The Absent and Present Serpent in Nicolas Poussin's *Spring*

by
Herbert Morris

The Serpent is as central, and as apparently indispensable to the drama depicted in Genesis 3 as Iago, with his deviousness, is to Othello's tragic story. Accordingly, painters from the earliest period of Western art through Dürer, Raphael, Michelangelo, Cranach the Elder, Cranach the Younger, Tintoretto, Titian, Rubens and Domenichino, all not too distant in time from Poussin and several having a clear influence upon him, insert a snake in their pictorial representation of the tale of Adam and Eve. Poussin, who takes the tale as the subject for *Spring* or *The Earthly Paradise* (Fig. 1), the first painting in his series of paintings, *Four Seasons,*[1] alone among painters, and indeed sculptors, who have treated the subject prior to him, to my knowledge, does not include a snake, the form taken by the character in the tale referred to as "the Serpent."

The painting does depict, as expected, the obligatory nude figures of Adam and Eve.[2] Both catch the early morning sunlight and are diminutive in size compared to the immensity of the luxuriant natural setting in which they are situated. We see Eve kneeling beside a reclining Adam with his left knee raised, her right hand gripping his left upper arm, and her left arm raised, her hand pointing toward what we are clearly to understand as a representation of the Tree of Knowledge with its hanging fruit interspersed with flowers. A short distance from this tree, to its left, in deep

---

[1] *Poussin and Nature: Arcadian Visions*, ed. P. Rosenberg/ K. Christiansen (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008). Professor Rosenberg writes, "The paintings of the Four Seasons are incontestably the most famous works by Poussin and the most often illustrated as has been frequently repeated, they constitute his 'artistic and spiritual testament.'" 292. See general discussion 292-296. See also N. Milovanovic, *Nicolas Poussin Les Quatre Saisons* (Musée de Louvre: Paris 2014). The Duc de Richelieu, grand-nephew of Cardinal Richelieu, commissioned the paintings, and then, either paying off a debt to King Louis XIV occasioned by losing a tennis match or selling the paintings to the King, delivered them in 1665 to the King who, in turn, arranged for them to be hung in the Louvre. Poussin is known to have worked on the paintings during the period 1660–64, a period in which he suffered from the effects of both age (1594–1665) and illness. It is not known in what sequence the paintings, each of which is on a Biblical story— Adam and Eve, Boaz and Ruth, The Gathering of the Grapes, The Flood—was painted.

[2] I refer to the woman as "Eve" even though she is only so named in Genesis 3:20 after the events discussed in this essay.

shadows, is another tree laden with fruit, absent any flowers, which it is reasonable to assume is meant to symbolize the Tree of Life that God informs Adam he has placed in the midst of the garden.[3] The Creator floats in billowy dark clouds above, facing forward, his left hand extended and directed ahead. Our eyes, guided by our knowledge of the biblical tale and its many pictorial depictions, and influenced by an ingrained mental habit that has resulted, survey the scene. We search for the tale's Serpent in the vicinity of the Tree of Knowledge, but he is nowhere to be seen. He is neither wrapped around the trunk of the Tree nor slithering along it nor hanging from a branch nor poking its head out from some thick foliage nearby nor simply on the ground in plain sight.[4] We do not expect a representation of the Serpent in a scene of the Expulsion, such as that of Masaccio (Fig. 2), but when the action described takes place in the Garden, the scene of the temptation, we do.

The absence of the Serpent alone arouses puzzlement that deepens for those of us aware of the particular appeal that the snake had for Poussin as a vehicle of symbolic significance. A snake appears in a number of his most famous landscapes. One is to be found in his *Landscape with Orpheus and Eurydice* (Fig. 3), in *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* (Fig. 4), *Landscape with a Man Pursued by a Snake* (Fig. 5), and in *Two Nymphs and a Snake in a Landscape* (Fig. 6). A snake, the python, wrapped around the base of a tree, also appears in the painting *Apollo and Daphne* (Fig. 7), dated the year before his death.[5]

Whatever the level of perplexity occasioned by these facts, it is heightened by what we observe in *Winter* or *The Flood* (Fig. 8), the last in the series of four paintings. In that painting we see a snake, the longest and thickest of any before painted by Poussin, splayed out upon a large dark

---

[3] Gen. 2:8.

