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## **Pleasure's Poise: Classicism and Baroque Allegory in Poussin's 'Dance to the Music of Time'**

'Like all artists of his period, Poussin placed great weight on the clarity and legibility of an allegory.'<sup>1</sup> Thus the verdict of Otto Grautoff, in his 1914 monograph on Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), describing specifically the artist's portrayal of earthly transience and vanity, 'The Dance of Human Life'. Clarity was already a catchphrase in Poussin scholarship in Grautoff's day, used most often in response to the artist's technical precision and eye for compositional balance, as if his paintings' classical symmetry and limpid light indicated a correspondingly lucid meaning. Classical transparency and rationality as an antidote to Baroque convolution and obscurity – this neat formulation breaks down before an intricate allegorical invention like 'A Dance to the Music of Time', as 'The Dance of Human Life' is now known (Fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> Confusion, not clarity, best characterizes the litany of responses to this picture over the last three and a half centuries, and there are no letters or recorded dialogues that shed light on the artist's intentions or programme. But this confusion is not primarily due to a lack of such sources, or to a growing distance from the time of the picture's creation. It was there from the very beginning, for central to the painting's conception is the mystery of life's liminal stages, in all their persistent changeableness. The work's resonance derives, and derived, from its *resistance* to legibility – from the complex circuit of meaning it stages for the viewer. Poussin's allegory, I will argue, is riddled with paradox and ambiguity, hinging on the provocative and elusive figure of earthly Pleasure.

'A Dance to the Music of Time' was commissioned in Rome by the learned Catholic prelate Giulio Rospigliosi (1600–69), the future Pope Clement IX (1667–69).<sup>3</sup> Its date has been debated, but scholars most often opt for the mid-late 1630s, before Poussin's brief interlude in Paris (1640–42).<sup>4</sup> Four figures personifying different phases in the drama of human fortune – Poverty, Labour, Wealth, and Pleasure – dance in a circle to the music of Father Time's lyre. The conceit seems to be a unique blending of two sources: the Wheel of Fortune, represented in medieval and Renaissance art with four or more people attached to its spokes, all subject to the rise-and-fall of the



*Figure 1* Nicolas Poussin, *A Dance to the Music of Time* (Il Ballo della Vita Humana), c.1634-40, Oil on canvas, 82.5 x 104 cm, © The Wallace Collection, London, UK / The Bridgeman Art Library.

goddess Fortuna's spins;<sup>5</sup> and the Cosmic Dance, a classical metaphor for the harmonic revolutions of the heavenly spheres and the cyclical stages of time.<sup>6</sup> Framing the dance are two putti: one blithely blows bubbles symbolic of earthly transience while the other watches intently as the sand in life's hourglass funnels away. A Janus term draped in garlands stands stolid at the left, its two heads, young and old, marking the edge of the painting as a temporal threshold, conflating past and future. The Janus is considerably more than a decorative piece of garden statuary; it stands for fortification and vigilance, as well as life's forming dualities. As the god of gateways, Janus also oversees the yearly cycle, and is memorialized in the name of its first month. The term is cast in a cool, purplish light streaming in from the left that tells us dawn is breaking, as does the presence of Aurora in the sky, sprinkling her rain of morning flowers as she leads Apollo and his entourage over a thick mass of rain clouds.<sup>7</sup> Trailing behind the Sun God's golden chariot is a dance of the Hours that miniaturizes and enlivens the round-dance below.

According to Giovanni Bellori, Poussin's first biographer and contemporary in Rome, the painting was conceived as a 'moral poesy' ('morale poesia').<sup>8</sup> This implies an intended moral message, but Bellori does not

rehearse a specific interpretation, offering only a summation of the figural composition and an acknowledgement that the changing fortune of humanity is represented.<sup>9</sup> André Félibien, Poussin's other seventeenth-century biographer, writes a very similar account of the painting – a narrative summary with no overall interpretation of tone.<sup>10</sup> In fact, his description mimics Bellori's almost exactly, such that he seems to be working from the textual account, and an imperfect visual memory, more than from the painting itself. (Bellori's vague remark about Labour looking wearily 'toward her companion' is incorrectly interpreted in Félibien's reading, suggesting he was writing without the picture clearly in mind: he describes Labour as looking at Poverty, when in fact she looks to her right, towards Time and Wealth.) According to Félibien, Poussin's allegorical figures are easily recognized,<sup>11</sup> and the work as a whole demonstrates a pictorial intelligence and 'netteté d'esprit' opposed to the distasteful 'awkwardness' and 'obscurity' of so many contemporary allegorical works.<sup>12</sup> (This 'netteté d'esprit' may be the source for the rhetoric of 'clarity' employed by Grautoff and others in descriptions of this work.) But the distinction Félibien draws between Poussin's supposedly easy-to-decode allegory and the convoluted ones painted by his contemporaries (no specific examples are provided) is belied by his *own* confusion about the picture, which he describes as 'an image of human life, represented by a dance of four women, who bear some relation to the four seasons, or to the four ages of man'.<sup>13</sup> These vague relationships are left unexplained.

Most subsequent accounts of the 'Dance' have treated it as a code to be cracked, using these contemporary texts and the iconographical sources in evidence to puzzle out pithy statements about 'the vanity of things of chance'<sup>14</sup> or 'the vices of man in conditions of inequality'.<sup>15</sup> If Poussin had a more pointed moral message in mind, viewers have found it difficult to grasp. Is this dance joyful, stoic, or melancholy? A sweet acceptance of fate or a cautionary tale more moralizing in tone? These questions are at the crux of the allegory, but their answers are obscure, primarily because Poussin's personifications are circuitous and contradictory in their embodiment of life's meaning. Much effort has gone into identifying who is who in the circle – what *are* the four stages of human life as Poussin and his patron envisioned it, and how are they personified? Richard Beresford, author of the most exhaustive and well researched study of the painting, asserts that '[w]ith the help of Bellori, Félibien and [Cesare] Ripa...it is possible to interpret the allegory of "A Dance to the Music of Time" with reasonable confidence'.<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, these texts have proved to limit and even derail informed readings of the painting, distracting from close visual analysis. The mystery of the 'Dance' is more *visual* than textual or literary, and so any interpretation should draw its strength from the painting itself.

We can be reasonably confident of a few things. Poussin almost certainly developed his personifications from Ripa's *Iconologia* (first published in 1593 and again in expanded form in 1603), the standard allegorical handbook for

artists of the day.<sup>17</sup> Ripa's illustrated catalogue of virtues and vices was widely known in the artistic circles of France and Italy throughout the seventeenth century, and offers a window into how this 'moral conceit'<sup>18</sup> was conceived and received. For example, we can be fairly sure that the figure in red at right with her hair wrapped in a scarf represents 'Fatica' or Labour, identified by her pained expression, bare shoulders and arms, well muscled physique, ruddy complexion, and short, cinched dress.<sup>19</sup> Labour brings livelihood, and so following her in Fortune's circle is Wealth, front and centre, wearing the jewels, golden shoes and drapery of Ripa's 'Ricchezza'.<sup>20</sup> Poussin does not include the cumbersome paraphernalia Ripa recommends for both of these figures: a crown, sceptre and golden vase for Wealth, and a scythe, flail and bull for Labour. In one respect this was a practical, formal decision; the absence of these attributes frees the figures to join hands and dance while also allowing for a more open and measured composition. More interestingly, though, this selective use of Ripa testifies to Poussin's lack of interest in establishing clearly recognizable identities, because by leaving out these obvious signs he allows his personifications to remain equivocal. By paring down and mixing up stock iconography, he leaves the dancers' identities open to question. In this way, he departs from Ripa's limited understanding of allegory as an art of symbolic conventions, adopting a more Neo-Platonic philosophy that sees allegory's true meaning as hidden within the visual and conceptual structure of the picture, waiting for viewers willing to seek it out.<sup>21</sup>

