Desmarets's "L'Art de la poésie":
Poetics or Politics?

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The text* of Desmarets's "L'Art de la poésie, à Monseigneur le Cardinal-Duc de Richelieu"—established by James Dryhurst from a MS copy in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal in Paris—speaks for itself.¹ But after some 350 years it does not by itself fully explain the cultural context in which it was formulated. This ambitious text, though not strictly speaking an inédit, since it was incorporated in the text of "L'Excellence et les plaintes de la poésie héroïque" which Desmarets prefaced to the first edition of Esther in 1670, is less well known even than his "Discours de la poésie," also dedicated to Richelieu. We do not know exactly when "L'Art de la poésie" was written; but it can be deduced from the dedication that it was written after 1631, when Richelieu was made a duke, and before Richelieu's death in December 1642. Perhaps it preceded the "Discours de la poésie," which was first published in 1633 (along with poems by Maynard, Racan, L'Estoile, Malleville, Baro, Habert, Godeau, and Chapelain) in Boisrobert's anthology Les Nouvelles Muses and then republished in Desmarets's Oeuvres poétiques, a partial collection of his plays and poems achevé d'imprimer by Le Gras on 20 November 1640. That "Discours" stands witness to Desmarets's ambitions in heroic poetry at the time when—already a member of the group of literati incorporated in 1634 as the Académie-Française—he entered Richelieu's personal service, also in 1634.² This was evidently the time at which Desmarets began writing Clovis, the first and most ambitious of the heroic poems on which he was to work (though not consistently) for over twenty years before it was finally published in 1657.³

"L'Art de la poésie" reflects literary theory and literary ambitions somewhat similar to those expressed by Desmarets in his "Discours," which may have superseded it. But I suspect that it was not included in his Oeuvres poétiques along with the "Discours" because it was not yet

*The text of the poem follows on page 58.
written by the end of 1640. Late 1642 seems the likely date of composit-
on. The phrase “au retour des allarmes” in line 5 would appear to have
been prompted by the conspiracy of Cinq-Mars and de Thou and espe-
cially by fears for the Cardinal's life as he was brought back to Paris
grieveously ill in the fall of that year. The other alarming incidents in Ri-
chelieu's career—including the famous *Journée des dupes* of 1630—gen-
erally occurred before he was made a duke or else have no obvious
association with a return. Richelieu's death on 4 December shortly after
his return to Paris would account for the fact that “L'Art de la poésie”
was not printed at that time.4

Desmarets's involvement with the poetics of heroic poetry is by no
means limited to the period of Richelieu's patronage. Yet what he empha-
sizes in “L'Art de la poésie” is very much in line with his other literary
preoccupations in the last years of Richelieu's life. The hints of political
allegory from line 101 are compatible with the atmosphere of *Europe*,
first performed in November 1642. The exemplary idealism expounded
from line 81 recalls the no less didactic theory of the novel in Desmarets’s
dedication to Richelieu's niece of his unfinished novel *Rosane* (1639).
Here, Desmarets requests that the young princes for whom he was writ-
ing *Rosane* (the future Louis XIV and his anticipated brother)

> admirent les exemples parfaits qu'on propose, & se portent avec ardeur à
les imiter: & pource que la nature produit rarement des personnes par-
faites, l'art de l'invention supplée à ce defaut. . . .

The art of fiction consists of mixing fable with fact, the entertaining with
the edifying, the marvelous with the educational. The result is not cul-
pable deceit (*feinte, mensonge* in a pejorative sense), but the greatest
imaginative effort of the mind:

> La fiction ne doit pas estre considéré comme un mensonge, mais comme
une belle imagination, & comme le plus grand effet de l'esprit: & bien
que la Verité semble luy estre opposée toutefois elles s'accordent merveil-
leusement bien ensemble. Ce sont deux lumières qui au lieu de s'effacer
l'une l'autre & de se nuire, brillent par l'esclat l'une de l'autre.

Fiction interacts with fact (*vérité*) on the basis of a perception—doubtless
Aristotelian in origin—that literature is more philosophical than history.
For Desmarets the more fully imaginative works

> sont pleins de feintes parmy la verité, plus ils sont beaux & profitables;
pource que la feinte vraisemblable est fondée sur la bien-séance & sur la
raison; & la vérité toute simple n’embrasse qu’un recit d’accidens humains, qui le plus souvent ne sont pleins que d’extravagances.

