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Locus genii

Placing Genius in Roger de Piles's Criticism

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Over the course of the early modern period, genius was transformed in criticism from a commonplace of 'inclination' into a powerful tool of aesthetic classification, signalling heightened creativity in a person or work of art. In the hands of eighteenth-century critics especially, it was inflated to denote the near superhuman talent of uniquely gifted individuals or, conversely, the 'spirit' of a group, nation, or race.¹ Reaching its apogee in the poetics of Romanticism and the late nineteenth- to mid-twentieth-century politics of *Geist*, genius has since settled down to become a contemporary commonplace (a cliché, even), emptied of meaning and rendered innocuous by overuse.² In this well-known story, accounts of genius's rise tend to be located in the mid- to late eighteenth century, in England and Germany especially, and in literary criticism.³ Yet this is to overlook significant shifts in critical discourse—especially about visual art—that occurred in the second half of the seventeenth century, mainly (though not exclusively) in France, which turned a late humanist commonplace into a dynamic arena for critical debate.⁴ A first aim of this essay, therefore, is to relocate the focus of genius's transformation from one place to another (England/Germany to France),

The writing of this paper has been partially funded by the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (fp7/2007–2013)/erc grant agreement no. 617391. I am grateful to Marta Cacho Casal, Tom Colville, Irene Galandra Cooper, Andrés Veléz Posada, Lorraine de la Verpillière, and (especially) Tim Chesters, for their helpful comments.

¹ On the post-medieval history of genius, see e.g. Jochen Schmidt, *Die Geschichte des Genie-Gedankens in der deutschen Literatur, Philosophie und Politik, 1750–1945* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1985); Penelope Murray (ed.), *Genius: The History of an Idea* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989); Noel L. Brann, *The Debate over the Origin of Genius during the Italian Renaissance: The Theories of Supernatural Frenzy and Natural Melancholy in Accord and in Conflict on the Threshold of the Scientific Revolution* (Leiden: Brill, 2002). For genius as 'inclination', see Alexander Marr, Raphaële Garrod, José Ramón Marcaida, and Richard J. Oosterhoff, *Logodaedalus: Word Histories of Ingenuity in Early Modern Europe* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2018).

² In this regard its trajectory is comparable to that of 'curiosity', on which see Neil Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity in Early Modern France and Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³ See e.g. Jonathan Bate, 'Shakespeare and Original Genius,' in Murray, *Genius*, pp. 76–97.

⁴ Italy and Spain played important roles as well, albeit somewhat earlier in the period. See below, n. 12; and Stefano Gensini and Arturo Martone (eds), *Ingenium propria hominis natura* (Naples: Liguori, 2002).

to a different cultural domain (from literature to visual art), and to another moment in time (the last few decades of the seventeenth century).

In support of this shift, I reintroduce an important but curiously overlooked figure in genius's critical fortunes: Roger de Piles (1635–1709). In a sequence of highly influential tracts on painting and painters published from the late 1670s to the early 1700s, de Piles promoted genius as the *sine qua non* for artistic success, linking it in his writing to other emerging critical categories such as *goût*, *esprit*, and the *je ne sais quoi*.⁵ While de Piles's theory of art has received some scholarly attention, the prominence of genius in his writings has been almost completely ignored.⁶ Likewise, although recent work by Jean-Alexandre Perras and Ann Jefferson has charted the changing nature of genius in early modern and modern France, de Piles's role in these movements has been scarcely mentioned.⁷ In what follows, I will examine how de Piles conceived of genius, where—and in whom—he placed it, and the locations that gave rise to his criticism: the academy and the gallery.

Génie and Esprit in Early Modern France

My discussion of de Piles must be set within the broader context of genius's early modern critical trajectory, in which issues of 'place' were very much to the fore. In the span of fifty years, genius in France shifted position dramatically, from outside to inside the body and from minimal to maximal significance in aesthetics. Where mid-seventeenth-century commentators tended to accept the traditional designation of genius as an external spirit or divinely bestowed gift, in the hands of early eighteenth-century critics it became increasingly an internalized and natural power of the mind. This change is succinctly demonstrated in comments by two important contributors to the discussion, Dominique Bouhours and Jean-Baptiste Dubos. In the chapter on *bel esprit* ('fine wit') in *Les entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugène* (1671), Bouhours, touching on the nature of political talent and a leader's capacity

⁵ See Richard Scholier, *The 'Je-ne-sais-quoi' in Early Modern Europe: Encounters with a Certain Something* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 198.

⁶ The chief studies of de Piles, neither of which addresses genius in any detail, are Bernard Teyssède, *Roger de Piles et les débats sur le coloris au siècle de Louis XIV* (Paris: Bibliothèque des arts, 1965); and Thomas Puttfarcken, *Roger de Piles' Theory of Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985) (for *génie*, see pp. 109, 112–13). For de Piles's influence, see Svetlana Alpers, 'Roger de Piles and the History of Art', in *Kunst und Kunsttheorie 1400–1900*, ed. Peter F. Ganz et al. (Wiesbaden: Harassowitz, 1991), pp. 175–88. De Piles's notion of *génie* is touched on fleetingly in Marije Osnabrugge, 'Talent, Genius, Passion: 17th- and 18th-Century Dutch Terminology for an Intangible but Indispensable Factor in Artistic Success', in *Lexicographie artistique: formes, usages et enjeux dans l'Europe moderne*, ed. Michèle-Caroline Heck, Marianne Freyssinet, and Stéphanie Trouvé (Montpellier: PULM, 2018), pp. 229–43, at p. 230.