The figure following Wealth is the most enigmatic of the group, her coyly knowing gaze simultaneously inviting and denying the viewer's identification (Fig. 2). Bellori labels her Luxury ('Lusso'),<sup>22</sup> but the broadest consensus calls her Pleasure, identified by her curly golden hair, wreath of roses, and lascivious look.<sup>23</sup> Following Pleasure is another problematic personification: a male figure whose bare feet, plain olive robe and humble wreath of leaves suggest Poverty. The most logical course of fate on Fortune's wheel supports this reading, moving from Poverty, to Labour, to Wealth, to Pleasure, and from Pleasure overindulged back to Poverty again. But Ripa's 'Piacere' is a young man, and his 'Povertà dei Doni' (Poverty of Earthly Goods) is a woman, lying prostrate on a bed of brittle branches.<sup>24</sup> The missing bed of branches is commonly explained by the necessities of the dance; Poussin simply switched the symbol from ground to head. But this does not explain the fact that the wreath looks more like leafy laurel than branches, and still less the reversals of Ripa's specifications of gender. Whether a personification is male or female is Ripa's first and founding instruction;<sup>25</sup> a painter who disobeys the instruction is immediately on strange ground. Bellori and Félibien were so intent on interpreting the painting through the lens of Ripa's text that they completely overlooked these aberrations; but such changes represent a general sliding of significance essential to the picture. If the confusion surrounding Pleasure and Poverty is *meaningful*, as I want to propose – that is, if it is productive in the viewer's progress toward interpretation – then cross-referencing emblem



*Figure 2* Nicolas Poussin, *A Dance to the Music of Time* (Detail of Pleasure).

books and classical sources that Poussin used can only lead so far. We must also investigate the posture Poussin takes toward his sources and toward the allegory itself, always keeping in mind that he was gearing the painting toward a specific patron – a patron both pious and scholarly, for whom this ‘moral poesy’ had aesthetic as well as philosophical value. As recent scholarship by Richard Neer, Jonathan Unglaub, Sheila McTighe and others has shown, Poussin’s painting often deviated from iconographic conventions to convey more complex conceptual significance, presenting a moral, intellectual, and visual challenge to the beholder.<sup>26</sup> ‘A Dance to the Music of Time’ brings new light to this pattern of deviation and dialectics. Pleasure’s beguiling outward look suggests Poussin’s interest in the viewer and in the sensuous beauty of paint as key elements in the construction of the allegory’s meaning.

The account of the painting that looks furthest beyond iconography and identification is that of Erwin Panofsky, in his 1936 essay on Poussin’s ‘Arcadian Shepherds’. Given the essay’s theme – ‘On the Conception of Transience in Poussin and Watteau’ – it is not surprising that ‘A Dance to the Music of Time’ plays a key supporting role. Furthermore, Panofsky and others have speculated that the second and most famous version of the ‘Arcadian Shepherds’ in the Louvre was both commissioned and conceived by Rospigliosi, perhaps even as a pendant to the ‘Dance’. The evidence is inconclusive, but given the rarity of allegorical subjects in Poussin’s œuvre, Rospigliosi’s demonstrated interest in such subjects (to which I will return), and the theme of human transience shared by both paintings, it is likely they were painted for the same patron and are connected in their conceptual motivation. Both works share a calm and harmonious composition disrupted by signs of temporality and ambiguity – signs that only emerge with extended contemplation. As allegories of human life, they both invite theories about the artist’s ‘metaphysical creed’, which is what Panofsky is after in his first and most ambitious investigation of the ‘Et in Arcadia Ego’ theme.<sup>27</sup>

Panofsky’s iconographical exposition of the four figures vis-à-vis Ripa quickly jumps to the centre of the ‘Dance’, using the allegory as a key to ‘Poussin’s attitude towards the fundamental problems of life and destiny’.<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, he uses the painting as evidence for the following conclusion: ‘The principle of metamorphosis, based on an insight into what I should like to call a cosmic rhythm, and leading to what I should like to call a serene resignation, may be regarded as the very quintessence of Poussin’s art.’<sup>29</sup> I want to challenge the notion that ‘serene resignation’ is the ultimate effect of this picture by highlighting several key visual elements that Panofsky and many others have either disregarded or overlooked. A closer reading reveals a provocative ambivalence in this morality poem of life’s changeableness, an undercurrent of mystery beneath the calm, serene surface of its allegorical imagery. As clear as the iconography of transience may initially appear, Poussin’s ‘principle of metamorphosis’ is ultimately visualized as paradox and unresolved duality.



Figure 3 Nicolas Poussin, *A Dance to the Music of Time*, n.d. Pen, brown ink and wash on paper; traces of squaring on black chalk, 14.8 x 19.9 cm National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.

I do not wish to simplify or reject outright Panofsky's argument. His reading of 'Poussin's conception of life' in the 'Dance' 'as a condition free though fatebound, dignified though pathetic, imperishable though variable'<sup>30</sup> is subtle and sensitive, and captures much of the painting's conflicted moral tenor. But too much of the visual evidence is left out of this account, so that the interpretation resolves too quickly and too easily into 'serene resignation'. Pleasure's gaze and Poverty's maleness are, for starters, two major details Panofsky avoids which confuse and add new layers to an interpretation of the dance's moral message. Like Bellori and Félibien, Panofsky reads Poverty as female, perhaps too immersed in Ripa's prescriptions to notice the gender switch. A scan of the literature shows Panofsky is not alone in his oversight: the majority of published descriptions of these dancers follow the seventeenth-century biographers' lead and identify them as all women. Like the few others who have distinguished Poverty as male – and note that not only are they surprisingly few, but that they were also all writing within the last thirty years<sup>31</sup> – I find his gender unequivocal. I also find it worthy of greater attention, given the evidence that his sex was a considered change from Poussin's original conception.

The evidence is the one extant preparatory drawing for the painting (Fig.

3), which shows that Poussin first conceived all four dancers as female. The sketch depicts a more traditional dance of nymphs: their sheer, clinging drapery reveals unmistakably feminine breasts, bellies and thighs, and their hair is long, either windswept or braided in a crown on top of the head. What might be the significance of Poverty's sex change, then? First, Poussin's insertion of a man into what was an all-female ensemble adds the potential for sexual love into the dance. Note that the heads of Poverty and Pleasure are oriented back to back, mirroring the Janus figure to their left. The two-headed Janus has a rich history of representation beginning in ancient Rome, which includes juxtapositions of youth and age as well as man and woman; both dualities are in play here.<sup>32</sup> Poussin's implicit coupling of Pleasure and Poverty in relation to Janus, the guardian god of warnings, provides a subtle clue to the moral message of the 'Dance': their juxtaposition in fortune's circle warns against submission to sensual pleasures. According to Poussin's pictorial logic, overindulgence in feminine delights leads a man to destitution.

This was an appropriate warning for the pious prelate who commissioned the painting. By all accounts Rospigliosi was a devoted and highly respected man of religion, committed to chastity and selfless service to the Church, so an admonishment against the pitfalls of earthly pleasures, particularly those offered by women, fits his moral code.<sup>33</sup> We can imagine him conceiving the painting as a moral exemplum for his wall, a visual sermon against sensual indulgence wrapped up in a sobering reminder of human frailty and transience. Rospigliosi was an erudite man who began his climb to the high ranks of the Church as a poet and librettist for the Barberini court. His operas, whether sacred or secular, tragic or comic, always revolved around a moral lesson. In his first opera, *Sant'Alessio*, which premiered in 1632 and was revived in more spectacular form in 1634,<sup>34</sup> a young Roman nobleman renounces his life of luxury for one of austerity, solitude and anonymity. By blending sacred drama – the story of a Saint's triumphant spiritual revelation – with antique notions of humility tied to terrestrial and often comical characters, Rospigliosi's operas were an important contribution to an evolving baroque 'tragicom-media'. The ascetic moral of *Sant'Alessio* – that diligent faith and modesty triumph over luxury – was sweetened in accordance with the model of 'la poetica barberiniana', which aimed to offer moral instruction sugar-coated in melodic language and sumptuous presentation. In the opera's extravagant re-staging in 1634 (documented in a series of engravings by François Colignon), sets by Francesco Guitti, Valerio Poggi, and Francesco Buonamici (among others) made the story of *Sant'Alessio* as 'dulce' as it was 'utile'. The sensory delight of both the visual spectacle and the music by Stefano Landi was understood as the most effective means of conveying the moral lesson.<sup>35</sup> According to Marc Fumaroli, the moral messages of Rospigliosi's libretti were ultimately 'veiled, if not obliterated', by their extravagant 'mise en scène', probably to the writer's chagrin. By commissioning works from Poussin, Fumaroli argues, the prelate had another opportunity to give his ideas artistic

form, and better control their representation.<sup>36</sup> If this is true – if Poussin's painting reflects Rospigliosi's aesthetics better than the stagings of his operas do – then Rospigliosi liked his allegories pared down, but was hardly averse to art's visual pleasure. In 'A Dance to the Music of Time', Poussin sweetened the picture's moral message with the same sensual pleasures it warns against: richly coloured robes, hints of melodious music, and a healthy dose of rosy flesh. But the danger and fragility of pleasure remain vividly in play.