Clearly a community of inspiration links this theory of the didactic heroic novel with the poetics of the epic expressed in the “Discours” and in “L’Art de la poésie” and afterwards illustrated in Clovis and in Desmarets’s other heroic poems. Though no further volume of Rosane appeared, this novel must have been in Desmarets’s thoughts when he adapted from it his last tragicomedy, Erigone—the “comédie en prose” seen at the Palais-Cardinal by guests of Mme de Rambouillet on 19 January 1642.

In any case Desmarets’s poetics of idealism—the theory by which fact in imaginative works should be ingeniously embellished by fiction—operates on much the same assumptions as those expressed at much the same time by Corneille, who opens his “Abrégé du martyre de Saint Polyeucte” prefaced to Polyeucte—a play read or perhaps privately performed for Richelieu shortly before his death: “L’ingénieuse tissure des fictions avec la vérité, où consiste le plus beau secret de la Poésie . . .” Consider also Livie’s last lines in Cinna:

Et la Postérité dans toutes les Provinces
Donnera votre exemple aux plus généreux Princes
[V: 3]

Throughout Desmarets’s practice of the novel, of theater and of heroic poetry runs his conception of literature as an “art merveilleux” (see lines 6, 122, 131, and 142). This conception may have roots in the merveilleux of court ballet, in which Desmarets would appear (as Marays) to have distinguished himself as a performer before composing two of the grandest ballets of the age. In “L’Art de la poésie” it is already linked with the “merveilleux chrétien” destined to be so important in Clovis and in the Biblical epics which later divided Boileau from Desmarets: note “ce grand Dieu merveilleux” (l. 45). In line 11 the evocation of the beauteous splendors of the heavens and of earth are—however different the implications—clearly reminiscent of Psalms which Desmarets had paraphrased and dedicated to Louis XIII in 1640 before including “Psaumes pour le Roy” in his Oeuvres poétiques, beginning with Coeli enarrant gloriam Dei . . . (XVIII).

However, if it is correct to date “L’Art de la poésie” to the period immediately following publication of Desmarets’s Psaumes de Davide paraphrasés, it is all the more curious to note his insistence here on the
thesis that "l'art nous ravit plus que ne fait la Nature" (l. 38). Not that this attitude is inconsistent with Richelieu's patronage of the arts or with Mazarin's activity at the time as one of Richelieu's principal collectors of art works, but because Desmarets later changes his mind more than once. Just before the mystic experience which may be styled the conversion of this already deeply religious man, he subordinates art to nature in the "première promenade" of Les Promenades de Richelieu (1653). He distances himself from the magnificence of the great château (of which he was then intendant) because he prefers "les simples beautez de la riche Nature"—the works of God—to any works of art "Où les mortelles mains pretendent trop de part." Not until five years later does he appear to conciliate his feeling for nature, surely exceptional in seventeenth-century France, with esthetic pleasure derived from works of art, writing in Les Délices de l'esprit (1658) that "les Arts sont agréables à Dieu & à l'homme; parce que l'Art est l'ouvrage de l'homme sur l'ouvrage de Dieu"—a formula reconciling feeling for nature and esthetic pleasure in the arts both with each other and with religious fervor.

Two strands of imitation theory thus reconciled in Les Délices de l'esprit are much more distinct in "L'Art de la poésie," reflecting the ambiguity of the concept imitation or mimesis associated with the interpretation of Aristotle's Poetics. As Henri Gouhier suggests:

Le mot [imitation] est équivoque. Est-ce l'oeuvre qui imite quelque chose ou est-ce l'auteur qui imite quelqu'un? Dans le premier cas, ce qui est imité, ce sont les actions des hommes agissant dans le monde; dans le second, celui qui est imité, c'est l'auteur présumé du monde dans lequel il y a des hommes agissant.«

Probably Aristotle meant the former. Desmarets's emphasis on the latter reflects a Judeo-Christian tradition whereby the Greek verb poiein—the root of such words as poet, poetry, and poetics—came to be regarded, through a mutation of concepts, as representing an act of creation, thereby indicating, as Gouhier puts it, "que l'imitation est celle qui fait du 'poète' un créateur à l'image du Créateur" (Ibid.). In "L'Art de la poésie" Desmarets (who would publish in 1654 his verse translation of L'Imitation de Jésus-Christ) blends the duality of imitation theory with the idealism of didactic exemplarity. By means of imitative (representational or mimetic) art the writer imitates not only God's creatures (here relatively disvalued), but His Creation, His creativity (ll. 45-52). Argua-
bly the exemplary "role models" by which the writer then goes on to embellish his fiction are destined to exert a redemptive influence upon the reader analogous to the role of the Savior in the real, historic world corrupted by the Fall of Man. It is ironic, not to say perverse, that in the "Querelle des Imaginaires" Pierre Nicole—who took a more radical view of the Fall—would condemn Desmarets's fiction as corrupting although it had been conceived as redemptive.