⁷ Jean-Alexandre Perras, *L'Exception exemplaire: inventions et usages du génie, XVI^e–XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Garnier, 2016); Ann Jefferson, *Genius in France: An Idea and Its Uses* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

to govern well, defined *génie* as ‘a gift of heaven, where the earth [i.e. birthplace] plays no part; it is a certain something of the divine’.⁸ In contrast, and less than fifty years later, Dubos wrote in *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* (1719): ‘I conceive that genius . . . consists in a felicitous disposition of the organs of the brain, in the right structure of each of these organs, as also in the quality of the blood.’⁹

The means by which this relocation occurred were many and convoluted, including a Cartesian attentiveness to the physiological mechanisms of the imagination, clearly evident in Dubos.¹⁰ Equally, a range of factors drove *génie*’s rise, including renewed interest in Pseudo-Longinus’ *On the Sublime* (which treats of ‘flawed genius’ and licence), powered in part by Nicolas Boileau’s 1674 French translation, which de Piles certainly read.¹¹ Particularly significant both for the relocation and rise of *génie* was the mingling—to the point of conflation—of genius with *ingenium*, or *esprit* in French.¹² In the classical and medieval traditions inherited by early modernity, genius and *ingenium* were clearly distinguished from one another by virtue of their ‘place’. The former was routinely defined in dictionaries as a ‘tutelary spirit’ governing one’s inclinations, while the latter was the ‘inborn nature’ of a person, including their temperament and ‘wit’, i.e. their mental capacity.¹³ As *ingenium* grew in stature in natural philosophy, poetics, and rhetoric (especially evident in the writings of Huarte de San Juan, Marino, Gracián, and their followers), it started to encroach on territory normally reserved for genius, including the divine gifts of inspired creativity associated with the *furor poeticus*.¹⁴

⁸ ‘[C]’est un don du ciel, où la terre n’a point de part; c’est je ne sçay quoy de divin.’ Dominique Bouhours, *Les entretiens d’Ariste et d’Eugène* (Paris: Sebastian Mabre-Cramoisy, 1671), p. 221.

⁹ ‘Je conçois que le génie . . . consiste en un arrangement heureux des organes du cerveau, dans la bonne conformation de chacun de ces organes, comme dans la qualité du sang.’ Jean-Baptiste Dubos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*, 2 vols (Paris: Jean Mariette, 1719), vol. 2, p. 6. See Kineret S. Jaffe, ‘The Concept of Genius: Its Changing Role in Eighteenth-Century French Aesthetics’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 41 (1980), 579–99.

¹⁰ See Denis Sepper, *Descartes’s Imagination: Proportion, Images, and the Activity of Thinking* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

¹¹ See Emma Gilby, *Sublime Worlds: Early Modern French Literature* (Oxford: Legenda, 2006); and Pseudo-Longin, *De la sublimité du discours*, ed. Emma Gilby (Chambéry: L’Act Mem, 2007), both of which indicate that Pseudo-Longinus was influential upon French literature well before Boileau’s translation. For de Piles and Boileau, see Nicholas Cronk, *The Classical Sublime: French Neoclassicism and the Language of Literature* (Charlottesville: Rookwood Press, 2002), pp. 181–41; Puttfarken, pp. 115–24; Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *The Eloquence of Colour: Rhetoric and Painting in the French Classical Age* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 220–1. On the sublime and early modern genius, see e.g. Wieneke Jansen, ‘Defending the Poet: The Reception of *On the Sublime* in Daniel Heinsius’ *Prolegomena on Hesiod*, *Lias*, 43.2 (2016), 199–223. See also Bussels and Lazarus in Chapters 10 and 12 of this volume.

¹² See Marr et al., ch. 4. See also Gilby in Chapter 11 of this volume.

¹³ See Marr et al., esp. ch. 1. See also Read in Chapter 14 of this volume.

¹⁴ On which, see Véronique Duché-Gavet (ed.), *Juan Huarte au XXI^e siècle* (Anglet: Atlantica, 2003); Mercedes Blanco, *Les rhétoriques de la pointe: Balthasar Gracián et le conceptisme en Europe* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1992); Jürgen Klein, ‘Genius, Ingenium, Imagination: Aesthetic Theories of Production from the Renaissance to Romanticism’, in *The Romantic Imagination: Literature and Art in England and*

This process is evident in France from at least the Pléiade onwards, but it accelerated around the middle of the seventeenth century, as French critics developed *esprit* as a critical term in debates about style, conduct, and personality.¹⁵ In Bouhours, for instance, *esprit* became a mark not only of individual ability but also of national identity, bound up with the supposedly 'natural' propensity of the French people and their language for reason, clarity, and eloquence.¹⁶ Thus, the *génie de la langue* was increasingly equated with the *bel esprit* of its speakers, prompting extensive discussion about how *esprit* might determine (or reveal) character, both individual and collective.¹⁷ Moreover, while *esprit* could be parsed into many varieties (*bel*, *mauvais*, *grand*, etc.), in the hands of writers such as de Piles it was proposed as a general, generative power, communicable from a person to a thing. Therefore, an artefact (such as a picture) as well as its maker could possess *esprit* and reveal *génie*. Metaphorically, we might say that in France *esprit* swallowed up *génie*, only to digest and regurgitate the latter as something transformed from an external entity into an internal power. This is so pronounced in de Piles's criticism that he should be considered a major conduit linking Bouhours and the eighteenth-century writers who posited *génie* as a foundational principle in new theories of creativity and sentiment.¹⁸

The Places of de Piles's Criticism

De Piles's criticism was the product of two places: the academy and the gallery. When he began writing in the late 1660s, the *Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture* (founded in 1648) was in the grip of the *Premier peintre du Roi*, Charles Le Brun, who espoused a classicizing doctrine of art firmly rooted in *dessein* (design), with Poussin as a model.¹⁹ de Piles, an amateur painter who had studied at the Collège du Plessis and the Sorbonne, made his mark in opposition to the

Germany, ed. Frederick Burwick and Jürgen Klein (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), pp. 16–62. See also Tomlinson in Chapter 4 of this volume.

¹⁵ The literature on this subject is large, but see e.g. Jean Lecoq, *L'idéal et la différence: la perception de la personnalité littéraire à la Renaissance* (Paris: Librairie Droz, 1993); Marc Fumaroli, *L'âge de l'éloquence: rhétorique et res litteraria en France de la Renaissance au seuil de l'âge classique* (Paris: Droz, 2002; 1st edn 1980); Marc Fumaroli, *La diplomatie de l'esprit: de Montaigne à La Fontaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002).

¹⁶ See Riccardo Campi, 'Ingenio ed esprit tra Gracián et Bouhours: una questione di metodo', *Studi di estetica*, 25 (1997), 185–209; Paola Gambarota, 'Syntax and Passions: Bouhours, Vico, and the Genius of the Nation', *Romanic Review*, 97 (2006), 285–307; Scholar, *The Je-ne-sais-quoi*, ch. 4.

¹⁷ See Marr et al., ch. 4.

¹⁸ *Génie* is prominent in the writings of *Encyclopédistes*, on which see e.g. Gita May, 'Diderot et Roger de Piles', *PMLA*, 85 (1970), 444–55; Éliane Martine-Haag, 'Le "génie" de Diderot, ou de l'indistinction première de l'esthétique et de l'histoire', *Dix-huitième Siècle*, 26 (1994), 435–52. The translation of several of de Piles's works into English in the eighteenth century rendered him influential on English critics.