In another opera by Rospigliosi, *Chi soffre spera*, first performed in 1637 and revived in 1639, the protagonist Egisto represents the noble selflessness of poverty, and his story was presented in the programme as an allegory of the triumph of virtue.<sup>37</sup> Based on a tale from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, *Chi soffre spera* is believed to be the first comic opera, but its underlying message was clearly moralistic. The narratives of Sant'Alessio and Egisto suggest the personal resonance Poussin's personification of poverty must have had for Rospigliosi, who was himself renowned for his frugal lifestyle. In his life and in his art, poverty and pleasure had both positive and negative connotations, and this ambivalence no doubt informed his reading of Poussin's painting.

Because the overtly allegorical mode of 'A Dance to the Music of Time' is so rare in Poussin's œuvre, most scholars believe the subject was conceived by Rospigliosi.<sup>38</sup> Whether the allegory of the 'Dance' was entirely his invention or a collaborative effort between patron and artist, we know that he explored similar themes in his operas. *Sant'Alessio* and *Chi soffre spera* indicate the moral underpinnings of Rospigliosi's libretti, but the most compelling example of an intricate allegorical structure akin to that of 'A Dance to the Music of Time' is his late opera *La Vita Humana overo il Trionfo della Pietà*, written approximately two decades after the *Dance* was commissioned. According to Count Galeazzo Gualdo Priorato, who was present at the premiere on 31 January 1656, *La Vita Humana* represented 'the cunning artifice and deceit with which pleasure and fault are always assaulting innocence and good intention. Life's remorse in falling prey to them [pleasure and fault], its constancy in rejecting them, and its frailty in delighting in them.'<sup>39</sup> 'The triumph of piety' was conveyed through elaborate theatrical machinery: Pleasure, Fault, Good Intention, Innocence, and Human Life were embodied in character, costume and voice, engaging in dialogue and physical interaction on a lavishly decorated stage.<sup>40</sup> The affinities between this opera and 'A Dance to the Music of Time' are striking in what they tell us about how the painting must have resonated with Rospigliosi's moral and artistic temperament. His operas, as celebrations of Christian morality as well as forms of visual and aural entertainment, demonstrate a belief that in art sober spiritual values can coexist with, even be strengthened by, an appeal to the human desire for sensual gratification. Even if the lavish staging of *La Vita Humana* went against Rospigliosi's wishes, as Fumaroli suggests, the allegorical premise described by Priorato shows the major role of pleasure, and its 'artificial' delights, in conveying the opera's message.

Poussin's depiction of Poverty visualizes this link between art and asceticism, showing him with a leafy crown rather than the brittle branches recommended by Ripa. The laurel wreath identifies him as a figure of the artist, a figure with which both he and his patron could obviously identify. By this point in his career Poussin was no pauper, but accounts of his frugality even after his success suggest that like Rospigliosi he connected morality with modest living.<sup>41</sup> All in all, the combination of identification and privation surrounding the figure of Poverty is part of the unresolved ambivalence that makes the moral of the painting so difficult to determine. Although denied the bright light and rich colour of the two women who frame him, Poverty (like Labour) eventually draws attention through the raw beauty and flex of his musculature. With their strained muscles trying to twist out of backwardness, these two struggling figures show their own kind of poise, their own *bodily* energy and vigour. While Pleasure and Wealth present the easy, sensual enjoyment of their supple flesh in movement, Poverty and Labour show the often painful effort of being in the body, an effort both familiar and fearsome to the viewer.

The body's earthboundness is a strong theme of the picture: the dancers are caught in a soft 'plié'; great attention is lavished on feet – heels and arches and gripping toes; and the putti are seated with their legs splayed, knees torqued towards the ground and one hand set down for support, so as to show multiple points of magnetic contact between skin and earth. All of this weightiness is offset by the angels of the Hours flying in the clouds above, led by Aurora who hovers unaffected by the gravity that pulls her floral confetti downward. Apollo in his silver ring (perhaps the circle of the Zodiac) connects the grounded group with those above, standing nude and strongly muscled on his chariot, a heavenly sublimation of human anatomy. On this level above the clouds, all is light and lively and hopeful. Down below life is more complex: the switching of genders and ambiguity of relationship between Poverty and Pleasure break open the dance's circuit of meaning and throw the moral of the painting into question, requiring the effort of a contemplative viewer to think it through.

The challenge to interpretation this kind of ambivalence presents to the viewer is both intrinsic and important to Poussin's allegorical mode. According to seventeenth-century conceptions of symbolic imagery, the obscurity of an allegory can be its strength as well as its pleasure.<sup>42</sup> Angus Fletcher theorizes this dualistic nature of allegory, calling a 'characteristic splitting' of primary meaning (form or surface significance) and secondary meaning (content or underlying theme) the 'essence of the mode'.<sup>43</sup> Ambivalence and obscurity appear at every stage of the history of allegory. In medieval poetry and scripture, for example, the 'difficoltà' of allegorical ornament was viewed as a didactic strategy as well as a delight. According to Fletcher: "Difficulty" implies here a calculated obscurity that elicits an interpretive response in the reader. The very obscurity is a source of pleasure, especially to the extent that

the actual process of deciphering the exegetical content of a passage would be painfully arduous and uncertain. Obscurity stirs curiosity; the reader wants to tear the veil aside.<sup>44</sup> Fletcher is drawing on the theories of Saint Augustine, who often remarked on the mysterious, polysemous nature of allegory in his writings on Christian scripture and morality: 'These things are veiled in figures ... in order that they may exercise the mind of the pious inquirer, and not become cheap for being bare and obvious... For being remote, they are more ardently desired, and for being desired they are more joyfully discovered.'<sup>45</sup>

This theory of an interpretation delightfully hard-won was still active in Poussin's intellectual milieu, and helps to explain the intrigue of 'A Dance to the Music of Time'. Interest in emblem literature and imagery reached its apex in the seventeenth century.<sup>46</sup> Rooted in the rhetoric of the conceit so popular at the time, emblems were everywhere in Baroque Rome – ornamenting the Galleria in the Farnese Palace, the Sala Regia in the Vatican, courtiers' carriages and costumes. Their rhetoric of poetic contrivance was part of the visual culture of the day, and their didactic powers made them particularly useful for the religious propaganda of the Barberini and the Jesuits, who used them to spread their faith and moral code in the pleasing form of visual images full of classical and mythological references. Because they delighted the senses, emblems, however abstruse, were seen as the most effective vehicles of moral instruction. So for a privileged set of erudite viewers, the obscurity of the 'Dance' was an appropriate and effective ingredient of the moral lesson it strove to present. The difficulty is not immediately apparent. At first glance the painting's iconography appears classical, familiar, and clear, and many of the interpretive errors in the art-historical literature – claims that the dancers simply represent the Four Seasons,<sup>47</sup> for example, or that Poverty is female – result from the blind assumption that Poussin was using traditional imagery in a traditional way. But unique alterations and ambiguities emerge with a closer look, and their 'difficoltà' is part of the point.

The aesthetic foundations of 'A Dance to the Music of Time' are complex, an amalgam of Poussin's contemporary Baroque influences and the Classical legacy of the Renaissance. Part of the ambiguity of the allegory is the way it mixes Classical continuity and calm – the eternal repetition of the dance and its imaging of balance and stasis in movement – with Baroque complexity and intrigue – the mysterious attraction of Pleasure's gaze and Poverty's aberrant gender threatening to unravel the tight circuit of the circle. The conflict between these two structures of representation is the same conflict driving Walter Benjamin's theorization of allegory in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, 1924–25), which aims to uphold the Baroque period's productive departure from Classical humanism, claiming the latter's confident notions of Symbol, Totality, Beauty and Perfection to be no longer viable in 'modernity'.<sup>48</sup> Studies of seventeenth-century

allegory too often avoid Benjamin's important study, which expands from its in-depth historical investigation of the emblematic-allegorical culture of the period into a series of reflections on the metaphysical nature of art and critical discourse. In particular, the final section on 'Allegory and Trauerspiel' offers several insights that help to put Poussin's painting into theoretical perspective, especially its presentation of transcendence: an earthbound, corporeal realm delimited by blocks of stone is reflected in a heavenly procession of gods and angels above. The dancers in their colourful robes reappear in the clouds with delicate silver wings, both freer in their movement and lighter on their feet, symbolizing the final, joyous state toward which the cycle of human life leads.