The serious work of fiction is thus a multiple imitation of God's Creation, combining imitation of the act of Creation with representation of creatures in the fallen state and models for their redemption. In maintaining that "l'Art imitateur est l'ouvrage des hommes, / C'est une créature," Desmarets asserts the concept of creative writing. "L'Art de la poésie" must be one of the earliest texts to do so. But from line 53 "Plus un art à nos sens représente de choses," we are back to the first strand of imitation theory: "l'oeuvre qui imite quelque chose." This strand is developed along the familiar lines of Horace's precept "Ut pictura poesis . . . " with one curious reservation:

La Peinture, embrassant les objets de nos yeux,
Imite tous les corps que l'on voit sous les Cieux.
Mais la Muse divine, à qui tout est possible.
Embrasse tout sujet invisible, & visible

[ll. 55–58]

Literature is argued to have an imaginative dimension somewhat arbitrarily denied to the plastic arts. In the wake of such theorists as the early cubist Albert Gleizes (1881–1953), it is scarcely necessary to repostulate theories by which painting or sculpture may be regarded as creating objects rather than as representing subjects or to underline the limitations of Desmarets's antithesis on this point. But it is worth noting that the antithesis is not supported by one of his principal illustrators, Abraham Bosse, who derived from the Lyonese mathematician G. Desargues (1593–1662) a theory of perspective serving to represent

sur une surface plate de quelque matière & inclination qu'elle puisse estre, tous les objets visibles de la nature, & ceux que l'on peut former dans l'imagination."

It is also worth pausing to consider the notion of a "sujet invisible."

An invisible subject may be imaginary, as Bosse suggests; but it may also be doctrinal or allegorical, as in the theological concept that the sun,
visible light, manifests God, *lux invisibilis*. It is not Bosse’s illustrations of Desmarets’s *Ariane* (1639) or his frontispieces for Desmarets’s plays published around 1640 that depict invisible subjects so much as the illustrations later engraved by François Chauveau and others for *Clovis* and *Les Délices de l’esprit*. In these texts one may contemplate numerous representations of the imaginary, the allegorical, and the theologically symbolic. Pertinent to the present discussion is the extent to which these beautiful books strive as a whole—text and illustration—to render a sensibility Christian and then modern through forms not only ancient but originally pagan. It is not merely a matter of heroic poetry or the epic privileged by “L’Art de la poésie,” but such other forms as the dialogue, the romance, drama, the ode, even the *Ars poetica*. Even if one excepts such devotional works as his recently identified *Lettres spirituelles* and the paraphrased Psalms, the examples set by Saint Paul and by David confirm that Desmarets’s literary practice supposes an essential third strand of imitation theory: the imitation of select literary models, mainly from classical antiquity, but also from the Old and the New Testaments. In “L’Art de la poésie” it is possible to show not only general indebtedness to Aristotle and to Horace, but specific inspiration from Virgil. The verse “Des astres nous décrit le réglé mouvement” (l. 59) is unlikely not to have been prompted by Anchises’s famous prophecy in *Aeneid* VI: “caeliique meatus / Describent radio et surgentia sidera dicent” (ll. 849–50). Here, the thought is imitated; elsewhere, aspects of Virgilian form.

For much of what follows in “L’Art poétique” however, Desmarets appears to imitate a more modern imaginative model: Ludovico Ariosto. To a large extent the imitation is a matter of atmosphere, but at times it seems quite specific. Line 60 “Monté d’un vol hardy dessus le firmament” seems reminiscent of the flights of the hippogriff in *Orlando furioso* and of “Ruggiero, / che scorre il ciel su l’animal leggierno” (VI: 16, but compare also X: 91–92). The view looking down upon wide stretches of the earth from an airborne hippogriff (symbolic among other things of poetic imagination) is not much different from the viewpoint supposed for Virgil’s gods, angels or the traditional Christian God. Indeed in *Orlando furioso* “la Bontá ineffabile” gazes down upon threatened France and introduces the allegorical episode with Silence, Fraud, and Discord which Desmarets may have recalled in his lines 102–4. Although Conrart’s copyist seems to have neglected the capital letters required for fully allegorical *Erreur* and *Flaterie*, Desmarets does appear to have recalled
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Ariosto’s Discordia when beginning Les Promenades de Richelieu: “Pendant que la Discorde espouvante les loix . . .” Desmarets also from time to time reasserts Ariosto’s promise in Canto I, 2, to relate “cosa non detta in prosa mai né in rima.”

