Conclusions and Implications

In the first four chapters of this book I have given an account of the rise of two radically different conceptions of rhetoric and of the clash between them. The first of these, whose history I have outlined by taking as the point of departure the program of the Academy and as the more or less clear denouement the Comparaisons and Réflexions of Rapin, came into being by a long process in which a theory of expression that goes back to Quintilian and Cicero and through them to Greek theorists was translated, adapted, and reformulated. I have studied the second in the Logique of Port-Royal; it has its ancient precedents, too, though not so much in theories of expression as in Greek atomisms and geometry; it came into being in seventeenth-century France as a development and application of the method of Descartes. These two approaches to problems of expression and persuasion are so different that when we study them in the texts where they are stated in pure terms, we must finally see them as incommensurable. But the two theories, with their aspirations toward persuasion, on the one hand, and toward demonstration, on the other, are involved in various fruitful compromises, with the result that the tendency to artifice in the one and to aridity in the other are overcome in a general ambition to be both appealing and truthful in every kind of expression.
In Chapters V and VI, it was possible to show, at least in part, how the two approaches were developed and specified by Pascal and by the most important dramatists of the period. In Pascal we have someone perfectly able to work on two levels, on that of theory as well as that of practice. He has no fully worked-out treatise on the subject of rhetoric, but he does have two significant fragments that outline a treatise; and there are many signs in the *Pensées* of the degree to which he is fascinated by problems of intellectual method. In the *Lettres provinciales* there is much evidence to show that what he chooses to write about as he enters the argument between the Jesuits and the Jansenists and what he takes to be suitable criteria in assaying the truth of the two positions derived from considerations such as those set down in the fragments. In fact, the basic conflict, that between a rhetoric based on appeals to opinions known to be favored by the person addressed (the position of the Ciceronians and of Rapin) and a rhetoric based on objective grounds that must be accepted by the person being addressed (the position of Port-Royal and of Pascal), lies at the heart of Pascal's procedure. The *opinions probables* of the Jesuits and their imperialistic aims which justify any means as long as it is effective—I speak as Pascal might, not as a historian—are treated much as the discipline of rhetoric is treated in the logic of Port-Royal; the victorious point of view is quasi-geometrical in its structure and dynamics. The striking thing is that when Pascal comes to the task that underlies the *Pensées*, he selects a very different technique, one that is dialectical rather than demonstrative in the fashion of geometry. In other words, he not only sides with the Port-Royalists in their opposition to the traditional rhetoric, he also knows how to formulate and use still another procedure when occasion demands.

The example of Pascal (in the *Provinciales*, at least) is that of a man who, by generalizing a mathematical method, arrives...
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at a logic that he can apply to problems of persuasion in apologetics. Corneille, Racine, and Molière certainly were not theoreticians of rhetoric on any comparable scale; they were interested in literary creation rather than in religious conversion or polemic. Still, one finds in what they say to their critics arguments that depend for their force on a conception of dramatic art that must be called rhetorical, it seems to me. This time the technique of “persuasion” is more traditional than Cartesian in inspiration. I have not tried to align the plays or passages from them with the more technical pages of Cicero and Quintilian—as has been done in some studies—in order to locate examples of the various topoi, devices, and figures of speech or thought that are treated theoretically in the sources; instead, I have studied the audience as a force in creative consciousness, using as evidence the statements that the playwrights made about what they were doing or thought they had done. The basic problem is this: once one has accepted the rhetorical framework, one must form a precise image of the audience for which one writes and in that act form an idea of oneself and of one’s art. Corneille, Racine, and Molière all agree in assuming that the audience is a decisive factor, but for reasons of temperament, personal circumstances, and what may be called generic vocation, each has his own way of coping with it.

“Classique est l’écrivain qui porte un critique en soi-même et qui l’associe intimement à ses travaux.” Valéry’s definition applies, as a matter of fact, to almost every major writer in France, at least since the Renaissance. If one considers the period covered by the present studies—from 1635 to 1685, roughly speaking—it certainly points to something essential in the consciousness of the principal authors. From the founding of the Academy to the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Mod-
erns, one question with which they worked was the following: in the light of what poetic principles could they bring into existence a literature worthy of France and of its monarchy and worthy of being compared with the classical legacy? This does not mean that they were not as interested as we are in the dilemmas and contradictions of human behavior or that they could not go far beneath the masks that men wore then and in every age; nor does it deny their ability to sense the problems of “human time” or to recognize, with anguish in some cases, the néant to which men must return or from which, with supernatural aid, they may hope to escape. What it does mean is that these concerns, though real and present, emerge into a critical consciousness that is focussed on the process of creation. The seventeenth century thought profoundly about man, his nature, and his existence, but experience and reflection alone did not bring into being those works in which we may, at our leisure, see the characteristic humanism of the age. In the presence of this flowering, of this marvelous burst of literary creativity, we must note these truths: It was essentially contingent, it might not have been, it would not have been but for the force of a productive discipline that caused works to be.