This transition from human beings' material constraints in nature to spiritual transcendence is, according to Benjamin, what all art aims to enact on some level; the Baroque apotheosis is only its most emphatic manifestation. In this way, *all* art is fundamentally allegorical in its leap from matter to meaning, and allegory is therefore art's most truthful, effective form because it fully accepts, even foregrounds, 'the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance' intrinsic to modern aesthetic experience.<sup>49</sup> In Benjamin's conception, allegory displays 'a deep-rooted intuition of the problematic character of art',<sup>50</sup> showing the forced relationship between an idea and its aesthetic form and thereby conceding its inevitable failure to seamlessly unite the two, without the secure frameworks of myth or religion that he believes existed in pre-modern times. Obscurity and an 'awkward heavy-handedness'<sup>51</sup> are this failure's effects, which, as Benjamin explains, are paradoxically powerful in their conveyance of meaning because of the curiosity and self-awareness they stir.<sup>52</sup>

Although Benjamin's problems do speak to the interpretive difficulty of Poussin's painting, his tragic tone and extreme polarization of Baroque and Classical impulses (rejecting the latter as 'false') show his conception of allegory to be fundamentally foreign to that of Poussin. In 'A Dance to the Music of Time', Poverty and Labour are strained in their plights and Pleasure's look is mysteriously unclear, but overall the circle still proposes the possibility of transcendence – through the (restrained) appreciation of sensual pleasures while on earth, and through divine redemption after death. Poussin's painting is Baroque in its complex use of allegory, but it is deeply different from a Benjaminian 'Trauerspiel'.

Nevertheless, Benjamin's discussion of the 'antinomies of allegorical interpretation' is useful for understanding the oscillations and ambiguities of the 'Dance', proposing allegory's great value as flexibility: its capacity for double meanings due to the split it forces between content and form.<sup>53</sup> The dialectical nature of these antinomies gives allegory an unexpected creativity in its mode of expression by encouraging its users to tweak conventions into new resonances, which is precisely what Poussin has done with the Cosmic Dance, the Wheel of Fortune, and Ripa's catalogue of allegorical figures.

The viewer's sense that Pleasure's female gender and enigmatic stare could 'just as easily signify a virtue as a vice'<sup>54</sup> is central to the work's productive ambiguity, encouraging reflection on the temptations and distractions, riches and rewards of sensual pleasure. (A Frenchman, Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac, recording his impressions of Rome in 1622 wrote 'there is no place in the world where virtue is so close to vice, nor where good is more mixed with evil.'<sup>55</sup> One wonders whether Poussin saw Barberini culture in much the same way.) In artistic terms Pleasure's sensual beauty is a virtue, but in the Catholic world of Poussin's patron, she also poses a dangerous threat. Both messages are important to the painter, and the tension between them is what gives the allegory its equipoise.

Benjamin believes these dialectics stem from 'the conflict between theological and artistic intentions', which often work at cross-purposes in artworks meant to convey a religious or moral message.<sup>56</sup> The relationship between allegory and Christianity is a topic to which he devotes considerable attention, calling allegory the form of the conflict between the Christian and the pagan, the theological and the artistic: 'The allegorical outlook has its origin in the conflict between the guilt-laden physis, held up as an example by Christianity, and a purer *natura deorum* [nature of the gods] embodied in the pantheon. With the revival of paganism in the Renaissance, and Christianity in the Counter-Reformation, allegory, the form of their conflict, also had to be renewed.'<sup>57</sup> The Christian foundations of allegory are obviously relevant to Poussin's painting in light of the iconography's moralizing overtones and his patron's position in the Catholic church. And the conflict Benjamin describes between 'guilt-laden' material bodies and a 'purer *natura deorum*' is eloquently figured in Poussin's picture, in the form of two dances – one terrestrial, one evanescent, distant, and divine. But in Poussin allegory is not a form for agonized, bombastic conflict; it is a mode that demands subtlety and balance to keep its moralizing in check. Benjamin concludes his study with a discussion of allegory's relationship to sin, evil, and the fall of man, also resonant with the moral message of the 'Dance'.<sup>58</sup> A close examination of this notoriously difficult passage, and a broader study of seventeenth-century allegory's Christian roots, are projects too massive to be undertaken here. My hypothesis, however, is that the tormented theological passages of Benjamin's book throw into even greater relief the tempered, pleasing, and ultimately hopeful tone of Poussin's allegory.

The passages of 'Allegory and Trauerspiel' most useful for understanding 'A Dance to the Music of Time' are those that describe allegory as the mode of temporality. Benjamin believes allegory is the representational mode most suited to figuring the human condition in modernity, because 'an appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity, is one of [its] strongest impulses'.<sup>59</sup> It is also one of Poussin's. An alternately delightful and painful 'Dauer im Wechsel' is the primary theme of the 'Dance': eternal change is figured in the cycle of human states, but the balanced composition

and fixed materiality of painting give the allegory permanence and stability, despite its ambiguous uncertainties. For Benjamin, however, allegory – as the mode of temporality, drawing on conventions of the past and adjusting them to present meanings – is deeply *historical* in its orientation and breadth and therefore *counter*-transcendental. At its heart is the fragmentation and decline of history, and for this reason it 'lacks...all classical proportion, all humanity'.<sup>60</sup> Classical conceptions of mythical wholeness, balance, and beauty can only be nostalgic and false impositions in Benjamin's definition of allegory. For him, allegory after the Renaissance represents a history that is 'sorrowful, unsuccessful', and increasingly burdened with ruin and decay. It shows this in its fragmentation of the symbol – prizing form and content apart – and in its backward-looking, dialectical structure, which references time.<sup>61</sup> Also, by overloading the human figure with iconographical attributes, using *things* (rather than bodies) as its primary source of signification, Benjaminian allegory stages the 'collapse of the physical, beautiful nature',<sup>62</sup> of the body as art's best materialization of meaning, which is tantamount to the collapse of Classicism.<sup>63</sup>

Such a broken, agonized world of signification was as inconceivable to Poussin as it was to artists of the Renaissance, and fails to capture the dynamics of the 'Dance'. Poussin takes many of the standard allegorical attributes of his figures away, displaying the body in its prime, moving gracefully from state to state. There are no ruins in this scene, and the viewer's focus is encouraged to rise upwards, like the evaporating bubbles blown by the putto near Pleasure's feet. By eventually pulling our attention away from the central circle – from Pleasure's hypnotic gaze and the dazzling triad of blue, white, and gold fabrics – an extended viewing of this painting is rewarded with the discovery of the miniature reprise of the dancers in the sky, the soles of the angels' pink feet peeking through the clouds, pointing left in mirrored opposition to the rightward-stretching mortal feet below (Fig. 4). The foot of the angel in pink is also in the same position as the right foot of Labour, seen through Wealth's orange skirt. Slightly out of step with the others, Labour mirrors the pose of this angel from head to toe, giving her position in the circle a hopeful cast. Life's changing fortunes and ambiguities, as well as the constraints of gravity and spatial limits, are the messages conveyed in the painting's lower half, but the unequivocal lightness and hope of Apollo's entourage above rewards the attentive, patient viewer with the distant prospect of resolution, however pale and elusive it may appear.

Ultimately, it is Poussin's transcendent representation of the human body, exemplified by the placement of the nude Apollo in the top-center of the composition, that sets his allegory apart from Benjamin's anti-Classical conception. The 'Dance' first and foremost occupies the body-centric world of Classicism, where the visible, sensible, *human* elements of existence are fore-grounded as primary vehicles of meaning. The unpredictable vagaries of weather and landscape set the atmospheric scene, but bodies construct the



*Figure 4* Nicolas Poussin, *A Dance to the Music of Time*  
(Detail of Apollo and the Hours).

allegory, bearing the physical marks and attributes of life's cyclical change. Hands touch, music is made, bodies are fleshy or muscular, extended and exposed, and interspersed among them are selected allegorical symbols that call forth abstract concepts, but do so primarily through their natural placement on or creation by the body: a garland of roses identifies Pleasure, blown bubbles figure Transience, and the music plucked from Father Time's lyre represents cyclical harmony and Time's orchestration of human life. The painting's unique adaptation of established allegorical imagery is also seventeenth-century in spirit, exhibiting a liberating revision of rigid iconographical types as well as a certain taste for complexity and obscurity.<sup>64</sup> But these alterations only serve to focus the allegory more closely on the body and sensual details, and to create a greater 'organic totality'<sup>65</sup> of harmonious reflections and symmetries between figures. Because they are not overburdened with elaborate iconographical accoutrements, the dancers appear more human, mobile, and earthly, more expressive as bodies, as well as more open to multiple meanings. Poussin's painting is not, then, allegorical in Benjamin's terms, but his Classicism does not exclude tragic tensions. For important to this rendition of the 'will to symbolic totality venerated by humanism in the human figure'<sup>66</sup> is uncertainty and free will in the face of life's array of possibilities, as well as a certain grace in accepting the limits of this array and drawing both pleasure and virtue from them.