It is difficult to imagine a more pointed contrast with Malherbe’s “aversion contre les fictions poétiques” as reported by Racan. When Malherbe read in Régnier’s first Epître au Roi “que la France s’enlevait en l’air pour parler à Jupiter et se plaindre du misérable état où elle était pendant la Ligue,” says Racan, Malherbe “demanda à l’auteur en quel temps cela était arrivé” because he had not noticed its having occurred during the past fifty years. I wish I could report that Racan replied “in poetry” or “in poetic time.” Antoine Adam uses this anecdote (without reply) to illustrate a trivializing influence of Malherbe’s famous reform of French poetic diction. Malherbe is said to have reduced the role of the poet, in a land governed by a king and guided by the Church, to that of a mere arranger of syllables, “pas plus utile à la société qu’un bon joueur de quilles” (I: 32).

Not, I think, the whole truth of the matter. But Adam goes on to link Malherbe’s reaction against imaginative hyperbole to the cultural impoverishment induced by the Counter-Reformation in France:

La chute que signifie, dans l’histoire de la pensée, la victoire de la Contre-Réforme, s’exprime de façon saisissante dans cet abandon des hautes doctrines de la Pléiade. Elles supposaient un climat de liberté intellectuelle, un affranchissement des traditions, le droit pour l’individu de courir tous les risques et d’oser toutes les audaces. La monarchie, l’Eglise, l’aristocratie ont repris la situation en main, étouffé les efforts de l’esprit pour se libérer. La poésie paie le prix de sa liberté perdue. [I: 32–33]

Desmarets was an important Counter-Reformation personality. He wrote verse exhibited in the Lady Chapel of Notre-Dame Cathedral and later dedicated his verse translation of the Office de la Vierge (1645) to the Queen Regent. But the atmosphere of “L’Art de la poésie” is not at all what Adam describes. “Enfin Malherbe vint . . .” belongs to a retrospective part of Boileau’s Art poétique (1674). Boileau’s hostility toward Desmarets, along with that of the Jansenist Nicole and the Protestant Bayle, so influential in the historiography of the seventeenth century, has gravely distorted perception of Desmarets’s role and of the cultural patronage of Richelieu. Even Perrault and the Moderns whom Desmarets later did so
much to encourage, lost few opportunities to minimize the achievements
of the period of Louis XIII and of Richelieu in order to maximize a late-
starting "century of Louis-le-Grand"—Louis XIV.

Let me contrast Adam's "chute" with a few passages of Desmarets's
"Discours de la poésie" of 1633, the first of his poems known to have
been noticed by Richelieu, who is straightforwardly advised:

Si tu veux que ton nom brille aux siècles suivans,
Chery les vertueux, sois l'appuy des scavans. . .

Indeed Desmarets goes on to warn the Cardinal specifically against:

l'erreur de ces nouveaux critiques
Qui retranchent le champ de nos Muses antiques,
Qui veulent qu'on les suive, & qu'adorant leurs pas
On evite les lieux qu'ils ne cognoissent pas.
Leur Muse cependant de foibless & de crainte
Pensant se soutenir affecte la contrainte,
N'ose aller à l'escart de peur de s'esgarder;
Et parlant simplement croit se faire admirer:
Elle a peur d'eschauffer le fard qui la rend vaine,
Et la moindre fureur la met troit hors d'haleine.

Then Desmarets disparages such "esprits rampans" in favor of a "Muse
sublime"—a term surely worth noticing at this date and a concept con-
textual for "L'Art de la poésie." For Desmarets proposes a "Muse sub-
lime" with

un coeur ambitieux,
Qui d'un superbe vol s'emporte vers les Cieux,
Et void avec orgueil, marchant dessus la nuë,
La terre dont le globe à ses yeux diminué:
Le Ciel qu'elle apperçoit & plus vaste & plus pur,
Qui de l'or du Soleil enrichit son azur,
Luy paroit un seiour digne de son courage:
Iamais dans un destroit sa grandeur ne s'engage. . .
De celeste fureur quelquefois s'animant,
Elle se sent ravir iusques au firmament . . .