¹⁹ De Piles's earliest work is a French translation of Charles Alphonse Du Fresnoy's *De arte graphica: l'art de Peinture* (Paris: Nicolas L'Anglois, 1668), which contains scattered references to *génie*.

established position, writing a *Dialogue sur le coloris* (1673) in favour of colour and advocating Rubens as an exemplary figure.²⁰ Even in this early work, de Piles used genius tactically to advance his cause. In a section of the tract treating *dessein* and the importance of anatomical study (promoted by the *Académie*), an interlocutor—Damon—asks whether all renowned artists are knowledgeable about anatomy. ‘Not at all’, de Piles replies, describing the ‘most able’ (*plus habiles*) artists as ‘geniuses quite felicitous for understanding everything without any other teaching than their good sense, with a certain natural light by which they follow what is good, and flee what is bad’.²¹

De Piles’s initial opposition to the *Académie* (to which he was later elected) and its formal, institutional approach to debate prompted not only the light, conversational tone of his early criticism, but also the choice of setting for several of his interventions: the gallery or *cabinet*.²² In contrast to the rigidity of the *Académie*, these were flexible places. The picture rooms of the Louvre were increasingly public spaces, in which artists mingled with courtiers, *marchands*, and men of letters, while private collections offered a friendly informality familiar from the humanist *studiolo*. For example, introducing his *Dialogue*, de Piles set the action squarely away from the *Académie*, in the intimacy of his own home:

Pamphile and Damon, leaving the *Académie de Peinture* a few days ago, and not knowing what to do for the rest of the afternoon, decided to come and see me. Being men of merit, who love the arts and understand them very well, I knew that I could repay their civility no better than by letting them see several pictures and other curiosities that I had received from Rome the day before.²³

The spread of collecting in seventeenth-century France established the gallery as an important space for learned discourse, complementing the *salons* and spawning a new critical genre, the gallery conversation.²⁴ De Piles had privileged access

²⁰ The *querelle* of design versus colour in the *Académie* and beyond has been extensively studied. Useful summaries of key issues are provided by the essays in Emmanuelle Delapierre, Matthieu Gilles, and Hélène Portiglia (eds), *Rubens contre Poussin: la querelle du coloris dans la peinture française à la fin du XVII^e siècle* (Gand: Ludion, 2004). See also Lichtenstein, *Eloquence of Colour*.

²¹ ‘[D]es genies assez heureux pour apprendre toutes choses sans autres regles que celle de leur bon sens, avec une certaine lumiere naturelle qui leur fait suivre ce qui est bien, & fuir ce qui est mal.’ Roger de Piles, *Dialogue sur le coloris* (Paris: Nicolas Langlois, 1673), p. 46.

²² On the academy in this period, see Paul Duro, *The Academy and the Limits of Painting in Seventeenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

²³ ‘Pamphile & Damon sortant il y a quelques jours de l’Academie de Peinture, & ne sachant que faire pour employer le reste de l’apresdinée, s’aviserent de me venir voir: Et comme ce sont des gens de merite, qui ayment les Arts, & qui s’y connoissent tres-bien, je crû que je ne pouvois mieux reconnoistre leur civilité, qu’en leur faisant voir quelques Tableaux & quelques autres curiositez que j’avois receus de Rome le jour precedent.’ De Piles, *Dialogue*, pp. 1–2.

²⁴ See Antonie Schnapper, *Curieux du grand siècle: collections et collectionneurs dans la France du XVII^e siècle* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994); William Ray, ‘Talking about Art: The French Royal Academy Salons and the Formation of the Discursive Citizen’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 37 (2004), 527–52.

to elite French collections through his position as tutor to Michel Amelot de Gournay, son of Charles Amelot, President of the *Grand Conseil* (effectively the High Court of France).²⁵ His direct experience of these collections (and other European ones that he visited) structured much of his writing, such as his celebrated description of *Le Cabinet de Monseigneur le Duc de Richelieu* (1681), or the dialogue, set in the Tuileries gardens outside the Louvre, in *Conversations sur la connoissance de la peinture* (1677).²⁶ Introducing this dialogue, de Piles explained:

Everybody knows that the King's pictures make up one of the most beautiful cabinets in Europe. I have seen it many times; but having learned that His Majesty had had them put them in a new order, and that they had been hung in one of the rooms in his Louvre, I brought Damon and Pamphile. . . . We were there for almost two hours, and our eyes found plenty to feast upon.²⁷

Thus, a specific place and the re-hanging of pictures within it set the stage for a critical foray in which de Piles laid out, for the first time, his ideas about genius, *esprit*, and taste (*goût*, here introduced through the metaphor 'to feast upon'). '[U]nderstanding the fine arts, and above all painting', he writes, 'presupposes much genius, and in the absence of genius, much wit (*esprit*) and inclination. But a perfect knowledge requires much wit, genius, and inclination altogether.'²⁸ De Piles proceeds to distinguish genius from inclination—a significant move in itself, since both *genius* and *ingenium* were often defined as just that.²⁹ Inclination, he says, is simply the love of one thing more than another, whereas genius is a talent we have from nature, which is fired by the ardour that accompanies inclination, the latter being useless unless it is guided by 'the light of *esprit*'. The rest of his text is peppered with references to this triumvirate and their properties. A wit (*homme d'esprit*) is capable of connoisseurial judgements at a glance, because of his genius; those with a genius for painting can make such judgements simply by their

²⁵ For de Piles's biography, see (in addition to Teyssèdre, *Roger de Piles*) Léon Mirot, *Roger de Piles: peintre, amateur, critique, membre de l'Académie de peinture (1635–1709)* (Paris: J. Schemit, 1924).

²⁶ For de Piles's visit to collections across Europe, see Alexandra Skliar-Pigluet, 'Piles, Roger de', in *Grove Art Online* (<https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T067651>).

²⁷ 'Tout le monde sçait que les tableaux du Roy composent un des plus beaux Cabinets, qui soit en Europe. Je l'ay veu plusieurs fois; mais ayant appris que sa Majesté les avoit fait mettre dans un ordre nouveau, & les avoit logez dans l'un des appartemens de son Louvre, j'y menay Pamphile & Damon. . . . Nous y fûmes près de deux heures, & nos yeux trouverent dequoy s'y repaistre agreablement.' Roger de Piles, *Conversations sur la connoissance de la peinture et sur le jugement qu'on doit faire des tableaux* (Paris: Nicolas Langlois, 1677), pp. 1–2. On de Piles's description of the cabinet of the Duc de Richelieu (1676), see Bernard Teyssèdre, 'Une collection française de Rubens au XVII^e siècle: le cabinet du duc de Richelieu décrit par Roger de Piles, 1676–1681', *Gazette des beaux-arts*, new series, 5 (1963), 241–300.

