerous vice.[45] But one might suspect Pascal here of irony, or else claim that the very inevitability of floating in the infinite fluid is what makes the thinker's ethical prescription so poignant and desperate: even just

42
Marin, Pascal et Port-Royal, 155–168.

43
Pascal, Pensées, frag. 206.

44
Ibid., frag. 693 (desert island), 72 (drifting). It is not a coincidence that Pierre Lyraud's thorough recent study of Pascal's "poétique de la finitude" begins with the fragment involving a desert island. Pierre Lyraud, *Figures de la finitude chez Pascal. La fin et le passage*, Paris 2022.

45
Pascal, Pensées, frag. 139.

quietly staying in your room would not save you from aimlessly erring in infinity, indeed with and within your closed, protective space. One of the most enigmatic *pensées* gnomically states: "working for the uncertain; sailing on the sea; walking over a plank".[46] It seems that these are to be considered desirable activities rather than unbeatable methods for taking the route to perdition, though this is not absolutely certain, as the context is ambiguous. Be that as it may, the very association of epistemological risk ("*l'incertain*") and the greatest existent liquid expanse ("*la mer*") is striking. Less ambiguously, the sea also serves Pascal to explain his precocious version of the epistemologically destabilising chaos theory and its butterfly effect: "The least movement affects all nature; the entire sea changes because of a rock."[47]

Pascal accuses painting of vanity, as it makes us admire the image of things that we do not admire in themselves. Perspective, he says, might work in assigning us a place from which to look at a painting, but is hardly helpful in the search for truth and morality.[48] Art is not, for Pascal, a reliable interlocutor in his existential quest, and yet Claude's seaports can be thought of as very close, in spirit, to the doubts and caution that Pascal expresses.

A port is in itself, for the author of the *Pensées*, an epistemological metaphor; an ambiguous one, once again:

> The licentious tell men of orderly lives that they stray from nature's path, while they themselves follow it; as people in a ship think those move who are on the shore. On all sides the language is similar. We must have a fixed point in order to judge. The harbour decides for those who are in a ship; but where shall we find a harbour in morality?[49]

Ostensibly, the port represents here an ideal of fixity and reliability, unfortunately impossible to attain in moral questions. Surreptitiously, however, the port's absolute solidity is jeopardised by its textual contiguity with those dangerously naïve people on a vessel, who are wrongly convinced that *they* occupy the stable point of reference to anything else. Is the port really a safe haven? Or is it the worst illusion of them all? Pascal distils a venomous doubt that goes against his seemingly simple message. The pious gambler consoles himself with the illusion that the destabilising fluidity can perhaps be avoided in God's domain: "The rivers of Babylon rush

46
Ibid., frag. 324. Even more strange is the inclusion of this trio in a list of "opinions très saines" attributed to "le peuple".

47
Ibid., frag. 505.

48
Ibid., frag. 134 (vanity of painting); 381 (perspective and morality).

49
Ibid., frag. 383.

and fall and sweep away. O holy Sion", he exclaims with some dose of wishful thinking – the French *vœu pieux* fits better here – "O holy Sion, where all is firm and nothing falls!"[50]

VI. Seaports of Babel

Claude, painting seaports, distils the doubt without even bothering to counter it with the promise of blessed divine fixity. As we have seen, Claude sets side by side the sumptuous, ostensibly stable man-made architecture on the one hand and the untamed sea on the other. He thus represents the dialectics accompanying millennia of human civilisation, of striving to control the uncontrollable, to measure the immeasurable and ultimately to represent the irrepresentable. An effort that, in the seventeenth century, goes on, accelerates and consequentially – perhaps paradoxically – runs into its limits with unprecedented force. Claude's ports are thus a comment on the ongoing enterprise of containing the liquid element, the flexible, the *insaisissable*, an effort irrevocably doomed but nonetheless necessary and constitutive of what it is to be human.

It is not simply the theme of seaports – what one might even call Claude's obsession with them – that enacts all these complex anthropological statements. While ports had been represented before Claude, it is Le Lorrain's subtle structural innovations and inventions that undermine the normative depiction of harbours as unambiguous safe havens, monuments to the triumph of human enterprise and spirit in the face of the unruly alterity of liquid nature. I already described the ongoing play of form and formless, of history and botany, of construction and fissuring – the never-to-be-resolved dialectics that only a detailed analysis of Claude's composition brings into light. But other elements join the nuanced treatment that takes an ostensible panegyric to rocky resistance and turns it into a hymn to fragility and to liquid intelligence. The daring turning around of the composition, so that we face the endless open sea and the blinding sun, is one of the transformations Claude applied in his mature years; yet another element is the inclusion of boats whose complex system of masts and rigging provides a grid of lines through which to look at the sea and the sky behind them, reminiscent of Alberti's veil or of Albrecht Dürer's perspectival devices. While the open sea is represented as an incalculable, immeasurable and disorienting entity, it is, in some parts of the painting, seen through a highly complex but seemingly orderly grid of straight lines, horizontal, vertical and diagonal. This grid is mapping the objects that are viewed through it, the things that the painter has decided to subjugate to a system of geometrical coordinates. The liquid sea shares with the sky the dubious status of being an object to meticulous information, in the strict etymological sense of the word. But both the sea and the sky belong to a very particular class

[50] Ibid., frag. 459.

of "objects" or "things". Not much can be obtained from their division into smaller units of geometrical simplicity and rigour; they remain as elusive as they were before. Thus, these grids are another powerful visual metaphor for the paradoxes of representation, the resistance of nature to human rationality and the impossibility of mapping infinite spaces. It is precisely the futility of the implied endeavour, of mapping the ungraspable and geometrising liquidity, that exudes subtle irony lost on the traditional reception of Claude as the elegiac poet of glory and nostalgia.

