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Apollo, David, St Cecilia: Music and Painting in Some Works by Poussin in the Prado*

This evening I want to concentrate on one of Poussin's most beautiful, complex, and understudied paintings, the *Apollo and the Muses on Parnassus* of around 1631-32. I will also be talking about two of Poussin's other paintings in the Prado, the *Triumph of David* of ca. 1627-28, and the *St Cecilia* of a year or two later, say around 1629-30. Both of these works have been almost as unjustly neglected as the *Parnassus*, while the *St Cecilia* has even been doubted as an authentic Poussin by that eminent Poussin scholar, Jacques Thuillier. Not everyone will agree with the dates I have just proposed, but in my opinion, there is now a considerable amount of stylistic and iconographic evidence to support them. Not only have these three paintings never received a fraction of the attention they deserve, they also, by a striking coincidence, bear a strong iconographic relation to each other.

Before continuing, let me add that these are only three of the extraordinarily interesting group of paintings by the French master that grace this museum. Depending upon which authorities you choose to follow, there are between six and ten of them, including the important early *Bacchus and Ariadne*, the *Hunt of Meleager and Atlanta* of around 1637, and the late and once unjustly rejected *Noli me tangere* of 1657 painted for Poussin's most enthusiastic French patron, Jean Pointel. I cannot resist also mentioning the very splendid work of around 1650 once called simply a *Landscape with Three Men* but now correctly identified as a *Landscape with*

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Diogenes leaving Sparta for Athens following a story by Diogenes Laertius in his *Lives and Deeds of the Ancient Philosophers*. As Charles Dempsey has clearly set out, it shows an altogether Poussinian subject, a little paradoxical perhaps, but strangely fitting. In his sixth book, Diogenes Laertius tells that when Diogenes the Cynic was asked by a stranger why he was departing Sparta for Athens, he replied that he preferred even the effeminacy of Athens to the so-called manhood of Sparta. You see him there in his simple *duplex pannum*, leaving the warlike city in disgust.

But back to what is, in my opinion, the greatest of the paintings by Poussin in the Prado, perhaps one of his greatest works of all. It is not a painting that appeals easily to contemporary taste. To many modern viewers it will seem too coldly classical, rather too full of static figures – to say nothing of the firm backdrop of trees that provides a clear scaffolding for the composition as a whole. With its all too isocephalic array of figures and with its gestures (like the upraised arms) so perfectly balanced, it seems too contrived to us, too much like the boring school photographs of our schooldays. Of course, the naked nymph in the foreground may not really remind us of such photographs, but even if we imagine her with her clothes on, she seems rather studied, mechanical and formulaic. Still, as soon as one begins to spend time with the picture, and to study it carefully, the painting begins to reveal itself for the aesthetic and compositional masterpiece it is. "Things of perfection must not be looked at in a hurry," wrote Poussin himself in 1642, "but with time, judgment and understanding. Judging them requires the same process as making them." It is worth remembering Poussin's remark whenever we discuss difficult paintings like this.

In vain does one search for an adequate treatment of this mysterious work. Not only has

its complex iconography never been studied in any detail, its esthetic quality alone has been greatly underestimated. Anthony Blunt seems to have had considerable difficulty, not only with this work, but also with a number of the other paintings in the Prado. He excluded the *Noli me tangere* from the artist's corpus altogether, for example, and he stumbled over the dating of several of the others—including the *Parnassus*. "I find it hard to believe that a work so clumsy in drawing and composition can be so late as 1630," he wrote. But aside from the fact that the *Parnassus* does, indeed, show a number of striking similarities with a group of pictures from around 1630-32, it is almost impossible to understand how anyone with a keen eye could say of this work that it is "clumsy in drawing," let alone in composition. One might not *like* the painting, for the kinds of reasons I have just outlined, but the drawing of the figures (and, indeed, of the trees, which Blunt did not like either) is of exceptional clarity and refinement—and the one thing the composition is not is clumsy. Anyone who takes the trouble to look reasonably hard at the picture will swiftly realize that it is planned with extraordinary precision and rigor.

In support of his arguments, Blunt drew a parallel between the drawing in this work and in the rather awkward early painting of a *Children's Bacchanal* in Rome and the Washington *Assumption*, which, in my opinion, is not by Poussin at all. The difference in quality between the *Parnassus* and these two minor works is clear. Fortunately, Blunt was closer to the mark when he noted the parallel between the type of the Apollo here and that in the famous *Inspiration of the Epic Poet* in the Louvre, as well as in the figure of Crocus in the Dresden *Flora.* But whatever the merits—and they are indeed high—of the Louvre painting, the compositional and draughtsmanly precision of the *Parnassus* surely reveals a more developed hand at work. It is only with his reference to the *Flora,* a work securely dated to 1631, that Blunt made a much more appropriate chronological conjunction.

But let us leave these forced and rather artificial parallels—perhaps too redolent of academic connoisseurship—and look at the picture with less prejudiced eyes. Especially now that the painting has been cleaned, who could deny the extraordinary beauty of its colors, the *changeants*, the whites, the blues, the reds, the evocation of a golden sunset on Parnassus, and the gleaming body of the nymph of the Castalian spring? The overall tonality, with its predominant pale blues and shades of silvery white, has a kind of shimmering smoothness about it, only slightly modified by the deep green, reds, and darker blues of the figures on the right—a fact that has led one critic to suggest, erroneously, I think, that the work may have been painted in two stages.