²⁸ '[L]a connoissance dex beaux arts, & sur tout de la Peinture, presuppose beaucoup de genie; & au defaut du genie, beaucoup d'esprit & d'inclination. Mais une connoissance parfaite demande beaucoup d'esprit, de genie, & d'inclination tout ensemble.' De Piles, *Conversations*, pp. 18–19.

²⁹ See Marr et al., ch. 1.

‘natural lights’ (*lumières naturelles*); the *esprit* sees and feels, leading men towards good *goût*, the latter of which is in language and the wit, but also in tasteful objects; invention requires ‘fire and genius’, both of which Rubens possessed in abundance; genius, like nature, is above rules.³⁰

Placing Genius: Nation, the Painter, and the Body

The comments on genius that percolate throughout the *Conversations* are distilled in de Piles’s next significant treatise, the *Abrégé de la vie des peintres* (1699). De Piles had begun working on the book—a more systematic articulation of his ideas than previous efforts—during a five-year incarceration for spying in The Hague, where he had been undertaking secret negotiations for the French crown. It was published in the year he was elected to the *Académie*: a reflection of the success of his campaign for colour and for the appreciation of Rubens. In it, de Piles selected significant artists and organized them into schools—a form of critical ‘placing’ in itself. Indeed, at the end of the book, de Piles offered a chapter on ‘national taste’ (*goût des nations*) that approaches ideas about national genius and ‘style’ familiar from later eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourse.³¹ Notably, while he distinguishes between *goût du corps* and *goût de l’esprit*, he claimed that ‘the wit may be called taste, in as much as it is considered an organ’, and that of the three types of taste in painting, the *goût de nation* is a quality discernible in works of art ‘formed in the wit of those who live [in a certain place]’.³² Thus, de Piles firmly placed specific stylistic qualities—determined, as he says elsewhere, by the genius of any given artist—in specific locations.³³

The importance of genius for his overall theory is announced boldly in the first line of the first page of the *Abrégé*: ‘Genius is the first thing that must be assumed in a painter.’³⁴ There follows a first chapter, ‘Du génie’, in which de Piles succinctly sets out his understanding of this notion. There is little point slaving away at an

³⁰ De Piles, *Conversations*, p. 20; pp. 33–4; p. 36; pp. 67, 180; pp. 226, 305. These topics relate to de Piles’s discussions, elsewhere in his writings, of the role of rules, judgement and taste, and the ‘first glance’ (*premier coup d’oeil*), for which see Puttfarken, *passim*. On Rubens and genius, see Alexander Marr, *Rubens’s Spirit: From Ingenuity to Genius* (London: Reaktion, 2021).

³¹ See e.g. Carlo Ginzburg, *Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflections on Distance* (London: Verso, 2002), ch. 6: ‘Style: Inclusion and Exclusion’. De Piles’s contribution to the emergence of taste as a concept remains under-researched. For taste’s later history in France, see e.g. Charlotte Guichard, ‘Taste Communities: The Rise of the Amateur in Eighteenth-Century Paris’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 45 (2012), 519–47.

³² ‘L’esprit peut être appelé goût, en tant qu’il est considéré comme l’organe; Le goût de nation, est une idée que les ouvrages qui se font ou qui se voyent en un país, forment dans l’esprit de ceux qui les habitent.’ De Piles, *Abrégé de la vie des peintres* (Paris: François Muguet, 1699), pp. 526, 528. There seem to have been two editions of the *Abrégé* published in Paris simultaneously in 1699: one by Muguet (cited here), another by Charles de Sercy, the frontispiece to which is illustrated as Figure 16.

³³ On style (*caractere, manier, air*) as a product of the *esprit* and *génie* of the painter, see de Piles, *Conversations*, p. 11.

³⁴ ‘Le génie est la première chose que l’on doit supposer dans un peintre.’ De Piles, *Abrégé*, p. 1.

art, he says, unless one is born with an inclination for it, but the 'light of wit, which is none other than genius', guides us on the right path. In somewhat conventional terms, he describes genius as a gift of nature given to men at the moment of their birth, which must be brought to perfection by study. Elsewhere in the book, drawing on Vasari's geographical and temporal ideas about genius in the *Lives of the Artists*, he explains how the genius of Tuscan and Urbinate painters came to fruition and was disseminated to other artists and schools.³⁵

This account of genius would be unremarkable were it not for the lexical and semantic slippage evident in the rest of the book. De Piles consistently intertwines *génie* and *esprit*, frequently using one term for the other such that the separation between them, proposed in *Conversations*, collapses. To give just one example, when relating Leonardo da Vinci's famous comments about how stains on a wall can be transformed in the mind (*ingegno*) of a painter into landscapes, de Piles translates Leonardo's *ingegno* not as *esprit*, but as *génie*: 'Leonardo da Vinci has written that the marks that one finds on an old wall... can excite the genius.'³⁶ Commenting on this passage, de Piles bundles *génie* and *esprit* together, asking 'of what character should these wits (*esprits*) be', that can turn a random stain into a deliberate composition? He concludes that 'the more genius one has, the more one sees things in these sorts of blots or confused lines'.³⁷

The suggestive slippage of the first edition of the *Abrégé* is rendered explicit in the second, revised edition, published posthumously in 1715 from de Piles's own manuscript. In it, he splits and significantly expands the first chapter into two: 'Du génie' and 'De la nécessité du génie'. In the new, first chapter, de Piles places *génie* firmly in man's natural faculties, in contrast to the ancients ('who believed that genius was a spirit appointed to watch over man') and the pagans ('who made it a god'), as well as most men ('who take it to be the fire of imagination, which produces abundant thoughts').³⁸ Instead, 'to give a more distinct idea', de Piles explains:

³⁵ 'Enfin après plusieurs années, le bon génie de la peinture suscita de grans hommes dans la Toscane, & dans le Duché d'Urbain, qui par la solidité de leur esprit, par la bonté de leur génie, & par l'assuidité de leurs études, élevèrent les idées des connoissances qu'ils avoient reçues de leurs maîtres, & les portèrent à un degré de perfection, qui sera l'admiration de la postérité.' De Piles, *Abrégé*, pp. 36–7. See also Gabriele Lo Nostro, 'Da Vasari a Roger de Piles: il paradigma vasariano nella storiografia artistica francese tra il XVII e il XVIII secolo', in *Vasari als Paradigma: Rezeption, Kritik, Perspektiven*, ed. Fabian Jonietz and Alessandro Nova (Venice: Marsilio, 2016), pp. 265–73.