[4] A common pictorial representation of the serpent, of course, has its upper body as that of a young woman despite Genesis 3:1 in which the Serpent is identified as male.

[5] A. Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin* (New York: Pallas Athene, 1967), I, 315, Fn 3: "The snake, which is the central theme of the *Landscape with Two Nymphs*, appears to have become something of an obsession with Poussin in his later years." See also T.J. Clark, *The Sight of Death* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006) " Snakes, it is clear, were the members of the animal kingdom Poussin was most drawn to: they appear in paintings and drawings all through his life, time and again charged with a specially repellent beauty," 178. Professor Clark's discussion of snakes is the most thorough in the Poussin literature, but however illuminating his remarks about a snake when it appears, he neglects to shed any light on the issue that is dealt with in this paper, not saying anything about the absence of a snake in *Spring*.

rock in the left foreground of the painting and still another, much smaller, attached to the trunk of a tree just off the center of the scene on the right. Where we expect a snake, we see none. Where we do not expect a snake, we see two. It is as if the sly Serpent, split into two in some manner, and then slithered away from Eden in the spring where he belonged, to a stormy wintry scene of horror, accompanied by a smaller companion, where he does not.

Poussin, then, has presented us in *Spring* and *Winter* with a conundrum of absence and presence. The fact that the paintings come from the same series compounds our puzzlement. I consider in this paper *Spring* alone. I claim, firstly, that the Serpent's absence from where we expect to see him serves Poussin's purposes better than would the Serpent's presence there. Poussin gains something from non-representation of the Serpent as represented in Genesis. He also means to convey something to us by non-representation.[6] Secondly, I claim that the Serpent is in plain sight but not at all where we expect to see him or in his familiar embodiment. He appears in the Tree of Life, offering a deceptively appealing illusion of overcoming death while Eve is about to grasp knowledge and the reality of human mortality. My view is that Poussin in *Spring* provides a radical and illuminating revision of the biblical tale of Adam and Eve from a Stoic perspective on life.[7]

In Part I, I consider several possible explanations for the biblical Serpent's absence. While the Serpent's absence has been noted by a number of art historians, to my knowledge there is no published work in which there is an attempt to resolve the mystery. I reject a number of possible explanations that may come to mind and then offer one of my own. In Part II I offer supporting argument for my second claim.

I

One suggested explanation for the Serpent's absence in *Spring* is that Poussin depicts a moment in time before the temptation and Fall. The Serpent has yet a role to perform. All is, as yet, complete innocence. Eve is simply drawing Adam's attention to the attractiveness of the fruit on the Tree without either of them having thought of eating from it in mind. But, problematically, the Tree, on this view, is without any symbolic signifi-

---

[6] See on the difference between "causing" and "meaning" H.P. Grice, "Meaning", *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 213-23.

[7] On the topic of Stoicism and Poussin, see Blunt, 157-76.

cance, and it is a mere accident that, at the moment, Eve finds this tree, rather than any other attractive tree in the Garden, visually appealing. Yet another problem with this view is the fact that in the biblical telling of the tale, Eve's focus on the Tree of Knowledge occurs only after the Serpent's question to her about eating the fruit of the trees in the garden.[8] The painting, in light of our knowledge of the tale would seem strongly to suggest that Eve,with her left hand pointing to the Tree and her right on the upper left arm of Adam, is beckoning him to eat.