If Claude's seaports are to be considered as pictorially raising historiographic issues, it should not be forgotten that from the 1640s onwards the artist included in them proper historical themes, albeit always at the margins of the composition and in small scale. Some of these are clearly marked by the vagaries of history and by the fragility of human existence – Ursula's looming martyr in the painting today in London and the much later Dido episode exposed in Hamburg are typical examples of that category, where the vanity of spectacular harbours is echoing the merciless fate striking specific human beings (often women in Claude's seaports, which could not be a coincidence: the male artist, while claiming liquid intelligence culturally associated with female "softness", is still the active and creative *metteur-en-scène* of these passive, helpless creatures' life story). The painting we have been looking at above, however, depicts a rather optimistic story: the Queen of Sheba, with her royal retinue, is ready to leave for the journey that will bring her to Jerusalem, where King Solomon, the builder of the Temple, will receive her. The sea here, far from being the dangerous no-man's land it usually connotes, is an intercultural trajectory leading to exchange and enrichment, and of course to the enhancement of intercontinental commerce, a fundamental preoccupation of seventeenth-century Europe.

Claude's dialectics is capable of accommodating this, too. By definition, it is neither optimistic nor pessimistic; it is a prudent warning against *hubris* but also an acknowledgement of the necessity and vitality of ports. It is all the more poignant that the Queen of Sheba embarks on her ambitious expedition from a harbour already showing signs of decay and irrevocable fragility, and that her quest of knowledge and discovery is nonetheless launched.

Another narratively ambiguous example from Claude's seaports series is a 1646 seaport from the Louvre [Fig. 3] – a composition simpler than most, and including less anecdotic detail. Its narrative content is debated, and so is its title: the Louvre uses the rather general (and proto-impressionistic-sounding) "Port de mer, effet de brume" – seaport with misty or hazy effect – adding in parentheses "L'embarquement d'Ulysse?". The hypothesis proposing Ulysses's embarkation from the land of the Phaeacians as the painting's theme is often repeated in catalogues and monographs; it is quite clear, in any case, that these are heroic characters from an epos about to depart to the open sea.

[Fig. 3]
Claude Lorrain, Seaport, Effect of Mist, 1646, Oil on Canvas, 119 × 150 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre, Photo Credit © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

While the general structure of the Louvre painting is very similar to the National Gallery's *Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba*, some details here require specific attention. The flags, for instance, visibly moved by the maritime wind: a cultural element resisting nature's potential savagery – winds can be fatal to the seafarer – but with nothing on them, no message, no colour, no design. They are potential bearers of content, of cultural information, left empty and useless.

And then, one particular detail in this painting makes it an even more poignant warning against the perils of epistemological and cosmological hubris. This detail here is unique in the series of Claude's seaports, and has never been interpreted as particularly important, but I believe it may be truly significant and add another semantic layer to this image of hubris, crisis and dialectics.

I am referring to the triangular shape on the left-hand side, dominating the fortress and partly hidden in the foggy atmosphere. Marcel Röthlisberger, the most prominent Claude scholar of the post-war period, briefly described it as a "cone-shaped mountain above the characteristic outline of Soracte (a mountain in Lazio)", an assertion that is not contradicted by later authors.[51] But for a mountain, the object seems to have an unusual form; the triangular summit can indeed be considered a natural elevation, but this hardly explains the two other diagonals, in particular the front one, and their rhythmic sequence. A more plausible hypothesis, to my knowledge never proposed before, would be to link this mysterious form to the most emblematic motif related to issues of human hubris and civilisation in crisis: the Tower of Babel.

Such identification of the motif, or rather such association, would, first of all, explain its structure, approximately spiral, albeit in a simplified way. Not only Pieter Bruegel's pair of famous works from 1563–1564, but also numerous Northern images of the Tower of Babel, all followed this iconographic tradition with only anecdotic variation (for instance, Lucas van Valckenborch's depiction from 1594 [Fig. 4]).[52] The Tower of Babel's top reached the sky, the Bible (Genesis 11:1–9) tells us, and this seems to be the case here. Moreover, the Babylonian hypothesis is also compatible with the harbour motif, as most early modern images of the Tower of Babel imagined the biblical city as a port town, with the tower partly surrounded by water, boats and harbour activity.