³⁶ 'Leonard de Vinci a écrit que les taches qui se trouvent sur un vieux mur... peuvent exciter le génie.' For Leonardo's original comments (well known in seventeenth-century France, where manuscripts of his writings circulated), see Claire Farago (ed.), *Leonardo's Writings and Theory of Art* (New York and London: Garland, 1999), p. 147n38.

³⁷ 'Mais de quel caractère que soient les esprits... Que plus on a de génie, & plus on voit de choses dans ces sortes de taches ou de lignes confuses.' De Piles, *Abrégé*, pp. 18–19.

³⁸ 'Par le mot du génie, on a entendu diverses choses. Les anciens ont crû que c'étoit un esprit commis à la garde de l'homme, & qui lui inspiroit les bonnes & les mauvais actions. Les payans en ont fait une divinité; & la plupart des hommes le prennent pour le feu de l'imagination qui produit une abondance de pensées.' Roger de Piles, *Abrégé de la vie des peintres... seconde édition* (Paris: Jacques Estienne, 1715),

That we carry genius from birth, and that it is mingled and mixed with *esprit*, just as an essence is mingled and mixed in a glass of water. . . . It is, so to say, the master of the faculties of the soul: it compels them to drop everything, dragging them forth to serve it in the pursuit of tasks to which it itself is carried away by the quickness of its own nature; and when the organs begin to deteriorate, the wit and genius also weaken.³⁹

While this account of genius hardly stands up natural-philosophically, in it de Piles takes a decisive step towards a more materialist conception of genius, of the kind Dubos advanced just a few years later. De Piles places genius firmly in nature and in the body, he declares it susceptible to deterioration over time, and he links its fate to the failing of the internal organs with senescence. Moreover, he renders it inextricable from *esprit*, suggesting—through his simile of an *essence* mixed in water—that this pair is like *spiritus*, an admixture of substances, at once material and immaterial.⁴⁰

An Allegory of Painting: Genius/*Ingenium*, Art, and Nature

I have suggested that this merging of genius and *esprit* into one notion is embryonic in de Piles's earlier writings, such that we should take his account in the second edition of the *Abrégé* to be a clarification of, rather than a departure from, his previous thinking. With this in mind, we may turn to the frontispiece of *Conversations*, which encapsulates de Piles's ideas about this interrelationship and the mutual interdependence of *génie/esprit* on art and nature (Figure 13). This interdependence is a consistent feature of de Piles's criticism, which emphasizes not only that genius is a gift of nature, but that, as per convention, it benefits from art (i.e. training and learning).⁴¹ A good example is his comparison, in *Cours de peinture par principes* (1708), of painting to a formal garden:

p. 12. In the first edition of the *Abrégé* (p. 40), de Piles had already sought to clear up the common misconception that 'invention' and 'genius' are the same thing.

³⁹ 'Que nous aportons le génie en naissant, & qu'il est confondu & mêlé avec l'esprit, comme une essence est confondue mêlée dans un verre d'eau. . . . Il est, pour ainsi dire, le tyran de facultés de l'ame: il les contraint à tout quitter, les entraîne pour le servir dans les ouvrages où il est emporté lui-même par la rapidité de sa nature; & lorsque les organes viennent à s'alterer, l'esprit et le génie s'affoiblissent également.' De Piles, *Abrégé*. . . seconde édition, pp. 12–13.

⁴⁰ *Esprit* is a synonym for *spiritus*, the latter of which is closely bound to theories of *ingenium* and genius. De Piles's use of the term *essence*, similarly labile and connected to spirits, is surely purposeful. See Marta Fattori and Massimo Bianchi (eds), *Spiritus. IV^o Colloquio Internazionale del Lessico Intellettuale Europeo* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1984).

⁴¹ Here, de Piles has adapted the commonplace *ars et ingenium* (familiar especially from Quintilian), on which see e.g. Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators: Humanist Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 37 and passim.



Figure 13. 'Artis et Naturae Foedus', frontispiece to Roger de Piles, *Conversations sur la connoissance de la peinture et sur le jugement qu'on doit faire des tableaux* (Paris: Nicolas Langlois, 1677). Copperplate engraving. Cambridge University Library, F167. d.4.13. Published by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

We may consider painting to be like a beautiful parterre; genius is like the soil, principles are like the seeds, and good wit (*bon esprit*) is like the gardener, who prepares the soil in which to place the seeds, according to their seasons, and to grow all sorts of flowers, which look no less useful than pleasing.

It is certain that genius, to whom we owe the birth of the fine arts, cannot guide them [the fine arts] to perfection without the aid of culture.⁴²

The anonymous, engraved frontispiece that graces this book, as well as *Conversations*, depicts Art and Nature joining hands in agreement over a pedestal inscribed with the motto '*Artis et Naturae Foedus*' (The Alliance of Art and Nature). The pair are brought together by the guiding hands of a winged deity, bursting from the clouds in rays of sunlight. Aptly, de Piles created this image by adapting one of his hero's compositions: Rubens's title-page to Silvestro da Pietrasanta's book of emblems, *De symbolis heroicis* (1634) (Figure 14).⁴³ There, as the book's index informs us, 'heroic' symbols are generated through the companionship of Nature (depicted as *Natura multimammia*, or 'many-breasted Nature') and Art (in the guise of Mercury), who provide matter to *Ingenium*.⁴⁴ Rubens depicted the latter as a butterfly-winged figure, who, while receiving the gifts of art and nature, simultaneously hands the tools of painting to the eloquent god. De Piles, intent on emphasizing the fiery nature of a superior artist's abilities, has added a flame to this figure's head.⁴⁵ Perhaps he was familiar with the French painter Simon Vouet's *Allegory of the Human Soul*, which features a similar figure, identified in an engraved version as *Ingenium*, which 'leaps like a flame, flashes like a flame, that is why it crowns the hair of the head with harmless fire'⁴⁶ (Figure 15).