As often with great pictures, and even more often with great pictures by Poussin, this is a work that requires time. One ought not be put off by the multitude of figures. One has to study their harmonious grouping, and attend, not just to the isocephaly of the Muses' heads, but also to the ways in which these same heads, the attitudes, the torsion of the bodies, the intertwining gestures are all related to each other with subtle symmetries. From the upraised forearms of the two muses in the background, to the two putti so carefully balancing each other in the foreground—probably derived from two putti carved by his friend Duquesnoy—the work is suffused with harmonious and subtle balance. The poets in the foreground extend their arms in similarly counterpoised ways, the figure on the right gesturing with an arm that is clearly illuminated, the other on the left with his similarly gesturing arm in shadow. Even the half-nude body of the young Apollo is clearly conceived as a subtle balance to the still whiter form of the Castalian nymph, the former based on the seated Antinous type, the latter on the famous figure of the reclining river god of the Tiber.

This, surely, is one of Poussin's most classical works. It is deliberately so, not just in the subject matter, or in the derivations from ancient statues, but above all in the composition; in the firm scaffolding of trees, the flattened hemicycle of muses surrounding Apollo, the closure of this hemicycle by the reclining figure below it, and the balanced groups of standing figures on either side. It marks a clear turning point in his art; in fact, it represents *the* moment in his development when he turns from the Venetian modes of the late twenties to the work of the great master of high classicism in the Renaissance, Raphael himself. Poussin's pictures will not have the icy classicism of his contemporary in Rome, Domenichino, but something much more elegant, at least at this stage. For in this painting of *Parnassus*, as is abundantly clear, Poussin pays homage to Raphael's famous fresco of this subject in the Stanze della Segnatura in the Vatican. The grouping of the tall trees that structure the composition and that resemble the bars on a musical score, the group of muses around Apollo, and the combination of these muses with poets—all this is transferred, broadly speaking, to Poussin's marvelous variation of that prototypical theme.

Early in his career, Poussin drew a copy of the central group of figures, one of his rare direct copies of an old master, but in fact the painting is even closer to Marcantonio's print after Raphael than to Raphael's original composition. Critics have often noted that the flying putti come from Marcantonio, not from Raphael; but while the similarities are plain enough, there are also a large number of more or less significant differences, as is only to be expected. These differences include the presence of the nymph of Castalian spring, source of poetic inspiration (of course Raphael's composition had a door in it, so Poussin could hardly have left the lower center of the painting bare); the addition of the two cup-bearing putti in the foreground (one in shade, one in light, one twisting in such a way as to show the front of his chest, the other turning

in the exactly opposite way to hide it, revealing only his delightful paunch); and, last but not least, the presence of nine figures of poets, most or all of whom are not ancient, but modern and are presumably portraits of Poussin's contemporaries. We will return to them soon.

But first I want to turn to a drawing, formerly in the Wildenstein collection and now at the Getty, that represents a critical stage in the development of Poussin's composition. Both Blunt and Rosenberg dated it to around 1627, which seems right to me, and drew a parallel between the relative schematism of the figures here and the well-known and still rather crude drawings he made as a young man on subjects from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* for his friend and early patron, the poet Marino. Blunt rightly noted of this drawing that the trees are rather like the Marino series in their "tufty foliage attached in a curious and unnaturalistic manner to the trunks."

But the drawing and the painting can on no account, as Blunt suggested, come from the same period. For Rosenberg, the painting lost some of the freshness of the drawing after Raphael, in the heightened rigidity of the composition; but this, I think, is also to misunderstand what makes the painting so important a work. Still, Rosenberg concluded rightly that the many differences between the drawing and the painting—the very epicene Apollo of the painting that supplants the still-Raphaelesque figure of a viol-playing god, for example, and the introduction of the nymph below—allow one to date it a few years later; so does the fact that the painting has none of the occasional elements of crudeness that one finds in the drawing. Certainly, the drawing remains much closer to the Raphael, especially in the figure of Apollo and the muses sitting at his feet.

The identification of each of the muses has never been clear, and may never have been

intended to be (the same, of course, could also be said for Raphael's *Parnassus*). In the left foreground Melpomene, the Muse of tragic poetry, appropriately carries her mask and sword, and leads in a tragic poet. Urania, muse of astronomy, with her globe, Clio, muse of history, with her book and trumpet, and perhaps Polymnia, muse of sacred music and pantomime sit at Apollo's feet. Above Polymnia comes Thalia, with her comic mask, and to the right, probably Terpsichore, muse of dance and music, Erato, muse of love poetry, and Euterpe, muse of lyric poetry, each appropriately carrying a stringed instrument. Standing in the center is Calliope, muse of Epic poetry, crowning two poets. In addition to these two figures, and the poet being ushered in on the side, I count five other figures, at least one of whom—but possibly two—has a laurel crown on his head.