To be sure, I am not suggesting that what we see on the left-hand side of Claude's painting is simply and unproblematically the Tower of Babel. Probably, it is not just one thing and has no single, indisputable explanation. It is not a mountain, then, although it may vaguely remind the viewer of a natural slope; and while it

51 Marcel Röthlisberger, *Claude Lorrain. The Paintings*, vol. 1: *Critical Catalogue*, New Haven, CT 1961.

52 See Sébastien Allard, La tour de Babel du XVIe au XVIIe siècle, in: *Babylone* (exh. cat. Paris, Musée du Louvre), ed. by Béatrice André-Salvini, Paris 2008, 456–467.

[Fig. 4]
Lucas van Valckenborch, The Tower of Babel, 1594, oil on panel, 41 × 56.5 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre, Photo Credit © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

incorporates echoes of a splendid edifice, of virtuoso architecture and of the pretentiousness that is indispensable for this kind of enterprise, this "thing" is not simply the ancient Tower of Babel represented dominating a port of hybrid architecture and some figures clearly connoting classical antiquity. The painting evokes all these motifs, exploits the evocative powers of them in juxtaposition, happily ignoring our anti-dialectical art historical reluctance to allow absurdity or contradiction.

What the Babylonian allusion adds to the painting is a further poignant hint at the theme of human civilisation's dangerous pretensions juxtaposed with the emblem of elusive nature, the ever-changing and limitless, liquid sea. But the topic is already present in the very theme of seaports as they are repeatedly depicted by Claude, even without this further, exceptional motif. Indeed, it might be said that Claude's seaports are always, in some way, rehearsals of the Tower of Babel myth: they are monuments of excessive ambition and human folly.

Even if the thematic interest of Claude Lorrain in liquidity as an alternative epistemic model is undeniable, one might still object that while Claude's seaports indeed represent the ambivalent nature of human attempts to discipline and domesticate liquidity, the artist himself, as a painter, hardly shows any liquid intelligence at all. This can be disappointing, for after all, Claude is not merely telling us stories or explaining ideas; he produced visual artefacts that might not satisfy those who seek examples of fluid intelligence in painterly action. Claude's technique is a far cry from the liquid proficiency demonstrated by the *macchie* of Titian or from Rubens's unruly blotches of colour. Claude's paint had thoroughly dried up on his canvases, and hardly any trace remains of its oily, fluid former self.[53] If Claude demonstrates painterly intelligence – and he surely does – it is of the neat and well-delimited kind, solidly classical and classically solid.

Even from a purely art historical point of view, the objection should not be taken too far. Claude's principal claim to fame was his mastery of diffuse light, penetrating every nook and cranny of the composition, and displaying a behaviour that is as liquid-like as it gets. A comparison to any of Poussin's contemporary works, with their own intelligence invariably based on the hard, inflexible eloquence of contours and fixed forms, should suffice to remind us that Claude's was a fluid aesthetics, albeit of a particular kind.

But the dialectics of Claude leads to a liquid reappraisal of art in yet another, more abstract way. When, still on a purely represen-

53

The assumption of Claude's pigments being thoroughly dried and solidified seems to be complicated, though, by the frequent appearance in his canvasses of "blanching" – paint layers becoming "lighter and 'chalkier' in appearance" as time passes. Although *Sheba* seems to have suffered less from this phenomenon than other Claude paintings, it is still interesting to think what, in his technique, led to such posterior destabilising of the pigmented surface. See Martin Wyld, John Mills and Joyce Plesters, Some Observations on Blanching, in: *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* 4, 1980, 49–63, in particular the causal hypotheses seeking to explain areas of blanching in Claude (pp. 60–63). I thank Matthew Hunter for drawing my attention to this valuable technical study.

tational level, it forces the hard-edged products of human ingenuity to confront their suppression and eventual dissolution in the eternal flux of the universe; when it recognises the necessity of both a solid and a liquid approach to the world, it ends up commenting on the status of knowledge itself and of its representations, be they verbal or pictorial. Through his visual version of dialectics that never culminates in Hegelian synthesis, Claude sketches a novel epistemology, specifically painterly and at the same time akin, perhaps, to late twentieth-century theories representing humanistic knowledge as the product of social negotiation rather than the result of calculations and proofs: Richard Rorty's pragmatics, Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic truth, humanistic rather than scientific, or Gianni Vattimo's *pensiero debole*.[54] In all these cases, hard, solid knowledge is constantly critiqued by a more malleable, soft kind of intelligence, for which liquid is surely an adequate term. Needless to say, Claude has never thought in these terms, nor was he even involved in the active scene of scepticism and liquid philosophy that anticipated by three centuries, as we have seen, its twentieth-century reincarnation. But in his discreet way, questioning the prerogatives of solid architecture, of all-encompassing linear perspective and of firm, totalising principles, Claude Lorrain used the visual medium of painting to liquefy a by-then petrified worldview. I contend that he thus deserves, against all odds, a place in the hall of fame of fluid practitioners, of the explorers of flux, and of the pioneers of liquid intelligence.

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54 Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton, NJ 1979; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. and ed. Garret Barden and John Cumming, New York 1975; Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti (eds.), *Weak Thought*, Albany, NY 2012.