Here, as also in "L'Art de la poésie," is an exalted overview reminis-
cent of Ariosto and of the Pléiade. The neo-Platonist cast of "fureur ce-
leste"—for like the madman, the lover and the mystic, the poet can
through “fureur” attain ecstasy—is intelligible in terms of, for example, Pontus de Tyard’s *Dialogues philosophiques*. These last lines may further serve to gloss the “noble furie” of the Muse “des Cieux originaire” invoked in lines 101–9 of “L’Art de la poésie.”

The neo-Platonist inspiration of the “Discours” and of “L’Art de la poésie” finds expression also in the activities of the early Académie-Française and of other playwrights associated with Richelieu’s patronage. Desmarets in particular was familiar with Pléiade neo-Platonism. In *Les Visionnaires* the “fureur” of the extravagant poet Amidor in Act I, scenes 2 and 3, parodies that aspect of Pléiade poetics, notably Ronsard’s ode I, 3 beginning “Je suis troublé de fureur.” Poetic “fureur” is complemented by a parody of the lover’s “furie” in the role of Filidan, “amoureux en idée” whose inspiration is even more clearly neo-Platonist:

J’adore en mon esprit ceste beauté divine,
Qui sans doute du ciel tire son origine.

[I: 4]

That the parody is firmly grounded in familiarity with neo-Platonist thought is evident in Desmarets’s works from the “Discours de la poésie” to *Les Délices de l’esprit*, including his first comedy written for Richelieu *Aspasie* (1636). It must also have been evident in his lost address to the Académie-Française of August 1635 in which he is reported to have argued that Platonic love “a quelque chose de divin.”

But Desmarets rejects Plato’s notion that literature, being an imitation of ideal reality imperfectly manifested in the world of phenomena, threatens to corrupt its audience. For as we have seen, he envisages a role for the poet not merely as an imitator of things, but as an imitator of divine Creation capable also of introducing redemptive imaginative amelioration into his work. In this way God becomes the guarantor of both the merveilleux and the inventive Muse:

Mais alors qu’elle invente une belle aventure
Glorieuse elle suit l’auteur de la Nature;
Et produisant au jour ce qui ne fut jamais,
Imite du grand Dieu les admirables faits

[ll. 113–16]

Ornaments of the merveilleux are metaphor and hyperbole—compare with André Gide’s observation that “l’oeuvre d’art est exagération.” Yet
the marvelous remains verisimilar through its relation to fact or to doctrine—“le fondement, pris sur la verité.” By “vérité” Desmarets, who gives scant attention to the technical analysis of rhetoric, seems to mean (in terms of the categories suggested by Aristotle’s *Poetics* XXV) not only “things as they were or are,” but “things as they are said or thought to be” and “things as they ought to be.” This last category strongly favors the redemptive exemplary idealism with which Desmarets is concerned in “L’Art de la poésie” and which he clearly conceives as being compatible with verisimilitude. Some thirty years later, in the *Discours pour prouver que les sujets Chrestiens sont les seuls propres à la poésie Héroïque* prefaced to the revised edition of *Clovis* (1673), Desmarets argues against the ornamental use of pagan mythology in poetry and associated hyperboles, claiming that “les Chrestiens, qui seuls ont la verité, ont seuls le vraisemblable.”

Because it is so deeply ironic, I hope it is worth repeating that Desmarets is sometimes remembered, if at all, only through Nicole’s hostile phrase: “Un faiseur de romans et un poète de théâtre est un empoisonneur public, non des corps, mais des âmes des fidèles . . .” For it is forgotten not only how extensive and influential Desmarets’s writings were, but that he had been closely associated with the cultural and devotional activities of the royal Court itself. Desmarets supplied poems not only for Notre-Dame, but for the statue of Louis XIII in the Place Royale (now Place des Vosges). Doubtless because he had so often danced in Court ballets with the King, it was Desmarets’s great *Ballet de la félicité* which was selected to celebrate the birth of the Dauphin, the future Louis XIV; and it was his *Mirame* which was selected to open in 1641 the great new theater in the Palais-Cardinal destined to become Molière’s theater and then the Paris Opéra. Though early in his career Desmarets seems to have come close to compromise in the trial of Théophile de Viau, his purpose (as far as I can see) was never to corrupt, but to edify through entertainment. Good intentions do not of course assure success, but arguably Desmarets’s success was greater than is now appreciated. One can cite the numerous editions and translations into several languages of *Ariane* and *Les Visionnaires*. After his conversion, he was not proud of his early reputation as a star performer in Court ballet, or for the innovative staging of *Aspasie* with successive décors and of *Mirame* with transformation scenes which also respected the newly fashionable unities. The innovative illustration of *Clovis* and of *Les Délices de l’esprit* also
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Desmarets’s “L’Art de la poésie” deserves mention, although the texts (often without illustrations) had numerous reprints, especially the latter. Desmarets was the first to use Europe in the title of a separate publication and one of the earliest to use the title and form of the literary promenade.13 He was an early proponent of the critical appreciation of French literature and of what we now call comparative literature in La Comparaison de la langue et de la poésie française avec la grecque et la latine, et des poètes grecs, latins et français (Paris, 1670). Neither “L’Art de la poésie,” La Comparaison, nor any of his other critical writing is strong in detailed analysis of rhetorical theory. But this relative weakness is compensated by a lofty conception of the cultural value of literature and of other arts, including technologies. Above all, he was an early protagonist of the Modern position in the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns. As early as 1636 he wrote in his burlesque poem “Les Amours du compas et de la règle” dedicated to Richelieu:

Et la Muse en riant me conduit par la main
Où ne marcha jamais le Grec ni le Romain.14

Even in this burlesque poem, Desmarets’s high purpose stands in sharp contrast both with Malherbe’s abdication of high cultural ambitions for literature and with Nicole’s hostility toward the liberating innovation of imaginative writing. It involves a sense of post-Renaissance adventure in which, though deeply imbedded in classical forms and Counter-Reformation patterns of thought, he glimpses a new superiority in modern European civilisation and the prospect of establishing within it the cultural hegemony of France. As for Richelieu, this was partly a matter of arms: Desmarets was Contrôleur général de l’extraordinaire des guerres and secretary to the French Mediterranean fleet. But it was also very much a matter of diplomacy, of cultural and literary confidence and ascendancy.

One achievement not evident in “L’Art de la poésie” is more or less to have devised the schema through which we divide the study of French literature into separate centuries, through the concept of the century of Louis XIV, which I have discussed elsewhere in relation to Desmarets’s Le Triomphe de Louis et de son siècle (1674) and to Perrault’s Le Siècle de Louis-le-Grand (1687).15 Discussion of his sense of translatio studii and of translatio imperii would exceed the limits of this presentation. Yet among a growing body of French intellectuals who early in the seven-
teenth century came to see Bourbon and Catholic France not simply as cyclical successors to such select past periods of greatness as the Empire of Alexander and the Roman Empire under Julius and then Augustus Caesar, but (by an upturn in the cycle) as positively superior in religion, arms, politics, invention, technology, the arts, and literature, Desmarets was clearly one of the more influential. To express a new confidence he often adapted classical forms, as suggested above, but with a different message. Witness the contrast between Anchises’s prophesy in Aeneid VI, p.847 ff., where Virgil concedes that other nations may excel in the arts and in rhetoric, but Rome will have a dominant political role, and Desmarets’s increasing insistence on the superiority of all things French, Catholic and modern. The limitations of such a view hardly need spelling out, and the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns did spell them out. But much of this position survives in underlying attitudes long associated with French “classicism,” for instance (Catholic dominance excepted) in Voltaire’s Siècle de Louis XIV, from the explicit translatio studii with which it begins, through insistence on cultural as well as military achievements, to Voltaire’s general assumption that French literary values are a superior norm even in an increasingly relativist world. Doubtless this oversimplifies, but it scarcely distorts or exaggerates. In any case, it restores some of the credit for the achievements of the later seventeenth century to the foundations laid by Richelieu and by the poet who, in the “Discours de la poésie,” addressed Richelieu near the beginning of his ambitious program of cultural patronage in the following terms:

Rends nostre siècle illustre en lettres comme en armes:
Fay qu’un esprit divin descouvre par ses vers
Qu’un LOUIS doit un iour regir tout l’univers. . . .

This is the doubtless still contentious sense in which Desmarets should be considered as “un visionnaire du XVIIe siècle.”

Notes

2. Or so I argue in presenting Desmarets's comedy *Les Visionnaires* (Paris: Didier, 1963), pp. xviii ff. I have since discovered that this was probably the Desmarets who, already in the service of the king at the siege of the château de Caen in 1620, published an account of its surrender, and that it was undoubtedly he who in 1623 was sent by the Parlement de Paris with Bautru to convey complaints to the royal court at Fontainebleau.