In the painting, almost all of these figures have been reshuffled. Instead of the Hippocrene spring in the drawing, the Castalian nymph occupies a prominent position. Holding aloft her comic mask and carrying what is either a flute or perhaps a shepherd's *houlette* is Thalia, on the left, then Urania, with a star-crowned globe very discreetly placed on her head (not, as Richard Verdi claimed, the next muse with a starry trumpet) then Clio wreathed, with her trumpet of fame, then Melpomene with her mask and much smaller sword—here it looks more like a dagger—than in the drawing. Slightly behind her comes the muse I suggest is Terpsichore, discreetly initiating a dance, as in so many paintings by Poussin of the next years, then, very possibly, as Panofsky suggested, Erato holding aloft what may be a flute but seems like a torch, and Polymnia, followed by a figure who is probably Euterpe, muse of lyric poetry and flute playing (as we see from the panpipes she holds), and, finally Calliope, who crowns the kneeling poet and holds aloft yet another laurel wreath. Right in front, of course, is the lovely nymph of the Castalian spring (it can't be the Hippocrene, since that was on Mount Helicon in Thebes, and

Parnassus was in Delphi). From it the two putti draw the watery inspiration they offer to the poets on the left and right. But who are these poets? This leads us to the heart of the iconographic puzzle.

It was Erwin Panofsky, needless to say, who laid the foundations for the study of the iconography of the picture. Unfortunately, these foundations have hardly been built upon at all. There has been little disputing his identification of Apollo and the Nine Muses, which I've just revised. He was the first to put the work in the company of two other paintings from Poussin's early period, namely the *Crowning of the Lyric Poet* in Hanover and the *Crowning of the Epic poet* in the Louvre, just as did Marc Fumaroli much later on. The starting point for Panofsky's discussion was, in fact, a very damaged and overpainted picture in Stockholm in which Apollo is very clearly conflated with Bacchus. According to Panofsky, this conflation left its traces in the Hanover painting as well as in the very epicene, soft-bodied and luxurious Apollo of the Prado *Parnassus*, very different from his more commanding and inspired counterpart both in Raphael's fresco and in the *Crowning* in the Louvre. But there has been little real consensus—or rather, little real discussion—of Panofsky's suggestion that the central figure of the Madrid *Parnassus* is none other than the great Baroque poet and friend (and early patron) of Poussin, Giambattista Marino, and that the three figures on the left are Tasso's famous poetic predecessor, Torquato Tasso, Virgil and Homer. While the latter two at least look like their counterparts in Raphael's *Parnassus* (and in any number of other works), the relationship between the young wreathed poet on the left and any known portrait of Tasso is not entirely convincing. It is certainly not impossible either—but then, neither is the possibility, as proposed very briefly by Zolotow in 1994, that Tasso is in fact the central poetic figure in the painting, dressed in gold and blue and

kneeling before Apollo to receive his two crowns of bay and myrtle. Certainly, there is no similarity between this benign, pink-cheeked figure and the slightly pinched and scowling expression that characterizes the much more thinly bearded figure in all the known portraits of Marino.

It must be said, however, that one cannot accuse Panofsky or Zolotow of plucking these names out of thin air. Poussin greatly admired the works of Tasso, especially, of course, the *Gerusalemme Liberata*, which provided the painter with a number of subjects that he often depicted. Until he died in 1624, Marino was one of Poussin's closest friends and supporters, and he was perhaps the leading figure in Italian poetry since the death of Tasso. That the two of them should be central figures in a painting of ca. 1630 of Parnassus is not entirely surprising, since they were arguably the two most recent leading figures in Italian poetry, and Poussin was intensely engaged with each of them. But who are all the others? And what could be their relationship with, say, Marino and Tasso? It may be true that on such a Parnassus, one should not be seeking exact physiognomic similarity—but still: at least some of these figures seem to be real portraits. All wear laurel wreaths, unlike in the drawing, where only two of the figures actually do. But are they really portraits? Or are they simply invented types, not reflecting real people at all? Aside from the fact that the Marino and Tasso identifications are not settled at all, there is a real problem with the group of portraits on the right of the painting. At least two and maybe even a third look almost identical. While I am convinced that all of these faces were indeed intended to be portraits, Poussin was never really good at physiognomic verisimilitude, and certainly never on a small scale. It is true that his two self-portraits in Berlin and the Louvre are extraordinary works of art; but for the rest we have no portraits from him whatsoever, on any scale. Portraiture was simply never his métier.

But let us persist nevertheless. If we could discover the name of the patron of this work, we might come closer to a secure identification, but we cannot be sure of this either. What we do know is that Poussin not only admired but also associated closely with a number of the leading poets of his age, from Marino on down. At least three problems should be noted here. Even in Raphael's *Parnassus* the poets have not been identified with any certainty and may never have been intended to be definitively identifiable. While they have almost always been recognized as largely classical poets, with the addition of a few moderns such as Petrarch, Sannazaro, and Raphael's near contemporary, Tebaldeo, identification has proven very elusive indeed. Secondly, while the young belaurelled figure leading the way with the book—or is it a tablet?—and pointing ahead discreetly on the left side of Poussin's painting has generally been identified as Virgil, and the bearded figure looking on in the background on the left as Homer, not even this is certain. The drawing is unhelpful here too, since the Homer there, misidentified by Friedlander, could not be clearer, and has no equivalent in the painting.

But the possible Homer in the painting raises the third problem in all of this. While Italian poets of Poussin's time—and even for some time before—often had mustaches, and frequently little goatees as well, I have come across no contemporary portrait of a poet of any significance who wears a full beard such as the one worn by this Homer and the poet in the background on the right. If anything, these are beards worn by senior clerics, not by literary figures. And several of the other figures here are unusually full-bearded too. But let us see how we do if we try to identify some of the portraits here. I must emphasize the hypothetical nature of my proposals.