Another possible interpretation for the Serpent's absence is significantly different from the first. We can label it "the Miltonian interpretation," because its basic features accord with the depiction of the Fall in *Paradise Lost*.[9] On this view, once the Serpent's guile proves successful and Eve gives way to temptation, the Serpent's work is complete and he vanishes. He has no further role to play. Eve then tempts Adam and he, too, eats of the Tree of Knowledge, but the Serpent is not there to witness this final act of the Fall. The claim, then, is that the painting captures that moment in time after Eve has eaten and now approaches Adam, inviting or beckoning him so that he might join her. It is a tale of two temptations each one of which attains its goal.[10]

Several obstacles stand in the way of accepting this interpretation. Firstly, the painting itself does not warrant the story imposed upon it of Eve's already having been tempted by the Serpent and eaten the fruit. We see no signs of her having bitten into fruit or possessing fruit, and the biblical tale has her only offering Adam fruit after she has tasted it. *Spring* does not portray such a scenario. For all that we can tell from the painting, she may have come upon the idea of eating without anyone's tempting her to do so. Secondly, the position and gaze of God in the clouds above seems perplexing in light of the tragedy unfolding below. We would expect a focus, not on what is in the distance ahead of him, but rather on what is below him and, given the biblical tale, what he will soon with great displeasure address.

---

[8] Gen. 3:1

[9] K. Clark, *Landscape into Art* (London: Penguin, 1956) 81: "…the *Spring* that perfect illustration to *Paradise Lost*, which by the art of design our first parents are given their true place in nature."

[10] J. Milton, *Paradise Lost,* ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1957), Book IX.

A final suggestion can be constructed from the views of Willibald Sauerländer.[11] He argues that the four paintings in the series *Four Seasons* must be viewed as a whole and that a symbolic Christian conception of historical development is the key to understanding the movement from spring to winter. True there are intimations of the Fall and mortality in *Spring*. Yet what Poussin intends to depict is the world before the Fall, a world in which Eve is pointing at the Tree but has yet to reach for its fruit. Sauerländer, writing some fifty years after first proposing his interpretation, summarizes it this way:

> The Creation of the world is finished, and God is seen high in the sky blessing his work. As in Poussin's other landscapes, however, felicity is overshadowed by immanent (sic) misfortune and death. Eve, who is seen in the center of the garden, points to the fruits of the Tree of Knowledge and invites Adam to taste from them…It is the moment just before the Fall, the moment of expectation...The Golden Age is coming to an end. The scorn of God and the Expulsion from Paradise are imminent.[12]

The explanation for the Serpent's absence is not directly addressed by Sauerländer, but it is plausible to attribute to him a view similar to the one taken by Milton. Sauerländer views *Spring* as depicting the world before the Fall, but because he views Eve as "inviting" Adam to eat, we must imagine that Eve has already succumbed to the Serpent's temptation. And, as with Milton, the Serpent is a character in the tale whose role has already been performed, and he need not be depicted.[13]

---

[11] See W. Sauerländer,"Die Jahreszeiten: Ein Beitrag zur allegorischen Landschaft beim späten Poussin," *Münchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst* 7 (1956), 169-84. W. Sauerländer, "'Nature Through the Glass of Time': A Reflection on the Meaning of Poussin's Landscapes," *Poussin and Nature: Arcadian Visions*, ed. Pierre Rosenberg and Keith Christiansen (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 113-17. I am unconvinced by Professor Sauerländer's claim that an understanding of each painting in the series depends upon an understanding of the series as a whole. I believe that *Spring* conveys meanings that are not necessarily linked to the meanings of other paintings in the series. See Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987) 367-368 for a critique of Professor Sauerländer's views on this issue.

[12] *Poussin and Nature,* 113.