I am not reverting to the notion of a theoretical and disembodied doctrine classique. I am not speaking of a critical system; as the history of criticism in the seventeenth century shows, nothing that can be called a system was ever fully achieved; poetic and rhetorical disciplines functioned as ideal goals while always remaining, in fact, more or less amorphous. On the contrary, I am saying that, as we think about the factors implied by the very existence of French classical literature, we are led not to lifeless doctrine but to personal discipline, to a kind of qualification that has been freely assumed by someone and vitally held by him in view of doing or making something well. Such a personal qualification has, of course,
a content; and when that content is made explicit, one slips often into the statement of something like a theory. But the ideological part must always be understood as entering into the powers of a particular writer or poet and as affecting, though not mechanically determining, his creative activity.

Reserving for the moment further comment on the subjective aspect of discipline so understood, let us summarize its objective content as that emerges from the preceding studies.

1. In the first place, we have been discussing knowledge directed to the uses of language. That is not its only subject matter; the revivals of the Ciceronian tradition during the seventeenth century were accompanied by an effort to recapture a truly comprehensive view of problems of expression; to brake the tendency to associate rhetoric with only one of its parts, the study of style; and to substitute for that narrow view a conception of the art as dealing also with the invention and arrangement of ideas and arguments and with the characteristics and interests of audiences. One of the important complaints of the Port-Royalists was that the "style rhétoricien" reflected an excessive concern with words and an inclination to let ideas and things slip toward the edges of the inquiry. Still, language is rarely out of sight, for the simple reason that it looks both ways: backward to the meaning that it conveys and forward, as the proximate cause, to the effect being sought. There is no need to dwell here on the work done in the seventeenth century to purify and to temper the French language so that it would be capable of all kinds of eloquence, but the acceptance of the linguistic medium as distinctive and self-contained is noteworthy. Terms derived from the plastic arts or from music do not invade in any significant way the discussions of literature. In fact, several signs point in the opposite direction: it is argued that pictures must have their equivalents of the three unities; drawing and
color are for the Port-Royalists ways of illustrating the distinction between thought and figurative expression; Poussin studies Quintilian.

2. According to the plan of the Academy, verbal disciplines—once the *Dictionnaire* was out of the way—would be expounded under the three headings of grammar, rhetoric, and poetics. Within this framework, however, they intended to give eloquence or rhetoric a special place. As the *Remarques* of Vaugelas show, it is the discipline into which grammar flows, so to speak, and out of which poetics arises as the resources of language are used in a freer and richer way. The priority of rhetoric is even more marked in the theory of Rapin, where the field of belles-lettres is divided into eloquence proper, poetics, history, and philosophy. As is clear from the analyses given in the second chapter above, the first of these not only provides the basis for the others but many themes and devices characteristic of rhetoric turn up in the reflections assigned to the other disciplines.

3. The subordination of poetics to rhetoric implies at once a certain attitude toward the audience, whether it is composed of readers or listeners or spectators. In a theory (such as that of Aristotle) where poetics has an independent status, the poet or writer works with the primary aim of bringing into being a concrete whole or a self-affirming object; that creation is the end of his labor, not what someone will think of what he has done. If the audience is in his mind, it is there as an indirect influence; and he tends to think of it in average or perhaps in ideal terms; it is not particularized. In a poetic theory that is polarized by rhetoric, however, the writer is concerned from the beginning with the effect on his readers or spectators, because success or failure with the members of that audience is an immediate sign of the value of his work. And he has to cope with his public as it is, here and now.
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Corneille, Racine, and Molière knew this, as their critical writings make clear: although each of them had his own way of defending himself against this force majeure—withdrawal when one no longer had an effective rapport with it, appeal over its head to an elite or to an imaginary jury of ancients, appeal to Louis XIV or to the majority of the audience—each of them was conscious of writing for a small group of particular people, made up for the most part of well-to-do bourgeois, real and would-be aristocrats, the king and his entourage. Moreover, in a more or less pure theory of poetics, the effect produced by a work depends on the unique combination of materials and form that it realizes; in other words, the effect inheres in the work. Where rhetoric tends to dominate thinking about poetry, the end of expression lies outside itself in persuasion, an event that takes place in the audience, not in the work. I should add that seventeenth-century poets do not often think of themselves as trying to persuade; however, they almost invariably associate their works with effects that in ancient times were taken to be secondary aims of the orator: delectare or conciliare, docere, and movere, which become plaire, instruire, and émouvoir.