The figure of Father Time epitomizes the difference between Poussin's allegorical spirit and that of Benjamin's 'Trauerspiel' (Fig. 5). Although he embodies the ephemerality of life with his bald head, whitened beard, and wrinkled brow, he is also strong and secure in his vigorously muscled, youthful body.<sup>67</sup> As Benjamin writes, quoting Aby Warburg, in the Renaissance even 'heavenly manifestations were conceived in human terms'.<sup>68</sup> All-powerful Time sprouts an impressive set of wings, but is shown seated and nude



Figure 5 Nicolas Poussin, *A Dance to the Music of Time* (Detail of Father Time).

without his blue robes, which lie on the ground at his feet. Solidly connected to the earth, he slumps his shoulders to the pull of gravity, his right foot extended flush with the ground. His relaxed strength appears human, almost vulnerable, and the irresolvable tension between his body and head seems almost a purposeful reminder of allegory's theatrical masquerade. Moreover, it is highly unusual to represent Time playing a lyre. (He is usually portrayed holding a scythe or an hourglass.)<sup>69</sup> Using music as an attribute of transience, Poussin's painting presents a gentler conception of Time, as figured in the pleasures of art and sensory perception.



*Figure 6* Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape of the Roman Countryside with St Matthew and the Angel*, 1639/40, Oil on canvas, 99 x 135 cm.  
 Location: Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany,  
 Inv. 478 A. Photo Credit: Jörg P. Anders. Bildarchiv Preussischer  
 Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, NY.

In Benjamin's terms, the stage setting of Poussin's 'Dance' is also notable for its non-ruinous state. Architecture and statuary are presented in pristine condition, with little if any ornamentation. The wide rectangular column at right, the tapered facets of the Janus term, and two rectangular blocks lying horizontally on the ground, one serving as a seat for Father Time, function as a stable framework for the dance, showing no signs of damage. Poussin's architectural fragments are decidedly *not* ruins, perhaps not even fragments, for they seem whole in their blocky separateness. Carefully placed to close and frame the scene, they symbolize Civilization unproblematicized – without a historical dimension. We know Poussin could paint ruins: 'Landscape with St John on Patmos' and 'Landscape with St. Matthew' are two roughly contemporary examples (both 1640) in which ruins are toppled fragments of former wholes, cracked, severed, or crumbling around the edges, and – in the case of 'Landscape with St Matthew' – embedded in soil and growth (Fig. 6). The smooth surfaces and upright solidity of the stones framing the 'Dance', then, show a distinct effort to paint idealized symbols of human culture, immune to the effects of weather and time.<sup>70</sup> In the preparatory drawing, the horizontal block at left is larger and draped with fabric, with weeds and grass growing at

its base (Fig. 2). It is possible, as Beresford suggests,<sup>71</sup> that Poussin originally conceived it as a sarcophagus (there is a lid), but he removes any suggestion of death or entombment from the final version by remaking the stone as a perfectly solid geometrical shape. Complete and a-temporal in their unblemished classical form, Poussin's architectural pieces defy the 'irresistible decay' of history,<sup>72</sup> providing an enduring and balanced backdrop for the drama of changing human circumstance figured in the dance.

Overall, Benjamin's notions of Baroque allegory serve to illuminate, by contrast, the transcendent Classicism of Poussin's painting. For Benjamin, allegory signifies 'earthly mournfulness' and fragmentation.<sup>73</sup> Declaring itself 'beyond beauty' and auratic 'radiance', its overriding mood is melancholy.<sup>74</sup> Poussin's allegory turns on the figure of earthly Pleasure, and delights in colour and sensual details, setting up reflections and symmetries that together construct an 'organic totality' of corporeal forms. Even the dark patch of soil growing weeds in the right foreground reflects diagonally back to Poverty's olive robe and leafy wreath. Father Time faces his stony reflection in the Janus term, and the same deep blues, oranges, pinks and reds repeat throughout the canvas in colourful measure. Poussin delights in completion and finish, in matching moments that knit together and harmonize the whole, and he pays obsessive attention to bodily minutiae: those pink feet peeking through the clouds, the dirt under Father Time's toenails, the shadow between Wealth's left thumb and forefinger revealing the tentative space between her hand and Labour's. But these efforts at representing wholeness and balance do not rid the picture of its ambivalent tensions. On the contrary, such tensions are the connective tissue that holds the picture in balance in the first place, compelling intense interpretive viewing. The contrast in the painting's foreground between the fertile patch at right and the brittle chasm opening into the frame at left (perhaps the only true Benjaminian aporia in the entire painting) offers the viewer an immediate choice as to how to enter the picture: the chasm is placed before Pleasure and the evaporating bubbles, warning against the pitfalls of indolence and overindulgence; and the fertile patch is placed before Labour and her fruits as figured in Wealth. But it is the area between them, softly illuminated by a golden light, that seems to summon our presence, leading us straight into the centre of life's multifaceted whirl, and eventually, hopefully, up to Apollo's radiant procession above.

Poussin's commentators have consistently glossed over this nuanced ambiguity. Von Ramdohr is exemplary, writing with blind confidence that 'A Dance to the Music of Time' 'satisfies all the requirements of a good allegory ... [and] can be grasped as a whole but, even if it is not, the expression of the interlinked figures is instantly explicable...'.<sup>75</sup> Not only is he missing the paradox and resistance to instant explicability that make the painting so intriguing, but he is also working within a conception of allegory foreign to Poussin and his patron. What can be 'grasped as a whole' is this: human life proceeds within its natural and architectural boundaries in an inevitable circuit

of progression, circumscribed by stone, weather, and time. The symbology of the putti and Father Time convey the moralizing scaffolding of the image: beware of life's brevity and the pitfalls of human nature, which will only lead you in circles, not upwards to the heavens. But the painting's passages of paradoxical meaning open up this framework to a more complex meditation on earthly existence, one that savours its pleasures as much as warns against its stumbling blocks and limitations. As the eye is drawn beyond its initial glance, carefully contrived episodes of ambivalence unsettle this representation of life's inescapable cycle, blending virtue and vice, strength and weakness, in each terrestrial figure.

Panofsky was not *wrong* when he proposed 'cosmic rhythm' as this work's underlying theme; but the interpretive labour the 'Dance' demands makes 'serene resignation' paradoxically difficult. The painting's effect is not one of serenity passively accepted, bestowed instantaneously by pictorial spell. The allegory absorbs the viewer in perplexed contemplation of pleasure and mortality, simultaneously celebrating painting's skillful mediation between the two. (For painting brings pleasure, and unlike dance freezes time, like death.) Labour's noble exertion, rewarded in the figure of Wealth, reflects the viewer's prescribed role as an active student of the picture, as does the overarching theme of time. As Poussin wrote, '[t]hings of perfection must not be looked at in a hurry, but with time, judgment, and intelligence. Judging them requires the same process as making them'.<sup>76</sup>

'A Dance to the Music of Time' stages a paced metamorphosis for the viewer's eye not unlike the life cycle represented: the painting's vibrant colour and warm passages of bare flesh are instantly attractive and sustain their appeal; but the solemnity of the stone columns and storm clouds soon sets in, and the dance appears more weighted, bounded and still. A sense of containment and limits emerges, punctuated by the eventual appearance of the circle carved subtly into the soil on which the dancers step, serving as a diagram for their movement as well as a distant shadow of Apollo's ring. The tension between the painting's sensuous immediacy and its architectural and symbolic confinement locates its balance in the body: the dancers pause beautifully in lock-step, each with one foot placed solidly on the circle, and Father Time, the putti and Apollo – however relaxed, playful or triumphant in pose – are framed by crisp, geometrical forms. Ripa's iconography of bubbles, roses, laurel leaves and hourglass are employed as symbolic reinforcements for these bodies, who actively perform the robust complexity and fullness of life in all its challenges and rewards. The dancers' harmonized stasis may appear serene, but their inner circuit of significance is ever-shifting. Their drapery whipped up into lively, calcified folds, they hover in tension between sensual life and death. Wealth lifts her exquisite foot tentatively towards Time. Pleasure, poised and balanced, holds her firmly by the hand. The dance goes imperturbably on.