[13] Milovanovic in his recent *Nicolas Poussin Les Saisons Quatre* generally follows Sauerländer's Christian interpretation of the series of paintings. He observes, "Dans le tableau de Poussin, ce n'est donc pas le demon qui est en cause, mais le coeur humain." p. 12. We can, perhaps, conclude from this that Milovanovic believes that the Serpent is

This view, while not open to the criticism that there is no evidence of Eve having eaten, is vulnerable to the criticism of an incongruity between the events taking place in the Garden and the depiction of God. More importantly, even if we were to grant the truth of either the Miltonian or Sauerländer view, we would not have been provided with an answer to the question, "Why would Poussin have selected such a narrative out of all the possible ones?" What of any significance turns on whether the time depicted is just after Eve's temptation or just before it? The fact alone of the Serpent's absence seems of so much more significance than either of these proposed scenarios that we have considered that seek to account for the fact. I want now to offer another explanation not open to the objections so far put forward.

It cannot, I believe, reasonably be doubted that among Poussin's purposes in the painting of *Spring* was to raise for viewers of the painting the very question addressed in this essay. He would be aware of the uniqueness of his painting in not depicting a snake on or in close proximity to the Tree of Knowledge in a tale that has the Serpent as one of the central characters. Having planted the seed, "Why no Serpent?" I believe that his hope was that this seed would germinate into a heightened attentiveness to every detail of the painting and to reflection associated with the topics the tale raises, topics such as human responsibility, good and evil, and death. Were Poussin to follow the path of all his distinguished predecessors and paint a snake, one wrapped around the trunk of the Tree of Knowledge, habits of mind would be triggered and the Serpent would be given but a glance, confirming viewers' expectations. Poussin is then, I believe, exploiting a familiar phenomenon. Disappointment of an expectation is likely to draw more attention than its satisfaction.

We can now turn from the causal effects on viewers of noticing the absence of a snake to what Poussin meant to convey by the biblical Serpent's non-appearance. My claim is that Poussin intended to gain special attention as a result of his non-representation; but he also intended this non-representation to convey meaning in addition to the meaning conveyed by the Serpent that is depicted in the Tree of Life.

We have seen that on both the Miltonian or Sauerländer views the Serpent has a role, one already or imminently to be performed. I suggest that the Serpent, as usually understood, has no role to play in tempting Eve to

---

not present because he is unnecessary. This would differ from the view that I attribute to Sauerländer. Milovanovic sees the painting in exclusively Christian terms and does not discuss the Tree of Life or the significance of God's position and gesture.

eat of the Tree of Knowledge whatsoever. Poussin likely believed that a fantasy of a serpent with feet, mouthing words, in what language we can have no idea, a being apart from humans, one capable of subtle thought, distracts from what is the morally serious point. Two individuals, capable of free choice, have chosen to acquire knowledge and are prepared to disobey their creator, even facing death as a consequence, in order to do so. It all lies within us; it is our nature, both the susceptibility and the occasional surrender. We know that, as we develop, we shall acquire knowledge of good and evil. We know, too, that at a certain point in time that we shall die. The tale, if taken literally, presents a history of how these facts about human life have come about. Poussin keeps what he believes to be essential truth and discards what he cannot take seriously. He exploits for his purposes the tale, but through his form of telling a story, through pictorial images, he leaves out an expected pictorial representation of the serpent, modifies in this manner the accepted story, and conveys an important moral truth.

The biblical Serpent is, then, a fantasy that should be cast aside, but what remains of it is the idea of a powerful, irrepressible force, a fundamental part of human nature, something within that seeks knowledge, a force so powerful that it may lead us into painful conflict with other strong attachments. The biblical Serpent is not only a phantom but also, importantly, one too seductively available as an object upon which to place responsibility. Poussin, by not representing the biblical Serpent, is portraying Adam and Eve in such a way as to place all responsibility, whether it be for good or for evil, upon them. Eve, as he depicts her, does not have available the excuse, "the serpent beguiled me." Nor does Eve have the reassurance provided by the Serpent that she will not die if she eats. Nor does one come away from the depicted scene imagining Adam shifting his guilt onto Eve. Each is fully responsible, and, given that Eve has not yet eaten, the powerful motives of love and compassion Adam might possess, as on the Miltonian view, to join her in eating, are not in play. There is no room for Eve to blame the Serpent or for Adam to blame Eve. Poussin disposes of what we all now take for granted as the lamest of excuses, however we might in subtle ways continue to employ it, "the devil made me do it."