Yet this flame—along with the dazzling sunlight the winged figure brings—surely signifies also the 'light of *esprit*', which de Piles equates with genius. Thus, a

⁴² 'L'on peut considerer la peinture comme un beau parterre; le genie comme le fond, les principes comme les semences, & le bon esprit comme le jardinier qui prepare la terre pour y jeter les semences dans leur saisons, & pour en faire naître toutes sortes de fleurs qui ne regardent pas moins l'utilité que l'agrément. Il est certain que le genie à que nous devons las naissance des beaux arts, ne fauroit les conduire a leur perfection sans le secours de culture'. Roger de Piles, *Cours de peinture par principes* (Paris: Jacques Estienne, 1708), pp. 387–8.

⁴³ J. Richard Judson and Carl van de Velde, *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard*, Vol. 21: *Book Illustrations and Title-Pages*, 2 vols (London: Harvey Miller, 1977), vol. 1, pp. 56 and 287–90 (cat. 69).

⁴⁴ 'Titulus Libri; et in eo Ingenium hinc a Natura, hinc ab Arte materiam accipiens, ad Scribenda Symbola Heroica'. Silvestro da Pietrasanta, *De symbolis heroicis* (Antwerp: Plantin, 1634), index (unpaginated).

⁴⁵ As he wrote, 'L'Invention demande beaucoup de feu et de Genie'; 'Un Genie de feu donne de la facilité'. De Piles, *Conversations*, pp. 67, 68.

⁴⁶ 'Ingenium ceu flamma salit, ceu flamma coruscat | Iccirco innocuo circuit igne comas.' On this engraving, see Alexander Marr, 'A Mirror of Wisdom: Simon Vouet's *Satyrs Admiring the Anamorphosis of an Elephant* and Its Afterlives', in *Teaching Philosophy in Early Modern Europe: Text and Image*, ed. Susanna Berger and Daniel Garber (Dordrecht: Springer, 2022).



Figure 14. Cornelis Galle after Peter Paul Rubens, title-page to Silvestro da Pietrasanta, *De symbolis heroicis* (Antwerp: Plantin, 1634). Copperplate engraving. The British Museum, 1858,0417.1218. © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

figure that straightforwardly stood for *ingenium* in Rubens's composition has become a hybrid figure of *Génie/Esprit*, which 'guides' men swiftly to perfection in their arts. The same figure appears in a slightly modified composition commissioned by de Piles from his friend, the painter Antoine Coypel—a leading figure in the *Académie* during the first two decades of the eighteenth century, strongly



Figure 15. Claude Mellan after Simon Vouet, *Allegory of the Human Soul* (1625). Copperplate engraving. Edinburgh, National Galleries of Scotland.

influenced by de Piles's writings and sympathetic to the *Rubéniste* cause⁴⁷ (Figure 16). In Coypel's design, engraved by Charles Simonneau and published

⁴⁷ See Nicole Garnier, *Antoine Coypel, 1661–1722* (Paris: Arthéna, 1989), pp. 199–200.

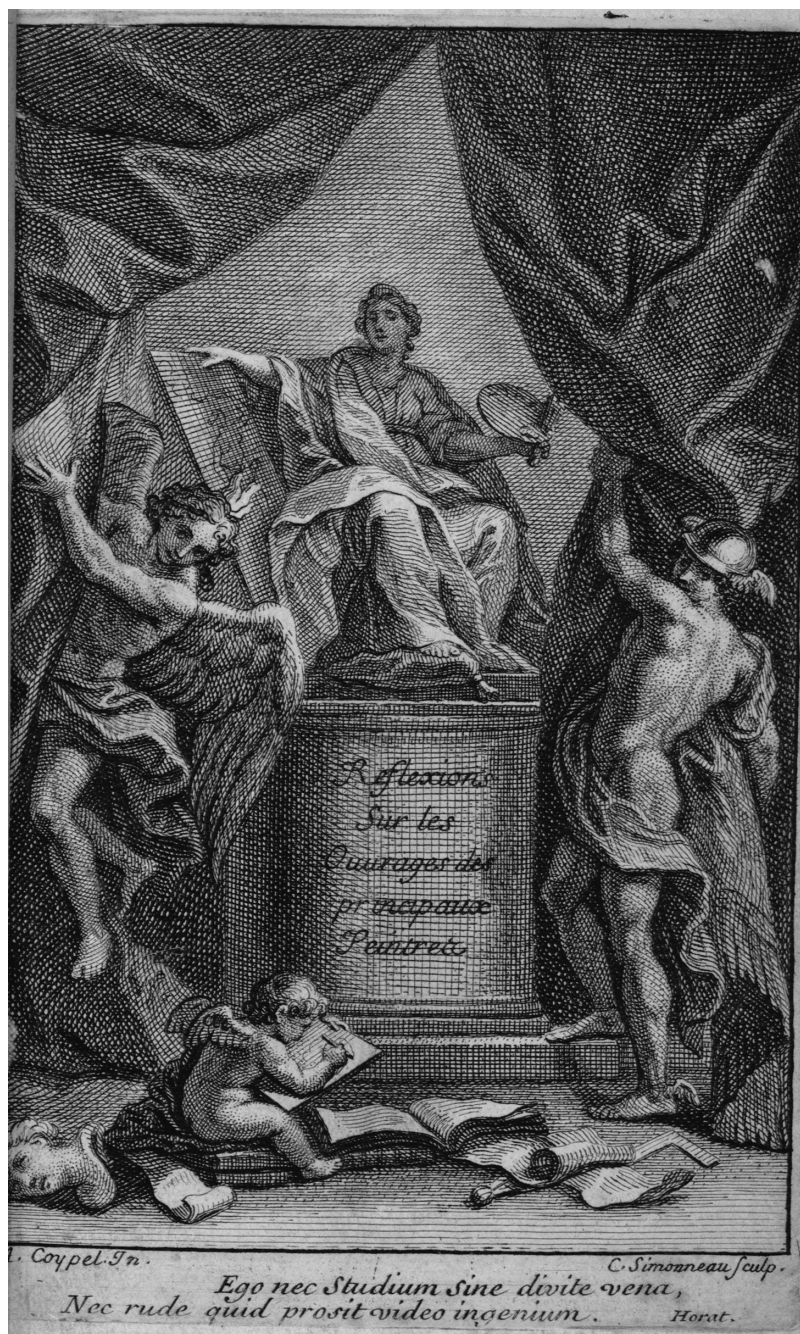


Figure 16. Charles Simonneau after Antoine Coypel, frontispiece to Roger de Piles, *Abrégé de la vie des peintres* (Paris: Charles de Sercey, 1699). Copperplate engraving. Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art, NUM 12 RES 382.

as the frontispiece to all of de Piles's books from 1699 on, the personifications of *Génie/Esprit* and Mercury (i.e. Art) pull back a pair of curtains to reveal *Pictura*, seated on a pedestal. The scene is captioned with a quotation from Horace's *Ars poetica*, '*Nec studium sine divite vena, nec rude quid prosit video ingenium*' (409–10), the relevance of which is clear from its context: 'Often it is asked whether a praiseworthy poem be due to Nature or to art. For my part, I do not see of what avail is either study, when not enriched by Nature's vein, or native wit, if untrained.'⁴⁸ In de Piles's criticism, this commonplace was not simply rehearsed, but expanded to incorporate new ideas about *ingenium* and genius, which were deployed especially on behalf of those modern artists favoured by proponents of *coloris*.