4. Other occasional pieces written by Desmarets after the *Oeuvres poétiques* went to press were added extracollationally to (some) copies left in stock. Such additions include his last play *Europe*. See my papers “Three Illustrated Works of Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin,” *Yale University Library Gazette* 33 (1958), pp. 18–23, and “*Europe, allégorie théâtrale de propagande politique,*” in *L’Age d’or du mécénat, 1598–1661* (Paris: CNRS, 1985), pp. 319–27.


L’Art de la Poesie
à
Monseigneur le Cardinal-Duc de Richelieu

Grand DVC, qui terracant les monstres de la France,
As couronné ta gloire, en dontant l'Ignorance;
Richelieu, dont le nom courant par l'Univers,
Souffre d'être porté sur l'aile de nos vers;
Entens un peu parler, au retour des allarmes,
De cet art merveilleux dont tu chéris les charmes,
Et de tes hauts pensers tiens le vol en suspens,
Pour goûter ses secrets, qu'au monde je répans.

De l'esprit des Mortels la douce nourriture,
N'est pas à contempler les faits de la Nature.
D'un oeil indifférent nous voyons leurs beautez,
Des moindres feux du Ciel les brillantes clartez,
Du grand Astre des jours la lumière éclatante,
Et le teint argenté de sa soeur inconstante.
L'Homme, de ces beaux corps regarde la splendeur
Sans un ravissement digne de leur grandeur.
Il voit des éléments la concorde & la guerre,
Le bel azur des Cieux, & le vert de la Terre,
Des spacieuses mers les écumantes eaux,
Le crystal ondoyant des murmurs ruisseaux,
Les flots impetuëux des rivières superbes,
Le vif email des fleurs, & l'oeil riant des herbes,
Les arbres chevelus des rivages voisins,
Les fertiles cotaux où naissent les raisins,
Les épics jaunissants, richesses des campagnes,
Et l'abry des valons, & l'orgueil des montagnes.
Il voit de toutes parts mouvoir par l'univers,
Des habitans de l'air le plumage divers,
Il voit des animaux les troupes vagabondes,
Et les peuples muets qui nagent sous les ondes,
L'Homme se voit lui-même en ce monde logé,
Desmarets's “L'Art de la poésie” 59

Le Chef-d’oeuvre de Dieu, son portrait abbrégé.
Nous voyons tous les jours tant d’œuvres nonpareilles,
Sans nous sentir épris de toutes leurs merveilles.
Mais si quelque Mortel d’un habile pinceau,
De l’un de ces objets a finy le tableau,
Nous aymons ardemment cette rare peinture,
Et l’art nous ravit plus que ne fait la Nature.
Si quelqu’autre accordant par d’inconnus ressorts
La souplesse d’esprit avec celle du corps,
Imite une action ou plaisante ou sérieuse,
Cette veue à nos yeux semble délicieuse,
Sans aymer l’Imité nous aymons l’Imitant.
Ce que l’esprit produit, nous rend l’esprit content.
Ce grand Dieu merveilleux dont nous sommes l’Image,
Ayme la créature ainsi que son ouvrage;
Il se plut à l’Instant en ce qu’il a vœut fait,
De ses puissantes mains il admira l’effet;
La Nature est de luy, c’est par luy que nous sommes;
Mais l’Art imitateur est l’ouvrage des hommes,
C’est une créature, il nous charme les sens,
Et remplit nos esprits de plaisirs innocens.

Plus un art à nos sens représente de choses,
Plus de perfections là se treuvent encloses;
La Peinture, embrassant les objets de nos yeux,
Imite tous les corps que l’on voit sous les Cieux.
Mais la Muse divine, à qui tout est possible,
Embrasse tout sujet invisible, & visible;
Des astres nous décrit le réglé mouvement,
Monté d’un vol hardy dessus le firmament;
Elle fuit au delà des lieux imaginaires,
Puis descend aux secrets des effets sublunaires,
D’où naissent les éclairs, l’orage & les frimats,
L’espérance & l’horreur des terrestres climats.
C’est elle qui décrit & Dieu même & ses Anges,
Adore son pouvoir, luy donne des louânges,
Dicte les mots sacrez dont on le doit bénir,
Se mêle de savoir le passé, l’avenir;
Pénètre des humains le coeur & la pensée,
Dit ce qu’une ame sent de douleur oppressée,
Ou quels sont ses transports nageant dans le plaisir,
Ou s'animant de haine, ou mourant de désir;
Les vices, les vertus, & les humeurs diverses,
Du sort capricieux les biens & les traverses,
Des esprits modérez les jours délicieux,
Et les nuits sans sommeil des coeurs ambitieux;
Les douceurs de la paix, les travaux de la guerre,
Et la honte & l'honneur des Princes de la terre.
En fin, d'un vers pompeux, sa verve nous décrit
Tout ce qui reconnoît l'empire de l'esprit.