This concludes my explanation for the biblical Serpent's non-appearance. If true, Poussin has already modified the biblical tale in an obviously important respect. He is telling a different story but keeping two of its main characters. I shall now argue that his version of the tale of Adam and Eve is even more radical. They are to be regarded, not as fallen

creatures, not as the earliest human malefactors, the cause of so much human suffering. Rather, they are creatures about to experience a rebirth, appropriately occurring during spring, transformed into creatures capable of a more elevated form of life.

II

There is, I believe, a temptation many viewers will feel when looking at *Spring*. What will immediately come to mind is a biblical tale with which they are bound to have some familiarity. They expect to see the Serpent, and this expectation would be reinforced if they have familiarity with other pictorial representations of the tale. All have a snake and all have that snake on or close by the Tree of Knowledge. Aware of what awaits us in *Winter*, we may also think that Poussin's intent was to have the Serpent associated with tempting Eve to eat of the Tree of Knowledge, present for some reason in a scene depicting God's punishment for human disobedience. The Sauerländer and Miltonian views presuppose such a fixation of attention, influenced by engrained expectations. Should our view be constrained by these expectations, we run the risk of failing carefully to attend to an all-important detail of the painting, *Spring* – The Tree of Life.

Let us, then, shift our focus of attention to this tree. In Genesis 2 we learn that God has placed within the garden numerous trees, two of which are named, one the Tree of Knowledge, the other the Tree of Life. God informs Adam that he might eat of the fruit of any tree in the garden except for the Tree of Knowledge. It is reasonable to assume that the Tree of Knowledge is the tree toward which Eve is pointing and from which she and Adam shall soon eat. They do, after all, gain knowledge of good and evil, and nothing is presented that suggests that they have eaten of the Tree of Life, which, arguably, if they had, would have made them invulnerable to death. So the Tree of Life is the tree, for the most part painted in dark colors, shaded from the sun, atop of which is a dark rock formation, the tree with hanging fruit that appears in the left foreground of the painting. At the very end of Genesis 3 the Tree of Life is again referred to, following the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden:

> …and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned everyway, to keep the way of the tree of life.[14]

[14] Gen. 3:24.

Were Adam and Eve to eat of the Tree of Life, God's assurance, expressed to Adam, that he would surely die if he ate of the Tree of Knowledge, would presumably turn out to be false, for Adam and Eve would, by eating, gain everlasting life.

Poussin, with perhaps the sole exception of Lucas Cranach the Elder (Fig. 9), among his distinguished predecessors, inserts the Tree of Life into his depiction of the Garden of Eden. He is not a painter inclined casually, indifferent to its symbolic significance, to include such an element in his painting. What meaning might it carry? If we focus our attention upon this tree, we are confronted with a stunning sight, the sole aspect of the painting that conveys a sense of dread that, if we stay with it, can make our skin crawl, not dissimilar to our response to the large snake in the left foreground of *Winter*. The Serpent, whom we have vainly sought, where our expectations led us to believe he would be present, is now before us, disguised to be sure, in the multi-trunked Tree of Life where we never expected to see him. We spot him in the dark, narrow, contorted and twisted trunks and limbs forming all that we can see of the lower portion of the tree. The word 'serpentine' leaps to the mind (Fig. 10). It seems as fitting a description as any to apply to those shapes. No other trees in the large corpus of Poussin's paintings, apart from the shapes of several battered branches in *Winter*, have trunks of a shape remotely similar to the Tree of Life. It provides a marked contrast to the erect trunks of the bedazzling Tree of Knowledge with its flowers scattered amidst its hanging fruit. If we were indeed meant to view the Serpent as situated there, Poussin would be alone among a long list of distinguished painters to have chosen him to be so situated. That we should find the Serpent in this tree seems, however, peculiarly fitting, even while we must acknowledge its dramatic divergence from the biblical tale. The Serpent is proverbially thought to be adept at hiding, and he appears to have beguiled us to look elsewhere for him when all the time he was residing in this unexpected locale, blending into the rich foliage, until that is, our attentive eyes fix upon him and bring him to light. He is also known to be immortal because of the repeated sloughing off of his skin, his powers of renewal, and here he is fittingly ensconced in the tree that promises everlasting life.[15]