Rubens: The Empathy of *Un Génie Universel*

This is most evident in de Piles's accounts of Rubens and his works.⁴⁹ In the notorious evaluative tables of modern painters, published at the end of the *Cours de peinture*, Rubens scored highest overall across de Piles's categories of composition, design, colour, and expression.⁵⁰ Indeed, while de Piles attributed *génie* to a range of artists, evident in the short biographies in the *Abrégé*, he considered it to be especially concentrated in Rubens, whom he described as having a 'genius of the first order', using the adjective *ingénieuse* repeatedly to describe his works.⁵¹ Specifically, de Piles's drew on conventional humoural theory to describe Rubens as having a 'fiery' genius, but one moderated by good diet and the exercise of reason.⁵² This meant that Rubens had the *feu doux* necessary to enter into the enthusiasm of heightened imagination (a notion de Piles probably derived from Boileau's translation of *On the Sublime*) little by little, restrained by reasoned judgement.⁵³

⁴⁸ '*Natura fieret laudabile carmen an arte, | quaesitum est: ego nec studium sine divite vena, | nec rude quid prosit video ingenium*' (408–10). Horace, *Satires, Epistles and Ars poetica*, trans. H. R. Fairclough (London: Heinemann, 1926).

⁴⁹ See e.g. Svetlana Alpers, *The Making of Rubens* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995).

⁵⁰ De Piles, *Cours de peinture*, p. [497]. Rubens and Raphael both scored sixty-five points, but there is little doubt that de Piles favoured the former. See Kathryn Grady, 'Taste Endures! The Rankings of Roger de Piles and Three Centuries of Art Pricing', *The Journal of Economic History*, 73 (2013), 765–90.

⁵¹ '[Rubens], avoit un génie de premier ordre.' De Piles, *Abrégé*, p. 402.

⁵² De Piles, *Conversations*, pp. 215–16. Elsewhere, de Piles notes that invention demands much fire and genius, while disposition needs phlegm and prudence (*Conversations*, p. 67). On the relationship between Rubens's temperament, diet, and creative ability, see the essays in Cordula van Wyhe (ed.), *Rubens and the Human Body* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), and Marr, *Rubens's Spirit*.

⁵³ '[C]eux qui brûlent d'un feu doux, qui n'ont qu'une médiocre vivacité jointe à un bon jugement, peuvent s'insinuer dans l'enthousiasme par degrés, & le rendre même plus réglé par la solidité de leur esprit.' De Piles, *Cours de peinture*, p. 118. A *feu doux* is attributed also to Raphael (*ibid.*, p. 68). On de Piles and enthusiasm, see Puttfarken, p. 118.

De Piles himself gets rather carried away in his description of Rubens's genius—lapsing, perhaps, into the puerility against which Pseudo-Longinus warns in *On the Sublime*.⁵⁴ For example, in the *Conversations*, de Piles wrote: 'I can tell you in a few words that he had a great wit, delicate, pellucid, just, sublime, and universal. . . . His genius for this fine art [of painting] was heightened, quick, easy, sweet, gracious, and of a great understanding.'⁵⁵ These qualities resulted in a 'self-sustaining' genius, able to paint quickly and surely, without the need for rules (although de Piles is quick to aver that Rubens was more learned than any other painter).⁵⁶ Yet beyond this hyperbole is an intriguing quality of Rubens's genius: empathy.

Take, for instance, de Piles's comments in *Dissertation sur les ouvrages des plus fameux peintres* (1681), in which he compared Rubens to other great masters. Having noted the particular abilities of artists such as Titian, Veronese, the Carracci, Raphael, and Michelangelo for one aspect of painting or another, de Piles pronounced Rubens's *esprit* to be 'universal, and the expansiveness of his genius enabled him to enter completely into the actions that he had to treat; he transformed himself into every character, and for each subject made himself a new man.'⁵⁷ This passage is striking in the context of the visual arts not simply because it posits Rubens as a 'universal' genius—a novelty in itself—but because of its claim for the painter's empathy. This enabled Rubens accurately to depict 'actions', through which the passions are shown in painting, by inhabiting the character of his figures.

A commonplace of rhetoric and a staple of early modern artistic theory, the relationship of empathy to the depiction of the passions was a much-debated subject in the *Académie*.⁵⁸ Notably, de Piles took a completely different approach to the schematic one offered by Charles Le Brun in his famous *Conférence sur l'expression générale et particulière* (delivered 1688, published 1698), in which he essentialized and codified certain 'passions' into a sequence of facial expressions (Figure 17).⁵⁹ Where Le Brun sought to achieve a model that anyone could copy, de Piles was invested in singularity: the unique capacity of a supremely gifted individual to experience what his figures would have done. This attitude, which nudges de Piles's aesthetics in the direction of *sentiment*, required demonstration.

⁵⁴ See the Introduction to this volume.

⁵⁵ 'Je puis vous dire en peu de mots qu'il avoit l'esprit grand, délicat, éclairé, juste, sublime, & universel. . . . Son génie pour ce bel art estoit eslevé, vif, facile, doux, gracieux, & d'une grand entendue.' De Piles, *Conversations*, p. 180.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 226.

⁵⁷ 'Celui [esprit] de Rubens estoit universel, & l'étendue de son génie le faisoit entrer tout entier dans les actions qu'il avoit à traiter; il se transformoit en autant de caractères, & se faisoit à nouveau sujet un nouvel homme.' Roger de Piles, *Dissertation sur les ouvrages des plus fameux peintres* (Paris: Nicolas Langlois, 1681), p. 68.