Only in the second edition of his rich 1989 essay on the Louvre *Inspiration of the Epic*

Poet (a work clearly related, at least iconographically speaking, to the *Parnassus*), did Marc Fumaroli suggest that the Louvre picture might be a kind of homage to the poet whom he unjustly called the Chatterton of Urban's Rome, the young Marcello Giovanetti. Fumaroli thought that he might be the poet on the left of the picture. This is not entirely impossible, but Simon Vouet's portrait of Giovanetti as engraved by Mellan for the 1626 edition of the twenty-eight-year-old poet's works does, it seems to me, bear a slightly stronger resemblance to the figure in the foreground on the right of the painting. Such identifications are often hazardous, and even more often the product of wishful thinking, but I think there is enough ancillary evidence to make the proposal a tempting one at the very least.

To begin with, there is the inscription on the engraving itself, which almost reads as a direct challenge to the painter of this: "You painted his hair without laurel leaves?" it begins in mock indignation, "You might as well have painted the sun without light or the day without sun." It seems that by placing a wreath on the head of this critical figure in the painting, Poussin has responded to exactly the challenge posed by the inscription on the engraving. It is similar in this respect to Rembrandt's magnificent response to Vondel's challenge to improve on his engraving of the preacher Anslo. But why should the young Giovanetti occupy what is clearly such an important position in the picture? He almost seems to present the company, at least the company behind him and to right, to the nymph of the Castalian spring. Let us look a little more at what we know about him.

Forgotten now, Giovanetti—as, ironically enough, his name suggests—died young, but briefly flared across the poetic firmament of Barberini Rome. He was born in 1598 and died in 1631. Everyone paid homage to him at the time, and he belonged to all of the main literary academies, including the Virtuosi founded by Ludovico Ludovisi under Urban VIII's

predecessor, Gregory XIII, the Umoristi, and also the Desiosi, "les academies litteraires les plus elegantes de la Rome pontificale." Giovanetti's first collection appeared in Bologna in 1620 when he was just twenty-two; the second appeared in Venice in 1622. The third collection, dedicated to Urban's close friend and counsellor Lorenzo Magalotti, with its frontispiece altogether appropriately showing Apollo holding an ancient lyre, appeared in 1626. In it, Giovanetti pays tribute not only to the poet-pontiff himself (for Urban had written a now famous collection of poems first published in Rome in 1631 and then by Plantin three years later), but also to his recently deceased contemporary, the poet he admired most, none other than Marino himself.

"Who can restore me," Giovanetti wrote, "to the Muses, and offer to my lips the fugitive waters of the Hippocrene spring?" Even these opening lines of one of his eulogistic sonnets suggest a parallel with the *Parnassus*. "It is you, Marino," he continues. This gives one pause. Should not Marino be in this painting too? Probably; and yet he cannot be the central figure, for reasons I have already suggested. But he must be there, somewhere in this group. After all, in a poem added to this collection, he replied with an explanation as to why Giovanetti merited his place on Parnassus: "Amongst all those who ever drank the sacred waters of Hippocrene up there on Parnassus thirsty for glory, and with sure foot [note Giovanetti's feet here] avoiding all error, set forth to tread upon the revered sand of its banks, you came amongst the very first, wherefore on you the greater prize of the soul, the green laurels of poetry, was bestowed."

And so on. It fits all too well with the figure of Giovanetti in this painting. So, too, does the elegiac poem on the Villa d'Este from this same 1626 collection, in which the poet records his passage from his sweet sojourn on Parnassus, by the Castalian spring, to the Tiber and its

cloudy skies, there to pursue his worldly career full of stress and cares. "If from my sweet Castalian sojourn/ Ambitious cares drew me back to the Tiber," he wrote. Could it be that the drawing was prepared sometime around 1626, and that it was, indeed, in 1631, when Giovanetti died at the age of 33, that this *Parnassus* was painted, perhaps in homage to the loss of someone who drew so deeply from the its source?[1] The only real difficulty I can see is that the poet whom I am suggesting as Giovanetti in the Prado painting carries a volume that is clearly much heavier than any he ever produced.

Even if it is wrong, this identification does introduce us quite precisely into the poetic world of Poussin's time. Let us explore it slightly further, concentrating, perhaps, on some of the leading young figures of the 1620s, rather than of an earlier generation, like the poets Tasso and even Marino. Amongst Giovanetti's friends was one of the leading young intellectuals and poets in the circle of Pope Urban VIII, Virginio Cesarini, the prodigious and prestigious addressee of Galileo's famous *Saggiatore*, the friend not only of the famous scientist but also of the elegant Guido Bentivoglio of Florence, and of Maffeo Barberini himself. More than once he was included amongst the poets worthy of inclusion on Parnassus (he was also known as a second Pico della Mirandola) and I see him as the young belaurelled figure being led to the Castalian spring by his near homonym, Virgil himself. Some may feel that my identifications of Giovanetti and Cesarini are interchangeable; but this possibility just serves to underline the undoubted hazards of making comparisons between prints, often schematic and secondhand, and the lack of more precise identifying traits in Poussin's poets. Fumaroli, it should be said, also saw Cesarini as a possible dedicatee of the Hanover picture of the *Coronation of the Lyric Poet*, though once more I think this hypothesis is a little remote. There is, however, a further possibility that helps to reinforce my own claim here. I would like to make a suggestion for

identification that is even more tendentious than anything I have proposed so far.