4. Beyond the idea of verbal discipline in general and the conception of rhetoric as the main verbal discipline, we may take note of more particular questions, such as those having to do with genres and rules. We all know that, to the strict seventeenth-century theorists at least, there is a nicely graded hierarchy from the epic to the epigram and that each of these has its requirements of action or thought or emotion and style. What we do not see so clearly is that these differentiations in works are related to the other two factors involved in the rhetorical process: audience and author. The audience for an epic is not in the same state of mind or expectation as the audience for an epigram, nor is the audience for a comedy
identical, descriptively speaking, to that for a tragedy. We note comparable differences when we turn to eloquence in prose: there is l'éloquence de la chaire, l'éloquence du barreau, and the eloquence proper to the councils of the Prince (a feeble copy of the deliberative sort described by Aristotle and practiced by Cicero); and each of these has its particular audience. Again, poets are constantly being urged to consult their forces, to know themselves, to find the type of inspiration to which they are subject, and to study and practice the corresponding types of writing. My point is that the generic distinctions used by the seventeenth-century critics and writers may be explained in part, as they usually are, by reference to what Aristotle and Horace and their commentators had said and in part, no doubt, by the natural tendency of the human mind to see things as instances of types; but whatever their origin, they became enmeshed in the consequences of rhetorical principles and their precise meanings were fixed by the interrelations of artists, works, and audiences.

It is at this point that the literary implications of these studies become clear. If it is true, as I have assumed, that many—even most—of the principal seventeenth-century authors sought to create for their own time a great literature, it is also true that they intended to do this without neglecting the claims of art and reason. They exemplify very well the definition of Valéry: each of them was to some degree, and usually to a high degree, a critic; while doing what he did, he wanted to know why he was doing it. I am suggesting that if we raise our eyes from the works and study the productive conditions that surrounded them as they were being elaborated, we find ourselves facing, along with accidents (but how necessary they are!) of circumstance and genius, an impressive ensemble of ideas. I have not presented it as a system, as a "classical doctrine," or as a list of rules. It has a certain shape, though the outlines are vague and the distinctions ambiguous;
and it has an objective existence. However, this ensemble is particularly interesting when we take into account its subjective aspect and its presence in the mind of the classical artist, for that is where it has an effective mode of being. There it forms the technical background against which he makes many of his choices. Placed from the beginning in the perspective of efficient causality, he sees himself as one who works entirely or for the most part with words, not with words chosen for self-expression alone, nor with words used as the matter of an art object, but with words as part of a performance or a transaction. He writes for a public situation in which there will be a sequence of things done, said, known, and felt. As for the rules governing the game, since they now bear his mark and have become part of his creative power, he sees them as hints, vitally grasped, of possible plans and effects. He is aware of himself as free within limits. Although he did not invent the limits, he has chosen what his attitude toward them will be. For the most part he accepts them because of the challenges and promises that they hold out to him, but he knows that he may have to set himself new bounds beyond the old.

In the adventures of rhetoric in seventeenth-century France, the historian of ideas and methods uncovers, therefore, the results of a persistent attempt to renew and rebuild one of the great intellectual techniques invented by the ancients, and to do so, furthermore, in the face of attacks from expert controversialists for whom the future belonged to logic. The historian of literature finds in the documents principles of interest to him, for they make it possible for him to see in criticism now three centuries old signs of life and coherence instead of a curious taste for arbitrary pronouncements. It opens up to him, moreover, an important factor in some of the great creative
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minds of the century. In several ways and degrees this rhetorical discipline was actualized in the energies of Pascal, Corneille, Racine, and Molière. That it played a part in their ways of stating and solving their problems is no doubt the surest testimony to its power and greatness; that some of their contemporaries misconceived and misapplied it should not cause us to undervalue its role, although their failures do make clear to us the essential misery of rhetoric, which is that it must always wait upon intelligence and inspiration.