What is to be made of all this? What is to be made of the Tree of Life, holding out its promise of everlasting life, depicted in a dark setting, with shapes giving rise to a feeling of unease, while the Tree of Knowledge, the

[15] J.H.Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 32-57, 269-351.

eating from which brings death, is sprinkled with bright flowers? What accounts for Eve, a temptress, not unlike the Serpent, being struck by the sun's rays, a luminous figure in marked contrast to those trunks supporting the fruit hanging from the Tree of Life?

I believe some answers to these questions may lie in supplementing the Sauerländer and Blunt's Christian and Pagan interpretations of the *Four Seasons,*[16] by viewing *Spring* with Poussin's well-known attachment to a Stoic mode of thinking in mind—its veneration of knowledge, reason, and nature.[17] He has, I believe, uprooted Adam and Eve from the tale historically associated with them and fashioned a tale of a significantly different kind, one in which Eve is fairly described as a Stoic Hero.

---

[16] See Blunt, *Poussin*, 334-335 where he suggests that each of the paintings in the *Four Seasons* can be seen as representing a different pagan god, in the case of *Spring* the god, Apollo.

[17] See Blunt, *Poussin*, Chapter IV, "Poussin and Stoicism" for the most thorough discussion of Poussin's paintings dealing with Stoic heroes such as Phocion, Camillius, and Diogenes, and his general attachment to Stoic thought. "His basic principle for the conduct of life is to live according to nature and reason. For him, as for the Stoics, these are more or less indistinguishable, and to live according to one is to follow the other" 167. Poussin would have also been acquainted with the works of a number of Neo-stoics, among them Justus Lipsius, Guillaume du Vair, and Pierre Charron, each of whom, while attached to the thinking of the ancient Stoics, sought to harmonize Stoicism and Christianity. On the issue of personal responsibility most relevant is Justus Lipsius rejection of philosophic determinism, a view espoused by leading classical Stoics, see J. Lipsius, Two Books of Constancie, trans. by Sir J. Stradling; ed. by R. Kirk (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1939) "Four Modifications of Ancient Stoicism," 1.20. My argument presupposes that Poussin believed, as Lipsius did, in personal responsibility and his admiration for the ancient Stoics did not go so far as his relinquishing the idea of personal responsibility whether or not the ancient Stoics in fact did so. Attesting to the popularity of Neo-stoic ideas in France of the 17th century is the fact that P. Charron's *De la Sagesse livres trois* (Bordeaux: Simon Millanges, 1601) appeared in 36 editions by 1672. See "Neostoicism" in International Journal of Philosophy. See also Chapter V, "Poussin's Religious Ideas," in Blunt and the little that is known about them. It should, perhaps, be mentioned that there is a distinction between attachment to everlasting life and a belief in the immortality of the soul. There is no Christian doctrine of which I am aware that supports the idea of an everlasting human life of the kind associated with the Tree of Life. In addition to the influence of Stoicism upon Poussin and, in particular with regard to his attitudes toward death, there would very likely be the influence of Lucretius and Montaigne both ofwhom he greatly admired. See E. Cropper and C. Dempsey, *Nicolas Poussin: Friendship and the Love of Painting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 177-215. See also Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), trans. by M.A. Screech. Essay 20, 89-108, "To philosophize is to learn how to die," is particularly relevant.