I have already suggested that the notion that the figure receiving the cup from Apollo's own hands—the one who is about to receive not one but two crowns of laurel—cannot be Marino. Nor do I think he can be Tasso, as Zolotow proposed on the basis of a chapter suggestively entitled "Il Parnaso" in Trajano Boccalini's very popular *Ragguaglio di Parnaso*, which first appeared in 1613 and was much reprinted throughout the century. Boccalini's collection of prose pieces is a highly amusing politico-satirical work, far removed in tone from the gravity of Poussin's painting; the chapter in which he puts Tasso in the company of Apollo on Parnassus is irrelevant to its theme, and provides no clue to such an identification.

For a long time I puzzled over the central figure, and worried about the fact that the beard is a little fuller than usual for this time, at least for poets; and then it occurred to me that the most likely candidate for this double coronation is not Tasso, but none other than the poet-pope Urban VIII himself. Urban, of course, was well known for his poetry, and he was intensely proud of it. He tended to think of himself as a kind of modern successor to Pindar (and was frequently hailed as such), and in almost every poem of the time referring to Parnassus, the river Pindus is also referred to—as in several of Giovanetti's poems and in Marino's response to him, too. Giovanetti would receive his laurel crown, wrote Marino, on Parnassus, where "Pindus, with all its blessed travail/ Casts shades on thee most pleasant and serene."

Now if we take the portraits of Urban that appeared in the 1634 edition by Plantin, or in the 1631 *editio princeps* of his collected poetry, we could say that while the central figure in the painting looks slightly younger and more idealized than he does in the engravings, there is still a marked physiognomic similarity. And there is every reason for Maffeo Barberini the poet to be

crowned thus, especially in 1631, the date that I have repeatedly proposed for the painting, and the date of the first appearance of his collected poetical works. Indeed, it was in this very year, 1631, that Andrea Camassei, painted *his* Parnassus for the newly rebuilt Barberini Palace in Rome. It is not at all impossible that Poussin painted his own version of this theme in emulation of Camassei's. In any case, no more suitable candidate for the central figure on this Parnassus could be imagined than Maffeo Barberini, and given his close relationship with his much-loved *Maestro di Camera*, Virginio Cesarini, and the fact that Giovanetti wrote a number of important poems in his honor, the presence of those two youths could possibly be confirmed.

All this suggests that it might be possible to identify the other poets, too, especially if one continues searching within this circle. But what did men like Gabriele Chiabrera, Agostino Mascardi, and Leone Allacci actually look like—to take just a selection of the different kinds of literary figures who were prominent in Barberini Rome? One might think that it would be impossible to know, unless one found the occasional painted portrait. But there does exist a rather wonderful gallery of engraved portraits of the chief poets and literary figures of Poussin's age. This is the illustrated history, published in 1647, of the most distinguished of the literary academies, the *Accademia dei Incogniti*. Amongst its members were a number of literary figures from Poussin's circle, as well as a number of others whom he certainly knew. Men such as Leo Allacci, the recorder of literary life in Urban's Rome, as well as Agostino Mascardi, the author not only of a book of poems, but also of a series of important literary and historical tracts, such as the then famous *Congiura dei Fieschi*, feature in it, but his and all the other portraits in this vivid picture gallery only confirm one major obstacle to the identification of all the figures in Poussin's *Parnassus*: every single portrait of a poet in the *Galleria dei Incogniti* is of a man wearing a mustache; most have goatees, and practically no one has anything like a full beard.

(The portrait of Giovanetti here is typical enough and lends a little further support to my earlier identification.) The only figures with beards that are even slightly fuller than a goatee are the clerics, and the occasional literary figure like Gabriele Chiabrera (who also happens to wear a pair of forbiddingly thick glasses). Not one beard in this collection is as full as those of the two figures on the extreme left and right of the Parnassus. This itself is something a mystery, but perhaps they are figures from the court of Urban VIII, combinations of clerics and poets just like the Pope himself. Unless we conclude that these are historical figures, rather than contemporary ones, they may be clerics, or they may simply be portraits that have been made graver or more suitable for inclusion in the company of the Muses, or indeed of the poet-pope himself.

So far, then, we have tentative identifications for five of the nine poets represented here. At the risk of multiplying my hypotheses, but for the sake of completeness, and even more, for the sake of giving this important picture in the Prado at least a little more of the discussion it deserves, let me make some suggestions for the remaining three figures on the right and the tall poet standing in profile beside Apollo. I have already observed that while in some ways, these are the most vivid and plausible portraits of all, they also all look much alike. This complicates our task considerably. The engravings in the *Glorie degli Incogniti* do not offer much help here, especially since for the most part they are highly schematic and probably derivative from other portraits. But—to make what you will regard as perhaps the most far-fetched of my suggestions—there is a certain physiognomic similarity between the portrait of the lawyer-scientist from Bologna, Claudio Achillini (1574-1640), and the figure standing next to Apollo. The difficulty with this identification—apart from the obvious fact that he has a bald head in the engraving—is that while the erudite Achillini from Bologna was indeed regarded as a poet of

immense promise, he may seem to us to be too minor a figure overall to be included in such a prominent position on this Parnassus. But he certainly was not regarded as minor by his contemporaries. In 1625, in fact, Antonio Abbondanti wrote of him "Qui vidi l'Achillino altero vate/Che tra primi in Parnaso ha il primo loco/ E le tempie di lauro ghirlandate." Aside from the fact that Achillini was asked by Virginio Cesarini and his learned friends in the Accademia dei Lincei to become a Lincean himself, he was widely regarded at the time as the most worthy successor of Marino, whom he knew well and who, in turn, admired him greatly. In the controversy that swirled around Marino's *Adone*, Achillini played a leading role for the defense.

