

# *The Eleven*

By Pierre Michon

Translated by Jody Gladding and Elizabeth Deshays from the French

## Discussion Points/Questions:

1. The central focus of *The Eleven* is the eponymous painting by the artist François-Élie Corentin. The background narration of how this painting came to exist, as well as the narrator's descriptions of the halls in the modern-day Louvre, respectively take place within a historically and contemporarily accurate world. Beyond this, the other painters whom the narrator mentions, such as Tiepolo or David, were real people whose artwork we can still see today. Nevertheless, both *The Eleven* and Corentin did not actually exist. What is this effect produced by this placement of a fictional painting and painter within a historically accurate frame? Does the painting become more real, or does perhaps the history become more fictional? Furthermore, beyond the historical backdrop, what other devices does the narrator employ to give credence to the reality of this painting? For example, one might look at the use of pronouns in the text – “you,” “we” (e.g., pp. 31 & 79) – and their effect on the reader's relation to the fictional painting, or at the narrator's use of historical uncertainty. Finally, is this particular historicity of *The Eleven* different from that of other works of historical fiction, and if so, how?

2. The idea that “God is a dog” – *Dio cane* – is first introduced on page 14. Throughout the novel this “figure of speech” gains various significations depending upon the context in which it is used. For example, on page 27 it seems linked to the idea that God does not help man or does not mete out justice, while on page 51 it appears more as a profanity or curse. In what other ways does “God is a dog” appear in *The Eleven*? In addition, how is this derogatory notion of the divine linked to larger themes in the text, such as the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror, or the place of the artist in a post-Christian society?

3. On page 22 the narrator compares the “pale existences” of past historical figures to the current “irrefutable” presence of the painting *The Eleven*, located right “before our eyes.” What role does sight play in establishing historical certainty? What is this relationship between the viewer and the viewed that causes the narrator to prize the current existence of *The Eleven* over his historical narrative? One might also look at other passages in which sight and the desire to see arise, such as pages 50-1 or 89-91. When it comes to history, how different is “seeing” with the imagination compared to seeing a real object of which the context has nonetheless disappeared? Is it possible to know someone through an object left by him or her, as the narrator claims at the bottom of page 45? In what ways is it possible to *see* the past?

4. The narrator often stresses the theatrical quality of the politics of the French Revolution. For example, on page 72, the narrator states, “... these parties were only roles now. It was no longer a matter of opinions, but of theater.” This is further

emphasized by the character of Collot, the former Shakespearean actor, who later lived out on the battlefield the scenes from his earlier plays (p. 40). What does it mean when politics turns into theater? If there is such a thing, how would a 'real' or 'true' politics differ from "that old theater of shadows" of which the narrator writes (p. 67)? Finally, and more broadly, how does this relation between art and life play out in the text? In his initial description of the figures in the painting, the narrator emphasizes these men's slide from men of literature to men of power and bloodshed. In what ways is the artist like the despot? And in what ways here does not only art imitate life, but life copy and take the form of theater, literature and painting?

5. "*The Eleven* is not a painting of History, it is History" (p. 94). What does this climactic assertion mean? What exactly is the difference between being *of* history and *being* history? Furthermore, is there a distinction to be made between being or representing history and being or representing **H**istory? Finally, could we also compare this statement with the political uses of *The Eleven* – the reason it was commissioned – as described on pages 80-81?

### **Suggestions for Further Reading & Exploration:**

#### **Online:**

Stephen Henighan reviews *The Eleven* on [The Quarterly Conversation](#).

Explore the [floor plan of the Louvre](#), described by the narrator in *The Eleven*.

Browse the Metropolitan Museum of Art's [collection of paintings by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo](#), the artist compared with Corentin in the first chapter.

See pictures of and read about [Combleux](#), the canal-crossed village in which François-Élie Corentin was born and raised.

Read a translation of Honoré de Balzac's [Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu](#) (*The Unknown Masterpiece*), another story about a fictional painter and the power or deception of art.

Read [Julian Barnes' piece](#) on Bridget Alsdorf's *Fellow Men: Fantin-Latour and the Problem of the Group in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century French Painting* in the London Review of Books. Using Fantin's sober group portraits, Barnes examines the group dynamics between artists and the relationship of the painter to his peers, as well as the artistic anxiety facing the prospect of fame or oblivion.

**In Print:**

Michon, Pierre. *Small Lives*. Translated by Elizabeth Deshays and Jody Gladding (Brooklyn: Archipelago Books, 2008).

---. *Masters and Servants*. Translated by Wyatt Mason (New Haven: Yale UP, 2013).

---. *The Origin of the World*. Translated by Wyatt Mason and Roger Shattuck (New Haven: Yale UP, 2013).

---. *Rimbaud the Son*. Translated by Elizabeth Deshays and Jody Gladding (New Haven: Yale UP, 2013).

Andress, David. *The Terror: The Merciless War for Freedom in Revolutionary France* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006). David Andress provides a riveting account of the Reign of Terror and its build-up.

Roberts, Warren. *Jacques-Louis David, Revolutionary Artist: Art, Politics and the French Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992). Warren Roberts examines the link between Jacques-Louis David's art and the political life he led, as described in Michon's *The Eleven*.