Mais son art qui comprend toute chose imitable,
Sait mêler sagement l'utile au délectable
Par ses charmes flatteurs rend le vice abattu,
Inspire adroitement l'amour de la Vertu,
Elle amuse nos sens par les fables plaisantes,
Arrachant de nos coeurs les épines nuisantes;
Puis y plante en leur lieu les bons enseignemens;
Comme une Mère entend par des amusemens
A charmer de plaisirs une humeur enfantine,
Cependant que sa main verse la médecine.

Dans le vers heroïque, elle forme un guerrier,
Pieux, sage, courtois, vaillant, aventurier,
Patient aux travaux, amateur de justice,
Honnorant les beaux-faits, & punissant le vice;
Tel que doit estre un Roy, de qui les qualitez
Font d'un Peuple les maux, ou les felicitez.
Pour dépeindre les Grans, & pour leur estre utile,
Entrant dans leurs palais, elle prend un haut style,
Elle s'arme pour eux de pompe, & de grandeur,
Et fait luire en son front une auguste pudeur.
Elle sait s'animer d'une noble furie,
Pour chasser d'auprès d'eux l'erreur, la flatterie,
L'Impiété, l'Envie, & les sales amours,
L'Injustice, & l'orgueil, pestes des grandes cours.
Pour se rendre plus grave, elle enfile sa parole,
La docte Métaphore, & la haute Hyperbole,
Sont de ses grans discours les riches ornemens.
Elle se laisse aller aux transports véhémens;
Et pour se faire voir des Cieux originaire,
Dédaigne de parler un langage ordinaire.
Car la Muse imitant tout ce que voit l'esprit,
Desmarets's "L'Art de la poésie"

Suit cet art des humains qu'en la terre elle apprit;
Mais alors qu'elle invente une belle aventure
Glorieuse elle suit l'auteur de la Nature;
Et produisant au jour ce qui ne fut jamais,
Imite du grand Dieu les admirables faits.
D'abord, en méprisant d'entrer par la barrière,
Elle saute au milieu de sa longue carrière;
Et jette les esprits en ce même moment
Dans l'agréable espoir d'un grand événement.
Ayant par le désir attaché les oreilles,
Elle sait les charmer de ses doctes merveilles,
Conduit les grands desseins d'un fil ingénieux,
Ensorcele nos sens d'un son harmonieux,
Et mêle adroitement d'une veine fertile,
Et le faux, & le vray, le plaisant & l'utile.
Puis, pour rendre l'esprit de tout point contenté,
Et ne l'engager pas dedans l'obscurité;
Elle prend aux cheveux les rencontres naissantes,
Pour faire un beau récit des choses précédentes.
Ce discours est succinct, clair, doux & merveilleux,
Plein d'accidens divers, de combats périlleux,
De contes inouïs, & de fameux voyages;
Tantôt marquant des mers les dangereux passages;
Tantôt les régions, les ports, & les Citez;
Toujours divertissant par ses diversitez.
Enfin, dans ce doux point l'âme se voit conduite,
Qu'elle entend le passé dont elle sait la suite.
Sortant de ce détroit avec tant de plaisir,
Pour savoir le surplus nait un plus grand désir.
La Muse avance alors le grand corps de sa fable,
Qui, bien que merveilleuse est toujours vraysemblable,
Et dont le fondement, pris sur la vérité,
Fait qu'on reçoit pour vray tout le faux inventé.
Aux grandes actions, superbe elle s'attache;
Des moindres s'en défait, les néglige & les cache;
Elle fait un beau choix, & décrit seulement
Ce qu'elle reconnoît capable d'ornement.
Les querelles des Roys à leurs Etats funestes,
Et du Peuple Innocent les dangereuses pestes
Les horribles combats, les sièges, les assauts,
De deux camps ennemis la force & les défauts,
Des plus nobles guerriers la diverse vaillance,
L'un vaillant par vertu, l'autre par arrogance,
Un autre par espoir, ou par nécessité,
Par ruse, par exemple, ou par brutalité.

Recueils Conrart 4°, t. XI, p. 835 seq. Ars. MS 4116.