Achillini was also a very good friend and correspondent of Mascardi, and wrote poems in honor of another great Marino defender of the time: Antonio Bruni (1593-1635). Bruni was a great prodigy: his *Selva di Parnaso* appeared in 1616, when he was just 23 years old. In all his work, most notably the *Epistole Eroiche* of 1626, he showed himself to be a close follower of both Tasso and Marino. In fact, the figure in the background on the right bears a certain resemblance to the Bruni of the book on the Incogniti, but why was he, of all people, given a full beard?

There remain the two figures on the right of the picture, just behind and beside the figure I have identified as Marcello Giovanetti. Could it be that the figure to his immediate right is none other than Marino himself? He seems to have the same longish nose, dropping slightly over the upper lip, and a similar slightly wry expression as the figure in Greuter's engraving after Vouet. But how could Marino, of all people, be relegated to such a relatively minor position, even if we factor in the possibility that he stands here to back up, as it were, his poetic protege Giovanetti? Then again, this figure does not seem very similar to the poet with the rather elongated face, sunken cheekbones, and slightly melancholic features, represented by that other Frenchman in

Rome, Claude Mellan. It all goes to show how little one can rely on the apparent evidence of prints such as these. After all, aside from the fact that the poet on the extreme right of the painting almost seems to be a twin of the figure next to him, could not Marino actually be—more fittingly as he was the most famous poet of his day—the figure standing to the right of Apollo, the senior personage supervising, as it were, the crowning of the kneeling poet in the center? But Maffeo Barberini was not always on such good terms with Marino. By now I will certainly have confused you, or at least muddied the waters. And so I give up, certainly with regard to the figure on the right, who may, just conceivably, have been a more rugged and heroic version of Mascardi. As Panofsky said of Bosch at the conclusion of his book on Early Netherlandish painting, "this too high for my wit, I prefer to omit." Still, I hope that by now, even if you have been bored by or skeptical of my various suggestions, you can see what fertile ground for research this central painting in Poussin's oeuvre still offers, and how unjustly it has been neglected until now.

But I have not finished with it yet. Towards the beginning of these remarks, I compared the firm scaffolding of trees in the *Parnassus* to the bars on a sheet of music. I could have pushed the musical parallel further, by emphasizing the rhythmic disposition of the figures across the surface of the painting, and the polyphonic relationship between the trees and the figures, to say nothing of the way in which the gestures and disposition of the figures on the right—what Poussin himself would have called the *ordonnance* of the composition—seems to represent a kind of return *da capo* to the figures on the left.

This is by no means a far-fetched or purely aesthetic parallel. Nothing, for a start, could be clearer, even in this Parnassus, with its collection of what I have taken to be literary figures,

than the parallel between poetry and painting. It is not just that the Muses themselves perfectly embody this parallel; it is, of course, also the presence of the musical instruments they hold, and our knowledge that Apollo is usually shown with a lyre or other instrument, *Apollo Citharoedus*, as he was known to the ancients. Indeed it is precisely this relationship between poetry and music that is even further emphasized in the two other paintings by Poussin that are perhaps most closely to be associated with the *Parnassus* and which I have already mentioned, the so-called *Inspiration of the Lyric Poet* in Hanover and the *Inspiration of the Epic Poet* in the Louvre. In each case, but particularly in that of the Louvre painting, the pose of Apollo derives directly from the figure of the old man instructing Hercules in the art of playing the lyre in an ancient relief copied by Poussin in a well-known drawing in the Cabinet des Dessins. Music here directly becomes poetry, as the inspired poet receives his double crown from a putto flying above, just as in the Prado painting. Even in the Hanover picture, where the Bacchic aspect of Apollo emerges most clearly of all, the lyre lies beside the font of inspiration—here, significantly enough, explicitly represented by a wine jar. The Castalian spring in this picture has become straightforwardly Bacchic. Once more, as so often afterwards too, inspiration is somehow associated with fervor and a kind of drunkenness.

I should add that the muse in the Hanover painting has generally been identified as Euterpe, and the magnificent figure on the left of the Louvre picture as Calliope. These are precisely the two muses closest to the crowned poet in the Prado *Parnassus*. At the feet of Apollo lie the very works we would expect in this context, the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad*, and the *Aeneid*. I think we may be pretty sure that in the coronation of the poet in the Prado, the ancient poets included amongst the moderns can only be the authors of these works.

But there is more, much more, and soon our investigations will lead back to the other

paintings in the Prado with which I began. How much my efforts at identification of the modern poets in the *Parnassus* might have been aided if we knew more about its patron or early ownership! There are two possible names here, both potentially of great significance. When Poussin's early biographer, Andre Félibien, visited Rome in 1647, he saw a *Parnassus* in the collection of the sculptor and Bernini pupil, Carlo Mattei, on 28 August of that year.