## Notes

This essay began as a Masters thesis written in 2002 and 2003 at the University of California, Berkeley. I owe a great debt to T. J. Clark, who supervised the project, for his guidance, encouragement, and incisive criticism, without which my venture into Poussin studies would not have been possible. The text also benefited from helpful critiques and suggestions made by Jeff Alsdorf, Elizabeth Cropper, Elizabeth Honig, Anne Wagner, and the anonymous reader for *The Seventeenth Century*. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

- 1 Otto Grautoff, *Nicolas Poussin, sein Werk und sein Leben* (Munich, Müller, 1914), I, 146.
- 2 The source of the original title, 'The Dance of Human Life' ('Il Ballo della Vita Humana'), is Giovanni Pietro Bellori, *Le Vite de' Pittori, Scultori et Architetti Moderni* (Rome, Per il successo al Mascardi, 1672), pp. 447–8. The title 'A Dance to the Music of Time' was applied by the curators of the Wallace Collection, London (where the painting currently resides), for their 1913 catalogue. See Richard Beresford, *A Dance to the Music of Time by Nicolas Poussin* (London, Wallace Collection, 1995), p. 53, for a more detailed discussion of the evolution of the title.
- 3 An inventory of Rospigliosi's private collection, recorded by his nephew and heir Giovan Battista Rospigliosi in 1713, names eight paintings by Poussin, including 'A Dance to the Music of Time' (no. 512). The inventory is published in Angela Negro, *La Collezione Rospigliosi* (Rome, Nuova Argus, 1999), pp. 311–27.
- 4 See John Ingamells, *The Wallace Collection Catalogue of Pictures III: French Before 1815* (London, Wallace Collection, 1989), p. 310, for a summary of the dating of this picture. The painting has most recently been published with a date of c.1634–36, a couple of years earlier than the previous consensus of c.1638–40. See Stephen Duffy and Jo Hedley, *The Wallace Collection's Pictures: A Complete Catalogue* (London, Unicorn Press, 2004), pp. 334–5. Duffy and Hedley do not offer an explanation for the new date.
- 5 See Howard Rollin Patch, 'Fortune's Wheel', in *The Goddess Fortuna in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1927), pp. 147–77, for a brief history of this allegorical symbol in art and poetry.
- 6 Beresford, *A Dance to the Music of Time*, pp. 28–9.
- 7 According to Bellori, this representation of Apollo in his orb driving a chariot across the sky is after Raphael (*Le Vite*, p. 448). It was probably taken from Marcantonio Raimondi's engraving of Raphael's 'Judgment of Paris', c. 1514–18. See Erwin Panofsky, 'Et in Arcadia Ego: On the Conception of Transience in Poussin and Watteau' in Raymond Klibansky and H. J. Paton (eds), *Philosophy and History: Essays presented to Ernst Cassirer* (New York, Harper & Row, 1936), p. 252.
- 8 Bellori, *Le Vite*, pp. 447–8. Translation taken from Giovanni Pietro Bellori, *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, Trans. Alice Sedgwick Wohl (Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 328. Two other paintings by Poussin fall into this moralizing allegorical genre: 'Truth Unveiled by Time' (original lost) and 'Happiness Subject to Death', or 'The Arcadian Shepherds'. 'Truth Unveiled by Time' and 'The Dance of Human Life' were engraved by Jean Dughet and dedicated to Rospigliosi. They also appear in the 1713 inventory of Rospigliosi's collection (see note three), further confirming

Bellori's account of their patronage. Speculations that Rospigliosi also commissioned 'The Arcadian Shepherds' remain unconfirmed.

- 9 '[Poussin] figurò il Tempo à sedere con la lira, al cui suono quattro donne, la Povertà, la Fatica, la Ricchezza, e'l Lusso scambievolmente si danno le mani in giro, e danzano perpetuamente, variando la sorte de gli huomini.' ('[Poussin] depicted Time seated with his lyre, to the sounds of which four ladies, Poverty, Labour, Riches, and Luxury, exchange hands in a circle and dance perpetually, changing men's destiny.') Bellori, *Le Vite*, pp. 447–8, translated by Wohl in Bellori, *The Lives*, p. 328.
- 10 André Félibien, *Entretiens sur les vies et sur les ouvrages des plus excellens peintres anciens et modernes* (Paris, Chez Sebastien Mabre-Cramoisy, 1688), V, 377–8. Félibien describes the dance as a representation of 'le changement continuel qui arrive dans la vie et dans la fortune des hommes', and the putti as emblems of 'la vanité et la brieveté de la vie'. In general, his biography of Poussin makes references to particular paintings in order to launch broader encomiums of the artist's originality, versatility, use of expressive gesture, knowledge of anatomy, etc. His interpretations rarely extend beyond these general, laudatory terms. For a comprehensive analysis of Félibien's biography, see Claire Pace, *Félibien's Life of Poussin* (London, Zwemmer, 1981).
- 11 'L'on connoît facilement ce que ces femmes représentent...', Félibien, *Entretiens*, p. 377.
- 12 'Ces exemples [the 'Dance', 'Time Saving Truth', and the 'Arcadian Shepherds'] ne suffisent que trop pour faire comprendre avec quelle intelligence, quelle netteté d'esprit & quelle noblesse d'expressions notre illustre peintre sçavoit traiter toutes sortes de matieres, sans embarras, sans obscurité, & sans se servir de ces pensées creusées, & de ces circonstances fades, basses & desagrecables, dont plusieurs qui ont voulu employer les allegories, ont rempli leurs ouvrages, faute de connoissance de doctrine.' *Ibid.*, p. 378.
- 13 '...une Image de la vie humaine, représentée par un bal de quatre femmes qui ont quelque rapport aux quatre saisons, ou aux quatre ages de l'homme.' *Ibid.*, p. 377.
- 14 'Voilà bien la vanité des choses fortuites.' Paul Desjardins, *Les Grands Artistes, Poussin* (Paris, Laurens, 1903), p. 107.
- 15 'Tout est emblématique dans ce bal: les nuances du cœur humain s'y montrent pleines d'expressions pour tracer les vices de l'homme dans l'inégalité des conditions.' Pierre Marie Gault de Saint Germain, *Vie de Nicolas Poussin* (Paris, Renouard, 1806), p. 21.
- 16 Beresford, *A Dance to the Music of Time*, p. 26. Beresford's book is an invaluable resource, particularly with respect to Poussin's iconographical and stylistic sources. See his chapter entitled 'Aftermath', pp. 48–53, for extensive examples of the confusion the painting has generated. My main trouble with Beresford's volume is its great effort to clarify this confusion, rather than recognize it as a key component of the painting's meaning.
- 17 Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia overo Descrittione di Diverse Imagini cavate dall'antichità, & di propria inventione*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. of 1603 (New York, Hildesheim, 1970). See Panofsky, 'Et in Arcadia Ego' (1936), p. 241, on Poussin's borrowings from Ripa, also discussed in Emile Mâle, 'La clef des allégories peintes et sculptées au XVIIe et au XVIIIe siècle', *Revue des deux mondes* (May 1927), 387, and Erna Mandowsky,

- 'Untersuchungen zur Iconologie des Cesare Ripa', Ph.D. Dissertation, Hamburg, 1934.
- 18 'Concetti morali' is another phrase Bellori uses to describe this picture and the two others mentioned in note nine. *Le Vite*, pp. 447–8.
- 19 Ripa, *Iconologia* (1603), 1970, p. 145. Ripa offers a few possible versions for 'Fatica', and Poussin's figure matches 'Fatica estiva' ('summer labour') most closely. Many viewers have tried to interpret the dancers as representations of the Four Seasons, but there is no evidence or cohesive explanation for this.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 434. Ripa gives two descriptions of 'Richezza'. (Many of his personifications are presented in multiple versions.) The second, more positive definition is more fitting to Poussin's personification.
- 21 E. H. Gombrich discusses these competing philosophies of symbolism in *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (London, Phaidon, 1972). In his analysis, Ripa's *Iconologia* exemplifies the Aristotelian philosophy of symbolism, based on the theory of metaphor as determined by conventional associations, while Renaissance attitudes toward ancient hieroglyphs exemplify the Neo-Platonic philosophy of symbolism opposed to the idea of a conventional sign-language, instead focused on uncovering hidden, mystical truths. See also Sheila McTighe, *Nicolas Poussin's Landscape Allegories* (Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1996). Building on Gombrich's analysis, McTighe argues that Poussin's use of allegory in his late mythological landscapes begs comparison to the contemporary study of Egyptian hieroglyphs and the libertine ideas they were believed to conceal. My reading of 'A Dance to the Music of Time' suggests that Poussin's interest in allegory as a uniquely flexible and complex mode of pictorial rhetoric pre-dated the late landscapes by a decade, and I take a very different approach to evaluating its signification.
- 22 There is no 'Lusso' in Ripa's *Iconologia*, which is why most scholars have chosen to follow Félibien and identify this figure as Pleasure. The debate, however, seems unnecessary. Luxury had a different sense in seventeenth-century language, connoting 'lasciviousness' or 'lust' as well as material opulence. (The Oxford English Dictionary uses this reference from 1602: 'Mellida is light, and stained with adulterous luxury.') In Italian, the close relationship between 'lusso' ('luxury') and 'lussuria' ('lust') is slippery, and ideally suited to plays of meaning. Therefore, I doubt there is any essential difference between Bellori's 'Lusso' and Félibien's 'Plaisir', and I think scholars have quibbled needlessly over which Poussin intended.
- 23 Ripa, *Iconologia*, pp. 398–400. Pleasure is one of Ripa's more complex characterizations, with five variations: three slightly different versions of 'Piacere', one 'Piacere Honesto', and one 'Piacere Vano'. All but 'Piacere Honesto' are young men of about sixteen, and seem modelled after Venus's Cupid-like attendants in mythological representations, bearing such attributes as a fistful and/or crown of roses, wings, and a harp. (Ripa describes the crown of roses as a dedication to Venus.) 'Piacere Honesto' is described as female – a Venus dressed in black, adorned with jewels. Poussin's Pleasure is an interesting conflation and revision of these various personifications. The fact that he chose the female gender (unremarked upon in the literature on this painting) suggests that he conceived the temptation of Pleasure as feminine and sexual, an appropriate challenge to his patron's moral code of chastity.
- 24 Ripa, *Iconologia*, p. 409.

- 25 Gender is the first thing Ripa specifies in each entry. The descriptions for each emblem begin with either 'Donna', 'Huomo', or a gendered adjectival phrase, such as 'Una giovane'.
- 26 Richard Neer, 'Poussin and the Ethics of Imitation', *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 50/51 (2006–2007), 297–344; Jonathan Unglaub, 'Poussin's "Esther before Ahasuerus": Beauty, Majesty, Bondage', *The Art Bulletin*, 85:1 (March 2003), 114–36; Sheila McTighe, *Nicolas Poussin's Landscape Allegories*, 1996.
- 27 Panofsky, 'Et in Arcadia Ego' (1936), p. 244. When Panofsky revised the essay in 1955, he abandoned these deeper metaphysical questions and removed the section on the 'Dance' entirely. The second version was published as 'Et in Arcadia Ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition' in *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History* (New York, Doubleday, 1955), pp. 295–320.
- 28 Panofsky, 'Et in Arcadia Ego' (1936), pp. 240–1. Note that Panofsky names the figure in blue 'Luxury' after Bellori, and claims Poussin used Ripa's 'Superbia' as his model. He makes no effort to support this claim, however, and in fact there is very little to connect the figure to Ripa's description of 'Superbia'. Ripa, *Iconologia*, p. 479.
- 29 Panofsky, 'Et in Arcadia Ego' (1936), p. 244.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 242.
- 31 Anthony Blunt is one of the few who (eventually) makes note of Poverty's maleness, as well as his laurel-like head piece, but does so only in his footnotes, treating these details as 'small point[s]' not to be considered in an interpretation of the picture. See Blunt, 'Poussin's "Dance to the Music of Time" Revealed', *Burlington Magazine* 188:855 (Dec. 1976), 844–8. Note that Blunt did not mention these details in his 1966 catalogue. Besides Blunt, only the following writers have acknowledged Poverty as male, and none of them investigate or speculate on the matter: John Ingamells, *The Wallace Collection*, 1989; Alain Mérot, *Nicolas Poussin* (New York, Abbeville Press, 1990); Alfred Corn, 'Nicolas Poussin: Living for the Moment', *ARTnews*, 90:9 (Nov. 1991), 844–8; Pierre Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin*, 1994; and Beresford, *A Dance to the Music of Time*. All other accounts describe all four dancers as women, or avoid the matter by simply calling them 'figures.' The majority mistake him for female.
- 32 In ancient Roman religion Janus, a male god, became associated with the goddess Juno, and the two were joined in numismatic representations. They were not worshiped as a married couple, but rather as a masculine-feminine duality. This evolution expanded and complicated the representational possibilities for Janus – originally represented as a two-headed male god who could see into both the past and the future, often with one youthful head and one aged one – by adding the juxtaposition of genders to the repertoire. See Erika Simon, 'Janus', *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (Zürich, Verlag, 1990), I, 618–23.
- 33 For further information on Rospigliosi's life and public reputation see Gaetano Beani, *Clemente IX. Giulio Rospigliosi Pistoiese* (Prato, Giachetti, 1893); Giovanni Canevazzi, *Papa Clemente IX (Poeta)* (Modena, Forghieri e Pellequi, 1900); Ludwig von Pastor, 'Clement IX (1667–1669)', in *The History of the Popes* (London, Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1940), pp. 314–37; Francis Haskell, *Patrons and Painters: A Study in the Relations Between Italian Art and Society in the Age of the Baroque* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1980), pp.

- 56–8; Angela Negro, *La Collezione Rospigliosi*, 1999; and Danilo Romei, *I Teatri del Paradiso: la Personalità, l'Opera, il Mecenate di Giulio Rospigliosi (Papa Clemente IX)* (Siena, Protagon Editori Toscani, 2000).
- 34 *Sant'Alessio* is generally dated to 1631, but the premiere scheduled for 8 March of that year was moved out of the Barberini Theatre at the last minute due to a plague scare and there is no record confirming that the performance ever took place. Documentation of the 1632 and 1634 productions has survived in the form of witness testimony and engravings. See Nicola Michelassi, 'Il *Sant'Alessio* e il teatro dei Barberini (1631–1643)' in Romei, *I Teatri del Paradiso*, p. 69. For more on the operas of the Barberini theatre, see Margaret Murata, 'Operas for the Papal Court, With Texts by Giulio Rospigliosi', Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1975; and Volker Kapp, 'Das Barberini Theater und die Bedeutung der Römischen Kultur unter Urban VIII', *Literaturwissenschaftliches Jahrbuch*, 26 (1986), 76–100.
- 35 Romei, *I Teatri del Paradiso*, pp. 16–18.
- 36 Marc Fumaroli, *Nicolas Poussin, Sainte Françoise Romaine* (Paris, Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2001), pp. 67–80.
- 37 The moral of the opera was printed as follows: 'Argomento & Allegoria: Egisto, nato di chiara stirpe, si dispone di volgersi alla Virtù.' (Subject and Allegory: Egisto, of honest birth, prepares to turn to Virtue.) *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 38 Beresford expresses this opinion in *A Dance to the Music of Time*, pp. 28–9: 'There is scarcely any evidence that Poussin himself was interested in moralizing allegory, yet Rospigliosi's musical moralities and operas were full of it.' See note eight regarding Poussin's two other moralizing allegories.
- 39 'Le arti e gli inganni con i quali il piacere e la colpa cercano ogni ora di sbattere l'innocenza e l'intendimento. Il rimorso della vita nel secondarli, la costanza nel rigettarli, e la fragilità nel compiacerli.' Conte Galeazzo Gualdo Priorato, *Historia della Sacra Real Maestà di Christina Alessandra Regina di Svetia, &c.* (Rome, Stamperia della Reu. Camera Apost., 1656), p. 286.
- 40 Beresford offers a very brief but useful summary of *La Vita Humana's* libretto. His translations of 'Colpa' as 'Guilt' and 'Intendimento' as 'Understanding' are somewhat misleading ('Colpa' more likely means 'fault' or 'error', and 'Intendimento' makes more sense in the moral drama as 'intention' or 'plan', as in a thwarted moral plan), but the overall thematics of the opera are still well summarized by his description: 'The main action opened with a dialogue between Pleasure and Understanding, interrupted by the entrance of Human Life accompanied by Innocence and Guilt. Guilt forms a duet with Pleasure to tempt Human Life into wantonness, indolence, gluttony, avarice, pride, anger, and envy, while Understanding and Innocence counter with temperance, exercise and study, abstinence, liberality, humility, patience and disdain of worldly things.' Beresford, *A Dance to the Music of Time*, p. 29.
- 41 According to Bellori, Poussin spent some very poor years as a young artist, living hand-to-mouth off minor commissions. Bellori also relates an anecdote about Cardinal Massimi's visit to Poussin's home in Rome, after the artist had become quite wealthy: Massimi expresses pity for Poussin because he has no servant to show him out, to which Poussin replies, 'And I pity your lordship more for having many of them'. Bellori, *Le Vite*, p. 441, translated by Alice Wohl in Bellori, *The Lives*, p. 325.

- 42 See Mario Praz, 'The Pleasing and the Useful', in *Studies in Seventeenth Century Imagery*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Rome, Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1964), pp. 169–203.
- 43 Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1964), p. 221.
- 44 *Ibid.*, pp. 234–5.
- 45 Saint Augustine, *Against Lying*, X: 24, cited in Tzvetan Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, Trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 77.
- 46 Ripa's *Iconologia* was published in six editions between 1602 and 1620 alone, with translations issued all over Europe. See Erna Mandowsky, 'Introduction', in Ripa, *Iconologia*, pp. 1–2.
- 47 Several writers have mistaken Poussin's dancers for personifications of the seasons, including Joseph Jérôme Le Français de Lalande, *Voyage d'un François en Italie, fait dans les années 1765 & 1766* (Venice, Desaint, 1769), III, 451–2, and Friedrich Wilhelm Basilius von Ramdohr, *Ueber Mahlerei und Bildhauerarbeit in Rom für Liebhaber des Schönen in der Kunst* (Leipzig, Weidmanns Erben und Reich, 1787), III, 62–3.
- 48 All translations and citations refer to the most recent English edition: Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (New York, Verso, 1998). On the Baroque departure from Classical humanism, see in particular 'The Symbol and Allegory in Classicism', in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, pp. 159–63, and an extension of this discussion on p. 176. Benjamin's idea of 'modernity' is hard to pin down. He seems to locate its first full flowering in the Baroque moment of the Trauerspiel, his chosen subject, but also uses the term to refer to earlier moments in the Renaissance, for example, in that period's revival of esoteric, mystic branches of knowledge such as astrology. (I am grateful to T. J. Clark for sharing with me his incisive thoughts on Benjamin's study, from which this point is taken.)
- 49 Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 166.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 176.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 187.
- 52 *Ibid.*, p. 207 (and passim): 'Even if the language of [baroque] dramas had been exclusively a matter for scholars, the uneducated would still have derived enjoyment from the element of spectacle. But the bombast corresponded to the expressive impulses of the age, and these impulses are usually immeasurably stronger than the intellectual interest in the transparent details of plot. The Jesuits, who had a masterly understanding of the public, could scarcely have had, at their performances, an audience consisting entirely of people who understood Latin. They probably felt convinced of the ancient truth that the authority of a statement depends so little on its comprehensibility that it can actually be increased by obscurity.'
- 53 *Ibid.*, pp. 174–7.
- 54 Benjamin quotes Karl Giehlow's *Die Hieroglyphenkunde des Humanismus in der Allegorie der Renaissance* (Vienna, F. Tempsky, 1915), p. 127: "The many obscurities in the connection between meaning and sign ... did not deter, they rather encouraged the exploitation of ever remoter characteristics of the representative objects as symbols, so as to surpass even the Egyptians with new subtleties. In addition to this there was the dogmatic power of the meanings handed down from the ancients, so that one and the same object can just as easily signify a virtue as a vice, and therefore more or less anything." *Ibid.*, p. 174.

- 55 '...il n'y a lieu au monde où la vertu soit si proche du vice, ni où le bien soit plus mêlé avec le mal. On voit des miracles d'un côté, et de l'autre des monstres, et au même temps que les uns se donnent la discipline, les autres se baissent ou font quelque chose de plus sale.' Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac, *Les Premières lettres de Guez de Balzac*, H. Bibas and K. T. Butler (eds), 2 vols (Paris, STFM, 1933-4), I, 193-4. Cited in Fumaroli, *Nicolas Poussin, Sainte Françoise Romain*, p. 77.
- 56 Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 177.
- 57 *Ibid.*, p. 226. See also Edwin Honig, *Dark Conceit: The Making of Allegory* (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1959), pp. 62, 151, and *passim*, on the Biblical origins of allegory, and Angus Fletcher, *Allegory*, p. 20, on allegory's close relationship to religious ritual and symbolism.
- 58 Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, pp. 233-4.
- 59 *Ibid.*, p. 223. Benjamin also discusses the baroque interest in 'eternal transience': '...[N]ature remained the great teacher for the writers of this period. However, nature was not seen by them in bud and bloom, but in the over-ripeness and decay of her creations. In nature they saw eternal transience, and here alone did the saturnine vision of this generation recognize history.' *Ibid.*, p. 179.
- 60 *Ibid.*, p. 166.
- 61 Benjamin discusses the fragmentation of the symbol in terms of baroque language as 'the disjunctive, atomizing principle of the allegorical approach', recognizable in the proliferation of the capital letter in German orthography in the seventeenth century, which gave individual words allegorical import. *Ibid.*, p. 208. See Paul de Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp. 206-8, for a further discussion of allegory as an inherently temporal (and therefore historical) rhetorical structure, offering the reader (or viewer) 'a conception of the self seen in its authentically temporal predicament'.
- 62 Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 176.
- 63 '...[T]he primacy of the thing over the personal, the fragment over the total, represents a confrontation between the allegory and the symbol, to which it is the polar opposite and, for that very reason, its equal in power. Allegorical personification has always concealed the fact that its function is not the personification of things, but rather to give the concrete a more imposing form by getting it up as a person ... There is not the faintest glimmer of any spiritualization of the physical. The whole of nature is personalized, not so as to be made more inward, but, on the contrary - so as to be deprived of soul.' *Ibid.*, p. 187.
- 64 Poussin's alterations of Ripa's standard allegorical figures also demonstrate the general slackening of allegory as an authoritative system of meaning in the seventeenth century. According to Edwin Honig, '[s]ome explanation for the elusive pattern and the increasing ambiguity in modern allegories may be found in the destruction of the rigid base of cultural authority upon which allegory traditionally depended, and in the relatively greater stress put upon the autonomy of the artist since the Reformation'. Honig, *Dark Conceit*, p. 87.
- 65 This phrase is from Benjamin's description of the Classical symbol in contrast to Baroque allegory: 'It is not possible to conceive of a starker opposite to the artistic symbol, the plastic symbol, the image of organic totality, than this amorphous fragment which is seen in the form of allegorical script.' *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 176.

- 66 *Ibid.*, p. 186.
- 67 Renaissance representations of Father Time sometimes made him over into a vigorous classical nude, though always with an aged head. See Panofsky, 'Father Time', in *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 81. It is possible Poussin was working from such a model.
- 68 Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 221.
- 69 See Beresford, *A Dance to the Music of Time*, pp. 26, 30, for possible sources that may have inspired Poussin's representation of Father Time. Beresford notes Time's resemblance to antique images of Orpheus playing the lyre, and proposes Marin Mersenne's treatise on Universal Harmony (*Harmonie Universelle*, 1636) as a possible source. Mersenne's frontispiece reproduces a classical relief of Orpheus in the Mattei collection in Rome, which Poussin likely knew.
- 70 See Louis Marin, 'Fragments of a Walk Through Poussin's Ruins', in *Sublime Poussin*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 143–51, for a further discussion of the a-temporal 'purity' of Poussin's ruins. For Marin, Poussin's 'ruin-objects' are metaphors for the painting's 'construction' and 'the architectonics of representation'. Describing them as 'ruins without destruction, unmarked by time, unstamped by history, ideal architecture, a pure essence that ignores life and death', he emphasizes the distinction I am drawing between the idealized architectural setting of 'A Dance to the Music of Time' and Benjamin's conception of the ruin in Baroque theatre and imagery as decadent and infused with history. I am surprised Marin does not use 'A Dance to the Music of Time' to illustrate these theories, since I find his argument more convincing in relation to this picture than the pictures he cites ('Landscape with St John', 'Landscape with St Matthew', 'The Plague at Ashdod', and others).
- 71 Beresford, *A Dance to the Music of Time*, p. 33.
- 72 Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 177.
- 73 *Ibid.*, p. 227.
- 74 'Allegory declares itself to be beyond beauty.' *Ibid.*, p. 178. 'Hardly has there been a literature whose illusionistic virtuosity has more radically eliminated from its works that radiance which has a transcendent effect ... It is possible to describe the absence of this radiance as one of the most specific characteristics of baroque lyric' (p. 180). '...[M]ourning ... is at once the mother of the allegories and their content' (p. 230).
- 75 Von Ramdohr, *Über Mahlerei und Bildhauerarbeit in Rom*, p. 62.
- 76 'Les choses lesquelles il y a de la perfection ne se doivent pas voir à la hâte, mais avec temps, jugement et intelligence. Il faut user des mêmes moyens à les bien juger comme à les bien faire.' Poussin to Paul Fréart de Chantelou, 20 March 1642, reproduced in *Nicolas Poussin: Lettres et propos sur l'art*, ed. Anthony Blunt (Paris, Hermann, 1994), p. 63.

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