I reach this conclusion by imagining Poussin's thought process, quite consistent with fundamental themes at the heart of Stoicism, moving forward with a focus on nature and reason. There are several simple observations. Everything living dies. Among all living things, animals flee the prospect of imminent death. Among the animals, humans alone possess the concept of death and are capable of contemplating it when it is not proximate. This thought arouses in many a fear of death, and this fear gives rise, in turn, to thoughts of how it might be avoided. And a tempting fantasy, then, not infrequently enters the human mind that one might live forever, and one witnesses this fantasy at work in the familiar emotional inability to imagine one's own death. We often fail to live in a manner that reveals a genuine conviction that life at some point ends and this fact is an important aspect of why it is something to be treasured. In these circumstances we fail to face a fundamental truth of nature that we all die and opt instead, as is evident from much of our conduct during life, the illusion of everlasting life. This behavior is contrary to reason.

It is also contrary to reason to believe, and behave as if it were true, that such a life without end was clearly an indisputable good to be chosen if offered to one. Reason rejects a choice of some purported good when the prospect of attaining it brings before our minds an idea that we cannot get our minds around, an idea whose intelligibility we cannot grasp. Our imagination, if active on the issue, as it is bound to be, presents us with possibilities, none of which we can test in advance, of eternal suffering or unbearable tedium or a loss of deep involvement in life with never any escape. Reason instructs us that death appears an evil to be avoided at any cost, but it is in fact a blessing provided by nature. No reasonable person would choose this false, tempting, good. A lengthier life, provided certain conditions, such as good health, obtain, yes. Seeking an everlasting life, with all its unknowns, no. The Tree of Life offers, then, what might appear as an inestimable good, but on reflection, nature is preferable to illusion.

Eve's back is to the Tree of Life, suggesting a rejection of what the Serpent may have tempted her to eat. The bright light of a morning sun, evoking the light that knowledge, shines upon her. We can imagine her possessing instinctive good sense, on Poussin's view of the matter, and that she prefers the genuine good of knowledge to the false promise of everlasting life. There is no Serpent, as we know in this version of the tale, to either tempt her to eat of the Tree of Knowledge or to assure her that she shall not die if she does. We see her before the moment that she and Adam move forward toward the tree and eat its fruit, believing that

when they do, they shall die. We must assume, for God's words to have significance at all, that they are instinctively aware of death as an evil to be avoided. They move forward, despite the warning, and eat. This is a portrait, not of creatures that, as a consequence of disobedience, will fall, but, rather, of individuals capable of acting courageously, prepared to suffer death to obtain knowledge.

Spring is the appropriate season for this event to take place, given that when Adam and Eve eat, there is a rebirth, and a new life comes into being. The two become recognizable human beings with the capacity to reflect on their conduct and adjust their conduct to norms of their choosing. Virtuous action becomes a possibility. They acted nobly in eating; and now after eating, the idea of a noble action, not before available to them, can guide their future conduct. They can now reflect upon death and consider whether or not it is in all circumstances evil, and they can think about knowledge and reflect whether in all circumstances it is productive of good. With such thoughts they would move from knowledge to wisdom. They were before as children to be admired and to be loved; now they are creatures capable of dignity and worthy of respect. Poussin has depicted two individuals whose conduct is not distinguishable from that of noble Stoic heroes whom he has on a number of occasions depicted.[18]

What is it, should we accept this pictorial re-invention of the Adam and Eve tale, that we are to imagine God, floating in the clouds above, thinking about it all? His ways are notoriously inscrutable, and prohibiting his creatures from acquiring knowledge of good and evil, central to the biblical tale, is significant evidence that this is so. Can a loving God intend for the human beings that he has created to remain forever as children, that there be no place in human life for moral beauty, for moral virtue, for a realization of all of the human's natural capabilities? What could be made of the idea of a human being made in the image of God if they remain as little children? Still, the biblical tale is one in which God informs Adam that on the day he eats of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil he shall surely die. Such language does suggest death as a punitive response and God's desire for obedience. God turns his back on Adam and Eve and this suggests disappointment, turning away from them, because God foresees their disobedience, in their imminent turning away from him.