⁵⁸ De Piles's views on this subject may have been informed by his reading of Franciscus Junius's *De pictura veterum*, on which see Colette Nativel, 'Ut pictura poesis: Junius et Roger de Piles', *Dix-septième siècle*, 245 (2009), 593–608. See also Weststeijn's Chapter 13 in this volume.

⁵⁹ On which see Jennifer Montagu, *The Expression of the Passions: The Origin and Influence of Charles Le Brun's 'Conférence sur l'expression générale et particulière'* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), esp. (for de Piles's critique of Le Brun), pp. 83–4.

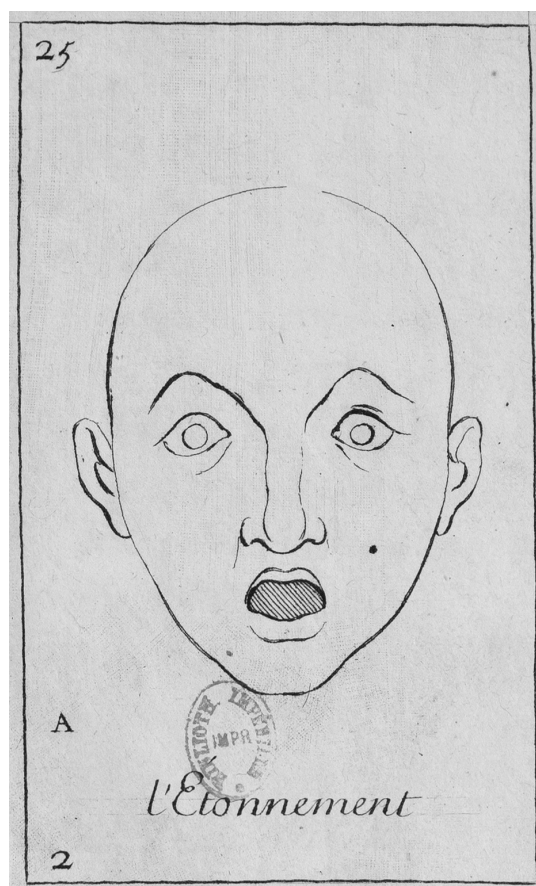


Figure 17. ‘L’étonnement’ from Charles Le Brun, *Conférence sur l’expression générale et particulière* (Amsterdam: J. L. De Lorme and Paris: E. Picart, 1698). Copperplate engraving. Paris, Bibliothèque National de France, V-23892.

A corollary, therefore, of de Piles’s having placed this ‘superior’ (in his words) genius so firmly in a single figure was the need to locate it equally in exemplary artworks. It is in the expression of the passions, he says, that the character of an artist’s genius is revealed.⁶⁰ For example, in his account of the Rubens pictures in the Duc de Richelieu’s *cabinet*, de Piles described *Christ in the House of Simon the Pharisee* (c.1618–20; Figure 18) as follows:

The difference of characters is effortlessly shown, not only by their costumes, which are exterior signs; but also by the physiognomy and by their expressions,

⁶⁰ De Piles, *Conversations*, p. 74.



Figure 18. Peter Paul Rubens, *Christ in the House of Simon the Pharisee* (1618–20). Oil on canvas. St Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum, GE-479. Photograph © The State Hermitage Museum. Photo by Svetlana Suetova, Konstantin Sinyavsky.

which are the portrait of the soul, and which reveal the core of hearts. . . . The expressions of the passions of the soul are wondrous in this work. . . . And for me, having seen all that is beautiful in France and in Italy by Titian and Giorgione, I swear there is nothing that has struck me more forcibly than this painting.⁶¹

While this passage reflects de Piles's investment in the poetics of wonder and his familiarity with the sublime, it also shows his contribution to an increasingly important concept in criticism: the masterpiece.⁶² The naturally talented, superior artist has placed himself in the shoes of others, in order to relay pictorially to his

⁶¹ 'La différence des caractères & des personnes se donne facilement à coinnoître non seulement par les habits qui en sont les marques exterieures; mais encore par la phisionomie & par les expressions qui sont la pourtrait de l'ame, & qui decouvrent le fond des coeurs. . . . Les expressions des passions de l'ame sont merveilleses dans cet ouvrage. . . . Et pour moy qui ay veu tout ce qu'il y a de beau en France & en Italie du Titien & du Georgion, j'avouë que rien ne m'a tant frappé pour la force que ce tableau.' De Piles, *Dissertation*, pp. 128–31. de Piles notes that the only other painting by Rubens comparable in greatness is the *Silenus* (now in Munich), on which see Alpers, *Making of Rubens*, ch. 3.

⁶² On de Piles, the sublime, and 'transport', see Puttfarken, p. 119. On the emergence of the masterpiece as a critical category, see Walter Cahn, *Masterpieces: Chapters on the History of an Idea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

audience those thoughts and feelings that convey a narrative. The result is a work that astonishes and moves its spectators, in which all the talents of its creator are harmoniously displayed. By placing *genius* in art objects in this way, de Piles established the masterpiece as a repository of artistic empathy.

Conclusion

I have sought to show that de Piles's notion of genius was the product of places both actual and metaphorical: the discursive spaces of the academy and the gallery, the bodies of artist and spectator, the commonplace, the paratextual space of the frontispiece, and the masterpiece. Developing a system of connoisseurship, de Piles transformed conventional notions of genius into a new aesthetics by mingling *génie* with *esprit*. In so doing, he moved what had been a largely literary notion over to fine art criticism. In this criticism, *génie* was located in multiple, connected places: the nation, the individual, and the work of art. Through a series of connections across places, de Piles articulated an explanation of style by which genius was transferred from a geographical region to a nation, thence to individuals, and hence to their works. Importantly, he posited not only differing kinds of genius, but also different degrees, while introducing the notion of an 'absolute' genius more familiar from later criticism: de Piles identified Rubens as paradigmatic not just of *a* genius, but of genius *tout court*. Drawing on yet transcending traditional humoural accounts of genius, he emphasized that the mix of genius and *esprit* necessary for greatness was bodily and that this greatness was expressed most fully in the depiction of the passions. His account of Rubens's brilliance in this regard relied upon a theory of empathy, in which genius propels the artist from one place to another, that is, from within himself to inhabiting another's experience. Thus, de Piles's criticism should be placed as a milestone not only in the developments leading to Romantic notions of genius, but also in the aesthetics of *sentiment* that underpinned that change.