This might seem to be fairly conclusive, except for the fact that, unfortunately. Félibien only names but does not describe the picture—and "Parnassus", after all, is a generic enough description that could well be applied to a number of other paintings by Poussin, too. Moreover, Jean Dughet's print after the painting is dedicated to none other than Giulio Rospigliosi, the famous composer of operas and other musical works who later became Pope Clement IX. Could it be that the *Parnassus* was painted to commemorate his entry into the world of musical drama in 1631, the year in which he wrote the libretto for *Il Sant'Alessio*, the pioneering opera that was performed to inaugurate the theatre of the Palazzo Barberini in the following year? Or did Rospigliosi acquire it, perhaps, after it was owned by Carlo Mattei?

Whatever the case, the refined and sensitive Rospigliosi stood at the center of both the literary and musical world of his day, and while it may be that the print's dedication to him has simply to do with the general poetical and musical relevance of the subject matter of this painting, we cannot discount the possibility that the *Parnassus* might indeed have been commissioned by (or at least belonged to) him. It would thus join a small but intensely select group of three of Poussin's most beautiful paintings which we can be sure Rospigliosi owned, namely the lost painting of *Truth Unveiled by Time*, the famous *memento mori* known as the *Arcadian Shepherds*, probably the most elegiac of all his pictures, and, finally, the *Dance to the*

Music of Time, in which poetry and music are combined in Poussin's most lyrical and yet compelling meditation on change and mortality.

By now some of you will have realized that this is the point at which I finally have no option but to introduce the Prado *David* into our discussion. It dates from at least three or four years earlier than the *Parnassus*, and has the characteristic rougher brushwork of Poussin's work of the period immediately following the *Death of Germanicus* of 1627. In this respect, as well as in the rather substantial figural forms, it comes quite close to the Edinburgh *Mystic Marriage of St Catherine*. I used to think that a strong case could be made for attributing the Edinburgh picture to Charles Mellin, as proposed by Doris Wild, but the *David* seems so clearly by the same hand, and fits so well with everything we know about Poussin and his iconography at this juncture, that there surely can be no doubt any longer about the attribution of either painting to him. Pierre Rosenberg rightly noted of it (as he might have said of all three of the paintings in the Prado that form the subject of this paper), that "le tableau n'a pas la célébrité qu'il mérite." Be that as it may, I want here to emphasize how important it is not to take the apparently simple iconography of this work for granted either.

At first sight the temptation is simply to think of this picture as yet another David and Goliath painting, showing David victorious after the death of the Philistine giant, crowned, as only Poussin could have done, by a figure that is a straight adaptation of an ancient figure of winged victory. But compare its iconography with more typical representations of this subject, such as Caravaggio's for example, and one begins to realize just how different it is. For although the double crowning here has to do with David's victory (the laurel wreath) and his future kingship (the gold crown), this is a picture that celebrates David the musician as much as David the warrior-king. It is true that he has the conqueror's sword in his hand, and the trophies of

Goliath by his side on the right, but he looks at these with a profound air of elegy and meditation befitting his role as a psalmist. On the left are two putti, one of whom dabs his eye at the association of victory with death. And the other gently plucks the strings of what has correctly been identified as an Aeolian harp, in an allusion to the *kinnor* mentioned by the Rabbis that stood by David's side and was made to sound by the winds as he slept after his victory.

Clearly, this is a painting about David the musician as much as it is about David the victor over Goliath. In case one doubts this for one moment, let me point out that David here is exactly the same type as the Apollo in the Louvre painting of the *Crowning of the Epic Poet* and in the ancient relief copied by Poussin we have already seen. David here is Apollo's biblical brother; each is shown with the appropriate lyre. Can it be only one more coincidence that this painting was owned by Giulio Rospigliosi's close friend and music lover Girolamo Casanate (1620-1700) (the founder of the famous library in Rome that bears his name), at least in the years between 1646 and 1664? I think not. And could it conceivably be that David seems to carry the features of none other than the famous composer Girolamo Frescobaldi himself? This may all be felt too far-fetched, but the phrase *se non é vero é ben trovato* applies even more than usual, since it all introduces us into the center of the world in which Poussin moved.

Before turning from this work to the last of the trio of paintings in the Prado discussed in this paper, let me point out the presence of the magnificent columns in the background of the *David*. They serve as a symbol the young man's *fortitudo*; but as so often with Poussin, nothing is an accident, and these, of course, are precisely kinds of columns that also feature in the spectacular treatment—very different it is true—of the same subject in the Dulwich Picture Gallery. Here a multitude of admiring spectators stands on the balcony of a grand piece of

classical architecture, while a prouder and more youthfully robust and confident David carries the head of Goliath before him. And here too, as befits the theme, victory is accompanied by the sound of music, in this case by accurately depicted ancient *tibicines*. By pure chance, this painting is shown alongside the Prado *Parnassus* in the excellent catalogue of the 1994 Poussin exhibition in London, and the juxtaposition seems entirely right. The Dulwich *David*, in short, is nothing less than the biblical and architectural equivalent of the Prado *Parnassus*, classical and set in nature, not in the city. They can surely be conceived of as pendants, at least aesthetically speaking, in many ways, but perhaps above all in the rhythmic demarcation of human activity conveyed by the measured procession of columns or trees in the background. These are measured compositions *par excellence*, with their proportions and spaces spelt out by the extraordinary clarity with which human activity is punctuated and structured across the picture plane.

In the case of the two *Davids* I have emphasized the significance of the architecture that plays such an important visual role in both paintings, and suggested that this choice is not at all coincidental in works that combine the themes of victory and music. When it comes to the Prado *Saint Cecilia*, shown in the course of playing from a score held by two engaged putti, the ancient patron of music is shown in front of yet another of those massive fluted columns that are also to be seen in both *David*s.

If the association is still not clear enough, consider one of the little-known illustrations by Abraham Bosse for the famous lutenist Denis Gaulthier's book of music known, significantly enough, as *La Rhétorique des Dieux*. A female figure is shown seated at a keyboard in exactly the same manner as Poussin's *St Cecilia* (as are many others during this century and after). St. Cecilia sits at an organ with a square fluted column and two more massive fluted pilasters on

either side. But she is no simple St Cecilia: she is the very personification of the Dorian mode. I leave the reader to ponder the possibility that the stringed instruments on the right might be an allusion to the profane music of Apollo, and the harp on the left might recall the sacred music of David. Even the clearly delineated triglyph and dentils of the column on the organ evoke the loose piece of entablature with dentils that lies—at first sight so strangely, and now so clearly the key to the whole picture—on the lower left of the Dulwich *David* .

The time has come to tie all this together. The connections are extraordinarily tight. In 1647, Poussin wrote a now-famous letter to his French patron Chantelou, in which he set out his own version of the theory of the musical modes; he then applied this theory directly to painting. Chantelou had evidently written to Poussin complaining that his paintings of the Sacraments were not as good as his rival Pointel's *Finding of Moses*. Poussin replied somewhat irritably, saying that different kinds of paintings, and, in particular, different kinds of compositions, had different effects on the emotions of their viewers—their passions, as they were then called—just as in the case of ancient music. In order to illustrate what he meant, Poussin then drew upon, sometimes verbatim, the most famous musical treatise of the sixteenth century, Giuseppe Zarlino's *Istituzioni armoniche*, first published in 1558 and republished several times after that; he excerpted a number of passages that seem to apply directly to the painting in the Prado.

It is true that there is, in fact, a rather large group of paintings by Poussin that command attention because of the clarity and tightness of their compositional structure, and which we easily label classical; but the *Parnassus* is one of the first to fully satisfy the criteria he sets out in this letter. I should add, as is often forgotten, that in his utilization of Zarlino to underscore the relevance of ancient musical theory for modern art theory, Poussin was probably stimulated by

his association with one of the most understudied musical theorists of all: Giovanni Battista Doni (1594-1647), to whom we owe the monosyllable *do* for the beginning of our musical scale. Doni's treatise on the genres and modes of music, the *Compendio del Trattato de' generi e de' modi della musica*, first appeared in 1635 and was expanded upon five years later. He also published a number of works on the significance of ancient music in the next decade, notably the *De Praestantia Musica Veteris* of 1647. It was in his posthumously published *Lyra Barberiniana* that he outlined the relationship between the modern instrument he designed for the Barberini, the *Lyra Barberiniana*, and its antique prototypes. But back to our painting.

In the high legibility of its composition, in the severity and rigor with which it is set out across the picture plane, in the firm, almost metrical structure provided by the backdrop of trees, and, above all, in the extraordinary clarity with which persons, gestures, and poses are made to respond to each other, the painting of the *Parnassus* exemplifies perhaps more clearly than almost any other work by Poussin what he meant by the word 'mode.' This word, he said,

> properly signifies the *ratio* or the measure and the form which we use to do something that constrains us not to move beyond it, making us work in all things with a certain middle course or moderation. And so this mediocrity or moderation is simply a certain manner or determined and fixed order in the process by which a thing preserves its being.

Here if ever in Poussin's work one surely finds the *mediocritas*, the determined and fixed order by which a thing preserves its being. The *Parnassus*, that painted paean to the harmonies of Apollo, seems to be a perfect lesson in what Poussin meant when he copied out from Zarlino his definition of the modes of the ancients, which, he said,

> were composed of several things put together; and from their variety there arose certain differences between the Modes; and from these one could understand that each Mode retained in itself a certain distinctiveness, *particularly when all the things which entered into the composition were put together in such proportions that there arose the capacity and power to arouse the soul of the spectator to diverse emotions.*

Observing these effects, says Poussin, "the wise ancients attributed to each [Mode] particular effects arising from each one of them" which he, following Zarlino, proceeds to enumerate.

Many have attempted to classify Poussin's paintings according to the list of modes he provided in this passage, and I will resist the temptation to do so; but it surely would not be surprising if Poussin himself felt that a painting such as this one fell clearly into the very first of the ancient modes, the Dorian. This, he said, was regarded by the the ancients, *nos braves anciens grecs*, as the most "stable, grave and severe" of the modes, to be used for subjects that were indeed "grave, severe and full of wisdom." Who could deny that the great *Parnassus* in the Prado, which has formed the centerpiece of my discussion today, fully satisfies each one of these essential requirements for the most serious and classical of all the modes known not only to the ancients, but also to Poussin himself? If we approach it precisely with the seriousness that it deserves, and if we take the time to scan its surfaces with the rigor and attention Poussin himself would have expected, it will finally begin to yield its secrets.