---

[18] Blunt, *Poussin*, 160-68. See also Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1989), Chap. 3 for discussion of gnostic perspectives similar to those that would inform a Stoic approach to Adam and Eve.

My conjecture on this issue is as follows. First, there is another example in Genesis of God commanding what one may find perplexing. He commands Abraham to sacrifice what is most dear to him, his son Isaac. He does so to test the strength of Abraham's faith. God is ultimately pleased with the evidence Abraham provides of his willingness to kill Isaac and the strength of attachment to his Lord.[19] Likewise, we may suppose that Poussin's God, in his Stoic re-telling of the tale, means to test the strength of Adam and Eve's attachment to knowledge by indicating death as the outcome of obtaining it. They pass the test.

Second, God is looking forward and his left arm is raised, his hand facing forward (Fig. 11). Some scholars view God's hand as raised in a blessing.[20] This interpretation is highly improbable, not simply because the hand does not appear raised, but, more significantly, because neither God nor priests bless with other than their right hand and, of course, it is God's left hand that is stretched out in a forward direction.

What meaning, then, is to be attributed to this hand gesture? There is another similar gesture in *Spring* itself and another in a Poussin painting, *Hagar and the Angel*, dated 1660 (Fig. 12), and the gestures serve to direct attention, either to a subject within the painting or to the viewer of the painting. Eve's left hand is raised and points to the Tree of Knowledge. God's left hand is directed toward the light of the morning sun, a light that illuminates the world, the most fitting of symbols for knowledge. God, by this gesture, appears to be validating, rather than condemning, Adam and Eve's conduct. The radical reconstruction of the tale from a Stoic perspective is completed with a significantly radical depiction of God.

Spring was painted between 1660-1664. Poussin was ill and his hands were trembling. He died in 1665. It is reasonable to believe that his attention focused, at least occasionally, on his own death and how he would confront it. No more light; no more color; no more shapes; no more giving and receiving love; no more thought and knowledge. There is reason, I believe, to think that with *Spring* Poussin was preparing himself to die in

---

[19] Gen. 22.

[20] Sauerländer, see note 11 above; *Poussin and Nature*, 293. I am indebted to Professor H.A. Kelly of the Department of English, UCLA for bringing to my attention that blessings are always done with the right hand.

the manner of the wise man so revered by the Stoics, surveying in his mind's eye much of what he so cherished in life, and at the end – a sense of gratitude and a calm acceptance of what nature brings to all that is living.

University of California, Los Angeles

All images are available at www.artstor.org

	Title	Artist	Location
Fig. 1	*Spring* or *The Earthly Paradise*	Nicolas Poussin	Musée du Louvre, Paris
Fig. 2	*Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*	Masaccio	Cappella Brancacci, Florence
Fig. 3	*Landscape with Orpheus and Eurydice*	Nicolas Poussin	Musée du Louvre, Paris
Fig. 4	*Landscape w/ a Man Killed by a Snake*	Nicolas Poussin	The National Gallery, London
Fig. 5	*Landscape w/ a Man Pursued by Snake*	Nicolas Poussin	Montréal Museum of Fine Arts
Fig. 6	*Two Nymphs and Snake in a Landscape*	Nicolas Poussin	Musée Condé, Paris
Fig. 7	*Apollo and Daphne*	Nicolas Poussin	Musée du Louvre, Paris
Fig. 8	*Winter* or *The Flood*	Nicolas Poussin	Musée du Louvre, Paris
Fig. 9	*The Fall of Man*	Lucas Cranach the Elder	Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna
Fig. 10	Detail of Fig. 1		
Fig. 11	Detail of Fig. 1		
Fig. 12	*Landscape with Hagar and the Angel*	Nicolas Poussin	Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome