Poetry and the Comic—A Subtle Partnership

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"The English have humor, the French perceive it." This bon mot springing from the well-known gallic arrogance illustrates in a jocular way the possible disjunction between the producer of a discourse and its recipient. It offers a crude similarity, and gives a dismissive thrust, to a delicate question which is at the center of literary criticism and has been much discussed in the past few years: that of the problematic connection between the production of a text (whether conscious, semiconscious, or, as in the French statement mentioned above, supposedly unconscious) and the response of the reader.

I have chosen this lateral opening to the present essay because the alliance of the poetic and the comic in a work of literature not only may require from the author the elaboration of intricate patterns but also may confront the reader with a teasing range of responses. The perception of the comic is by itself a complex operation and the kind of satisfaction suggested by poetry is equally complex and of a different nature. If already a number of people do not expect the comic to have serious implications, many more would find it difficult to conceive that poetic and comic elements could happily blend, each making its full impact on the reader. They might bring as an argument the case in which one of the two elements is entirely subservient to the other, the formal pattern of poetry with its various devices (meter, rhymes, etc.) being used only to produce a comic effect, as in a limerick for instance. This in fact is properly called comic verse, not poetry. It remains that much depends on both authors' and readers' own ideas of what is "poetic." These views are not only influenced by personal idiosyncrasies, literary genres, and, in as far as the reader is concerned, by degrees of competence or application but also historically conditioned by the particular concept of poetry at a given period.

The intricacies of the question are, I think, very noticeable in French classicism and also, up to a point, in English neoclassicism.

The first text I propose to examine is taken from the opening scene of
Molière’s *Les Femmes Savantes*, in which the two sisters express their divergent views on marriage:

> Mon Dieu, que votre esprit est d’un étage bas!
> Que vous jouez au monde un petit personnage,
> De vous claquermer au choses du ménage,
> Et de n’entrevoir point de plaisirs plus touchants
> Qu’un idole d’époux et des marmots d’enfants!
> Laissez au gens grossiers, aux personnes vulgaires,
> Les bas amusements de ces sortes d’affaires;
> A de plus hauts objets élevez vos désirs,
> Songez à prendre un goût des plus nobles plaisirs,
> Et traitant de mépris les sens et la matière,
> A l’esprit comme nous, donnez-vous toute entière.
> Vous avez notre mere en exemple a vos yeux,
> Que du nom de savante on honore en tous lieux:
> Tâchez ainsi que moi de vous montrer sa fille,
> Aspirez aux clartés qui sont dans la famille,
> Et vous rendez sensible au charmantes douceurs
> Que l’amour de l’étude épanche dans les coeurs;
> Loin d’être aux lois d’un homme en esclave asservie
> Mariez-vous, ma soeur, à la philosophie
> Qui nous monte au-dessus de tout le genre humain,
> Et donne à la raison l’empire souverain,
> Soumettant à ses lois la partie animale,
> Dont l’appétit grossier aux bêtes nous ravale.
> Ce sont là les beaux feux, les doux attachements,
> Qui doivent de la vie occuper les moments;
> Et les soins où je vois tant de femmes sensibles
> Me paroissent aux yeux des pauvretés horribles.²

The comic of Armande’s speech is, at least at first sight, perfectly straightforward. It lies in the discrepancy between the accepted opinion of a woman’s role as a wife and mother and the précieuse’s abnormal tenets: refusal of marriage, obsessive yearning for intellectual pursuits. However this feminist attitude—which was partly justified by the condition of women at the time—needed some elaboration to be presented as comic.

The most obvious comic flaw in Armande’s rhetoric is its oversimplification. The passage is built on antitheses which constantly oppose mind and matter, spiritual delights and humdrum chores. Keywords underline
the opposition: "bas," "grossiers," "vulgaires," "animale" on the one hand, "hauts," "nobles," "charmants" on the other. The dynamic pattern—a succession of rises and falls—translates in its uncompromising verticality the antithetical nature of Armande's overstatements. But the pattern is far from being rigid or mechanical, and is marked by an elegant flexibility. The ascending movement, punctured by objurgations such as "élevez vos désirs," "aspirez aux clartés," comes to a magnificent climax:

Loin d'ètre aux lois d'un homme en esclave asservie
Mariez-vous, ma soeur, à la philosophie,
Qui nous monte au-dessus de tout le genre humain . . .

Here the absurd analogy, made to stand out through the pauses in the lines, sound like a triumphant clarion call introducing the impressive long period that follows.

The rhymes also play their part, emphasizing the joys of life devoted to study ("désirs"—"plaisirs," "douceurs"—"coeurs"), giving a neat finish to the reminder of an exemplary mother ("fille"—"famille"), magnifying the power of knowledge ("genre humain"—"souverain") in opposition to the downward pull of lower instincts ("animale"—"ravale").

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of this speech is the diction which, with very few exceptions, belongs to the grand style characteristic of the literary language of the French classicists. One of the features of this language is the strong tendency to use abstract words with an extensive field of connotations, the blurring of their outlines even increased by the added imprecision of the plural, such as "clartés," "douceurs," "attachements."

Three words, however, do not belong to poetic diction: "claquemurer," "marmots," "idole" (taken here in its seventeenth-century meaning of a dull inert creature, a dolt). But the words are used by Armande more or less in inverted commas as if she were compelled by the violence of her ironical scorn to stoop to such familiar expressions. In any case, the unseemly picturesqueness of "claquemurer" is nicely balanced by the vague grayness of "choses du ménage," "idole" and "marmots" and by the orthodoxy of "époux" and "enfants." The despicable chores of a married woman are thereafter viewed from a great distance and "bas amusements," "sortes d'affaires," and finally summed up in the last line of the passage as "pauvretés horribles."
In comedy, poetic language may take some liberties which would not be possible in tragedy, on the condition of course that it should be done sparingly and with tact. Compare for instance Athalie's periphrasis when referring to Jezabel:

\[
\text{cet éclat emprunté}
\]
\[
\text{Dont elle eut soin de peindre et d'orner son visage}
\]
\[
\text{Pour réparer des ans l'irréparable outrage.}
\]

[II: 5]

and the precise realistic term used by Célimène when talking about Arsimnoé to her face in a speech rightly admired for its stylistic elegance:

\[
\text{Mais elle met du rouge et veut paraître belle.}
\]

[III: 4]

In Armande's lines, quite apart from the intrinsic aesthetic value of the overall effect of the grand style, the very vagueness of this kind of diction is very much in keeping with what we suspect to be the comic vagueness of the précieuse's acquaintance with knowledge. There is also another way in which the lofty terms reveal in Armande a comic discrepancy which will appear more clearly later in the play. The words chosen to convince the anti-précieuse Henriette of the delights which a life devoted to higher thinking will offer—the satisfaction of "désirs," the fulfillment of the "coeur," the "charmantes douceurs," "beaux feux," "doux attachelements"—are undoubtedly rhetorical overstatements. But, if we remember the lexical range of poetic diction, these terms are part and parcel of the language of love and their sexual implications are subconsciously present in a woman who boasts of despising "les sens et la matière."

Thus the possibilities afforded by a poetic text—rhythm, rhymes, diction—result in a comic discourse which is both forceful in its direct impact and rich in subtle nuances. At the same time the poetic medium is in no way debased and retains its elegant urbanity.

This last point is important when we consider Les Femmes Savantes as one of Molière's comedies which has had the misfortune of having been liked or disliked for the wrong reasons. Here, Molière's comic vision of préciosité is very skillfully balanced. The refinement of language which we have just seen in Armande's speech—and which historically owed so much to the influence of the précieux circles—is not in itself made ridiculous. In fact the raisonner, Clitandre, who stands for good taste, uses
the same language as Armande most of the time. But in keeping with the complex pattern of the play, we find variety of tone and diction. And no one better than Molière can show how, in the case of a bad poet, a comic discordance can ruin all the potential poetic value of a piece of verse. Thus Trissotin, in his epigram on the carrosse offered to a lady, destroys all the delicate poetic suggestions of the lovely word “amarante” by his deplorable pun:

Ne dis plus qu’il est amarante:
Dis plutôt qu’il est de ma rente.

[III: 2]

Such is the flexibility in Molière’s use of stylistic devices that if in this last illustration from Les Femmes Savantes he can remove the poetic substance from formal verse, conversely he can elsewhere give prose passages a lyrical quality: for instance, Dorante’s sophisticated description of an exquisite meal in Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme or in the fireworks of Scapin’s fanciful inventiveness.

These would deserve close scrutiny but I am concerned here with what in Molière’s works conforms to the poetics of French classicism: the mold of the regular alexandrine and the limitations on vocabulary. The restrictions are not a hindrance but an asset when the writer takes advantage of the various connotations of the terms belonging to poetic diction. The choice of the possible implications of a word becomes a question of focus. We saw for instance that in Armande’s speech the comic vision of préciosité gave a particular significance to the vocabulary of love. A similar vocabulary is also to be found in Tartuffe’s declaration to Elmire, but this time the focus is different.

One remembers the two superbly engineered speeches in which Tartuffe displays his rhetoric of seduction, both ending with a neat symmetrical pattern of opposites: the first on the tone of the respectful lover whose diffidence is underlined by the pauses:

Heureux, si vous voulez, malheureux, s’il vous plaît.

[III: 3]

the second with a closely knit pattern which firmly sums up the cynical advantages of his offer:

De l’amour sans scandale et du plaisir sans peur.

[III: 3]
The opening lines of the declaration set the key to the phraseology Tartuffe is going to exploit:

L’amour qui nous attache aux beautés éternelles
N’étrouffe pas en nous l’amour des temporelles;
Nos sens facilement peuvent être charmins
Des ouvrages parfaits que le Ciel a formés.
Ses attraits réfléchis brillent dans vos pareilles;
Mais il étales en vous ses plus rares merveilles:
Il a sur votre face épanché des beautés
Dont les yeux sont surpris, et les coeurs transportés,
Et je n’ai pu vous voir, parfaite créature,
Sans admirer en vous l’auteur de la nature,
Et d’une ardente amour sentir mon coeur atteint,
Au plus beau des portraits où lui-même il s’est peint.

This is a variation on the traditional syllogism used by Petrarchan poets with reference to neoplatonic fiction (we must adore Beauty, my mistress is beautiful, therefore I must adore her). The theme here is endowed with an exalted quality rarely to be found in love sonnets. The amplitude of the rhythm strikes a chord of solemnity, particularly when a couple of lines end with polysyllables (“éternelles”—“temporelles”) or sonorous rhymes (“pareilles”—“merveilles”). The beautés éternelles may conjure up the world of Ideas but the “Ciel” clearly refers to the Christian God, “auteur de la nature” and as such, the maker of a “parfaite créature.” The ultimate effect of loftiness comes from the reminder that God created man in his own image, after his likeness:

Au plus des portraits où lui-même il s’est peint.

Having reached these heights, Tartuffe is able to play with the ambiguities of a rich semantic field in order to assimilate human love and religious fervor.

It has often been remarked that Tartuffe uses terms that belong to the vocabulary of religious mysticism such as “infirmité,” “tribulations,” “béatitude,” “quiétude,” adjectives such as “bénigne,” “suave.” These words with their marked degree of abstractedness, their impressive quality of containing a vast network of evasive connotations fit perfectly into the poetic diction of the speech. They also give a powerful and deeply comic enlargement to the attitude of the traditional Petrarchan lover, al-
most beyond the customary hyperboles, as well as a different coloring to
the poetic substance. The unworthiness of the lover reaches the depths of
humility with the Christian implication that only grace can save him as
he expects nothing “des vains efforts de mon infirmité.” The joys he longs
for are on a level with the peaceful contemplation of a soul blissfully
attuned to its creator. The religious atmosphere which thus subtly per­
meates the text affects such conventions of love poetry as the deification
of the lady and the invincible power of her eyes so that the line

De vos regards divins l’ineffable douceur

while conforming to the topos suggests the mysterious and ambiguously
sensual ecstasy of a saint, as portrayed by a baroque artist.

Boileau also takes up the subject of hypocritical devotion with a portrait
of the fashionable directeur de femme insisting on the kind of advice he
gives to one of his flock, the central point of his comforting doctrine being
that

Tout est sanctifié par une ame pieuse

All the moral shortcomings of the lady are justified including her fierce
greed and ambition to see all her family grabbing the financial and hon­
orific advantages of high offices at court:

Vostre bon naturel en cela pour Eux brille.
Dieu ne nous defend point d’aimer nostre famille.
D’ailleurs tous vos parens sont sages, vertueux.
Il est bon d’empescher ces emplois fastueux,
D’estre donnez peut-estre a des Ames mondaines,
Eprises du neant des vanitez humaines.

The comic of this complete reversal of moral values is particularly fine in
the last two lines where the grand style adds a solemn emphasis to the
preposterous casuistry.

A few lines further on the tone becomes somewhat different when we
are given the result of this spiritual guidance:

Sa Devote s’incline . . .

Sa tranquille vertu conserve tous ses crimes:
Dans un coeur tous les jours nourri du Sacrement
Maintient la vanité, l'orgueil, l'entestement,
Et croit que devant Dieu ses frequens sacrilèges
Sont pour entrer au Ciel d'assurez privilèges.
Voilà le digne fruit des soins de son Docteur.
Encore est-ce beaucoup, si ce Guide imposteur,
Par les chemins fleuris d'un charmant Quiétisme
Tout à coup l'amenant au vray Molinozisme,
Il ne luy fait bien-tost, aidé de Lucifer,
Gouster en Paradis les plaisirs de l'Enfer.

We are left in no doubt as to the label to affix onto this comic vision of false devotion. The explicit moral condemnation ("crimes," "sacrilèges," etc.), the precise mention of contemporary religious movements, the stark violence of the irony culminating in the brutality of the final paradox: this is barefaced satire. In Molière's *Tartuffe* the satire was incidental as is almost always the case with him. Vices or foibles, even those seemingly of his own times—the excesses of préciosité, the rich parvenu, or the faux dévot—are a point of departure for a more general criticism of life in the form of a comic presentation of the insoluble problems to be found in human nature. The comic of *Tartuffe* does not lie in being a take-off on a contemporary dévot (they were more subtly clever than he is) but in the contradiction between his assumed saintly appearance and the only too visible reality of his gluttony and lechery. Moreover Tartuffe is part of a more intricate comic picture in which his maneuvers and utterances light up and conversely are colored by the reactions of the other characters.

Boileau is a satirist. And with satire the alliance of the poetic and the comic faces a particular difficulty. Satire is a hybrid form of the comic. Pure comic to be perceived requires an attitude of detachment which basically seems impossible in the case of satire. The satiric mode tends to bring out in the reader immediate reactions of his sensibility such as disgust, indignation, even painful bitterness and loathing. Yet with Boileau the perception of the comic is safe. The main subject of his attacks is not one likely to upset the reader's sensibility. Occasionally, as in the satire against women from which I have just quoted a passage, he may treat a conventional topic; however, what he is primarily concerned with is not an aspect of human conduct but a more intellectual problem: the aesthetics of poetry. What he attacks is not men but books,
words: not Chapelain the man but Chapelain the poet as in Satire IX. The violence in him takes the form of "la haine d'un sot livre" (IX) and what he has so wittily and rightly called in his preface to Satire XII "une espèce de colère poétique." This focus undoubtedly implies limitations. The sphere of his satire has nothing in common with that cruel tussle with evil which is the hallmark of great satire. But his singleness of purpose gives him a very special place in the pantheon of formal satire. His achievement can be considered, for the greater part, as an original and remarkable contribution to a very close partnership of the poetic and the comic—poetry being at the same time the tool and the material in producing the comic effect.

The revaluation of Boileau in the second half of the present century has brought to the fore his qualities as a poet and I shall have the pleasure of referring to some aspects of this most stimulating approach. A number of Jules Brody's remarks are especially relevant to the present essay, as when he very finely delineates the kind of response—an active participation—Boileau's text must elicit. This invitation on the poet's part to "collaborate" (to borrow Brody's word) implies both curiosity and sympathy from us. This should be the most rewarding, given the attractive complexity of Boileau's own attitude toward poetry, because for him poetry is fun and is also the most serious thing in the world.

The strict requirements of verse form may appear to him at times the curse of his life:

Maudit soit le premier dont la verve insensée  
Dans les bornes d'un vers renferma sa pensée.  
[Satire II]

And yet when praising the King's victories in Holland what enjoyment he derives from next to impossible rhymes and from his feigned inability to deal with names in essence unpoetic!

Et qui peut, sans fremir, aborder Woerden,  
Quel Vers ne tomberoit au seul nom de Heusden?  
Quelle Muse à rimer en tous lieux dispozée  
Oseroit approcher des bords du Zuiderzee?  
Et par tout sur le Whal, ainsi que sur le Leck,  
Le vers est en déroute et le poète à sec.  
[Epistre IV]
These last two rhyming monosyllables sound like a sharp tap on the Muse's fingers.

More subtle than this juggling with difficult rhymes is the sustained *jeu poétique* which presides over the fundamentally serious content of Satire IX, and gives it its pattern. The poem is *par excellence* Boileau's apologia for satire. As Maynard Mack has shown in a brilliant essay it is necessary for the satirist to make his ethical position clear and convincing by presenting himself in a favorable light, worthy of being trusted. Hence the importance of the persona he assumes. In Satire IX we witness the acrobatics of the fictitious persona who, endowed with a split personality, embarks on a mock duel from antithetical positions: for or against the right to satirize. The successive twists in the exchange or arguments—some of these cleverly self-defeating—result in a great variety of tones—reproachful, sarcastic, falsely naive, irritated, humble—and multiply through the skillful maneuvers of the duelists the number of thrusts, at times pleasantly unexpected, which directly or indirectly are aimed at the satirist's victims.

The victims are of course the bad poets of the period but the virtuosity of this attack transcends its contemporary character and thus escapes the fate of short-lived topical satire.

Et qui scâuroit sans moi que Cotin a prêché?

A joke but also a prophetic statement. Cotin and the other writers whom Boileau has ridiculed exist for the modern reader as protagonists in a poetic comedy we can appreciate for itself. But if the original features of these personages have faded into a kind of timeless transparency, it remains that, as is the case with Molière, the reader's active response to Boileau's text must take into account the conventions of seventeenth-century literary language. They affect in a rather interesting way the classicist's handling of metaphors.

Here are a few lines from *L'Art Poétique* where Boileau, referring to Scudéry, makes fun of the descriptive technique of an author who never knows when to stop:

S'il rencontre un Palais, il m'en dépeint la face:
Il me promène après de terrasse en terrasse.
Icy s'offre un perron, là règne un corridor,
Là ce balcon s'enferme en un balustre d'or:
Il compte des plafonds les ronds et les ovales,
The passage undoubtedly relies on figurative language for its comic and poetic effect. Paradoxically, the slow, boring reading of a tedious description undergoes a lively transformation. Verbs of motion sketch the haphazard and dull method of the author: chance encounters, leisurely meandering, exhaustive survey of niggling details, and the swift desperate escape of the reader. Inanimate objects acquire a life of their own through the interplay of denotations in verbs like “s’offre” and “ règne,” the finest semi-personification being that of the “balcon” with the “s’enferme” which suggests a gesture and a mental attitude of proud disdain. All these suggestions are light touches and their rapid succession while stimulating our imagination does not leave us with lasting pictures. We have here that impression of evanescent metaphors to be found as well in other classical writers.

The two elements of the narrative, the actual and the imaginary, are nicely fused at the end of the passage in the juxtaposition of the impatient flipping through the pages of a book and the panic-stricken flight through the grounds of the mansion.

The imagery of motion, conspicuous in these lines, plays a very important part in Boileau’s poetry. It was perhaps a subtle way for a classicist to re-introduce unobtrusively a concrete element in a literary language which was so cut off from a realistic representation of the world. We find it equally in La Bruyère with a similar comic and poetic value.

We may also notice another paradox in the passage. Although the surcharge of ornaments in the description is ridiculed, the line which expresses such unnecessary sophistication has a sophisticated beauty of its own (“ Là ce balcon s’enferme en un balustre d’or”) so that even the quotation from Scudéry, inserted almost immediately after, strikes a note of pleasurable luxury, mostly with the sonorous and lovely word Astragales which sounds (quite wrongly as far as its etymology and meaning are concerned) like a display of starbursts.

It is not the only time that we find in Boileau the device of incorporating a quotation from another poet into his own text, thus illuminating both with a lateral shaft of light. It may be a quotation from a poet he admires as when the lines he borrows are, at several degrees removed, from Malherbe:
Irai-je dans une Ode, en phrases de Malherbe,
Troubler dans ses roseaux le Danube superbe:
Délivrer de Sion le peuple gemissant;
Faire trembler Memphis, ou paslir le Croissant:
Et passant du Jourdain les ondes alarmées,
Cueillir, mal à propos, les palmes Idumées?

[Satire IX]

This is obviously a little dig at Malherbe's slavish imitators, but the verse retains a Malherbian nobility and the amusing twist at the end sets off the exotic allusiveness of the Idumaean palms while inviting the reader to share in the joke of the anticlimax.

Literary borrowings from the classics are another matter. Here too one has to remember that imitation was still a principle of art in the seventeenth century. The Horatian flavor of a great deal of Boileau's poetry is well known. Imitation of the classics gave an ennobling patine to a poem. This could not fail to be an important consideration for him:

Quoique vous écriviez, évitez la bassesse.
Le stile le moins noble a pourtant sa noblesse.

[Art Poétique I]

He would never allow the comic to debase the poetic language. When we think of the two traditional genres that established ready-made patterns for the alliance of the poetic and the comic, it is significant that he did not choose the burlesque, which he abominated, but its very antithesis, the mock-heroic, (which raised a subject taken from low life onto a higher and nobler plane) and composed Le Lutrin.¹⁰

One of the most precious legacies of Greece and Rome was the mythological atmosphere which had been the privileged domain of French poetry since the Renaissance. Among other advantages, it provided a decorative imagery for the poet's creative process. Boileau finds it useful to render his own harassing experience of the search for perfect rhythm, perfect rhymes and rich expressiveness:

Sans cesse poursuivant ces fugitives Fées,
On voit sous Les Lauriers, haleter les Orphées.

[Epistre XI]¹¹

(These two lines with their seemingly effortless harmony and their suggestive power giving the lie to the implied statement.)

Some of the most obvious mythological figures linked with poetic in-
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spiration were equally convenient for self-mockery; and even more so for satirizing incompetent poets:

Phébus a-t-il pour vous aplani le Parnasse?

[Satire IX]

Mythology had lost a great deal of its evocative quality by the time of French classicism. Boileau manages more than once to infuse a breath of life into a world frozen by convention. This he achieves by using once more images of motion but tactfully, with a great lightness of touch, so as not to upset the accepted connotation of the mythological element. This careful process can be seen very clearly in the way he expresses the clumsy attempts of the poète sans art:

Sa Muse déréglée, en ses vers vagabonds
Ne s’élève jamais que par sauts et par bonds

[Art Poétique, III]

The incongruous movements of the Muse in her abortive flight upwards are comic but within the harmony of the verse the jerkiness is poetically controlled. Note also that the concrete element is kept in check. The word “déréglée” which qualifies the muse can only apply to an abstraction (for “Muse” read “inspiration”). We move smoothly from abstract to concrete through the “vers vagabonds.” As a result of this delicate balance there is no danger of a burlesque picture of the muse.

Elsewhere in the Art Poétique a pompous and insensitive poet is ridiculed for metaphorically sounding a clarion in the middle of a gentle eclogue. The effect of this loud discordant noise is rendered by the graceful flight of rustic deities:

De peur de l’écouter, Pan fuit dans les roseaux,
Et les Nymphes d’effroi se cachent sous le eaux.

[II]

Mythology had not lost its charm entirely and could at times give a delicate coloring to Boileau’s comic sketches.

When we see the pastoral landscape thus lending its scenery to the comic vision without being debased in any way, we may well think of another poet, English this time, Pope, who also took advantage of the same tradition, mostly in his milder satiric vein.

Here are a few lines devoted to the pretentious garden of a wealthy man:
His Gardens next your admiration call,
On ev'ry side you look, behold the Wall!
No pleasing Intricacies intervene,
No artful wildness to perplex the scene;
Grove nods at grove, each Alley has a brother,
And half the platform just reflects the other.
The suff'ring eye inverted Nature sees,
Trees cut to Statues, Statues thick as trees,
With here a Fountain, never to be play'd,
And there a Summer-house, that knows no shade.
Here Amphitrite sails thro' myrtle bow'rs;
There Gladiators fight, or die, in flow'rs;
Un-water'd see the drooping sea-horse mourn,
And swallows roost in Nilus' dusty Urn.

[Epistle IV: ll. 114-26]12

The comic here might appear as a caricatural description of a garden where everything is wrong, the amusing effect increasing with the enumeration and variety of the examples which testify to false art, including the absurdity of a fountain without water and a useless summerhouse.

The unrelenting symmetry of the landscaping emphasized in several lines by the caesura gives the features of the garden preposterous human attributes (a nod or a brother) and makes its strongest impact with the pattern of line 120 where the mutilation of nature and coarsening of art are translated with superb compactness through the comic inversion of the normal order of things:

Trees cut to Statues, Statues thick as trees,

The placing of the statues—these destined to add the refinement of classical culture to the grounds—is in complete contradiction with the attributes of the figures they represent and may well seem the most grotesque aberration in the design of the park.

And yet I think I was not right in using the word caricatural. This would not take into account the poetic character of the passage which is particularly marked in the last four lines. Strangely, the classical figures by being seen in unexpected surroundings recapture a lost evocative power. Amphitritites appear more lovely, if less conventionally regal, sailing through bowers of myrtle which one thinks should have been destined to Aphrodite. The gladiators, no longer petrified as Gladiator Pugnans and Gladiator Moriens, assume, even in their dying fall, a lissom grace
against a flowery background. The line that depicts the fate of the seahorse starts with an elegant syntactical inversion and is made to sound as a long, drawn out pathetic plaint and the last line, with its pleasant alliteration and its swallows, brings renewed life to the dusty emptiness of the urn held by the river god.

Here perhaps the response of the modern reader would be to connect in his imagination the charm of the pastoral suggestions with the haunting and subtle beauty of those old, long-neglected formal gardens where fountains are for ever silent and nature has with random artistry invaded what is left of former statuary.

This last remark might suggest that the postromantic reader would more easily find Pope’s lines poetic than he would the illustrations from Molière or Boileau I have given. This may be the case. Pope is obviously a very great poet. But we must remember that if English neoclassicism had a great deal in common with French classicism, there were also important differences; for neoclassicism incorporated a much wider tradition. Most important of all, whatever the presence of a poetic diction which Wordsworth was to attack later on, the literary language was not restricted by the limitations inherent in the poetics of seventeenth-century France. A poet could couple the nobility of the grand style with the crisp raciness of a rich vocabulary, as Pope did, for example when satirizing, like Boileau, the boring long-winded writers:

Still humming on, their drouzy course they keep,
And lash’d so long, like tops, are lash’d asleep.

[An Essay on Criticism, ll. 600, 601]

It remains that with Molière and Boileau as with Pope the comic impact with all its nuances is inseparable from the poetic achievement. In the case of these French seventeenth-century writers, the author-reader (or listener) relationship may happen to be a very close one, with a self-effacing attitude on the part of both, given the respect of the first for the poetics of his time and for his audience and, as far as the second is concerned, the willingness to enjoy the plaisir du texte according to a certain code.

It does not necessarily follow that all the readers will oblige. I have mentioned some specific reactions of the twentieth-century reader. And my pleasurable response to the word Astragales may be an unjustified personal one. But, in spite of some inevitable variations in the way our
imagination reacts, the kind of text I have illustrated in this essay keeps
the quality of uniqueness in the handling of literary language, character­
istic of classicism, which gives it its highly rewarding, if somewhat exact­
ing, appeal.

There was, incidentally, at the same time another French poet whom I
have not yet mentioned whose works show in the most exquisite form
how subtle the partnership between the comic and poetry could be: La
Fontaine.

But that, Best Beloved (if I may so address the Muse of Comedy) is
another story.

NOTES

1. See on this point the very interesting essay of Jane P. Tomkins, “The reader
in history: the changing shape of literary response,” in Reader-Response Criticism

2. The quotations from Molière are taken from Oeuvres Complètes, 2 vols.,

3. The quotations from Boileau are taken from Oeuvres Complètes, ed. Fran­

4. The point is strongly emphasized by Alvin P. Kerman in his essay “A
Theory of Satire” in Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. R. Paulson (Englewood

5. Jules Brody and Bernard Beugnot have played a most important part in this
revaluation. A useful bibliography as well as a clear historical account of
Boileau’s fortunes will be found in Boileau, visages anciens, visages modernes,
Bernard Beugnot and Roger Zuber (Montreal: Presses de l’université de Mon­
tréal, 1973). Since then Jules Brody has added to his previous work on Boileau a
brilliant paper “Boileau et la critique poétique,” Colloques Internationaux du
C.N.R.S., No. 557 (Paris, 1974). There has been a very interesting attempt by
Gordon Pocock to reach a unifying picture of Boileau in connection with prob­
lems of doctrinal attitudes in Boileau and the Nature of Neo-classicism, (Cam­
bridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). Susan W. Tiefenbrun has given an
original and lively essay “Boileau and his Friendly Enemy: a Poetics of Satiric
140.

And it is a great pleasure here to make special mention of two excellent articles
by Hugh Davidson: “The Literary Arts of Longinus and Boileau,” in Studies in
the Seventeenth Century Literature Presented to Morris Bishop (Ithaca: Cornell
University Press, 1962), pp. 245–62; and “The Idea of Literary History in the

7. See “The Muse of Satire” in Modern Essays in Criticism.


10. Le Lutrin deserves more than a passing mention. We are, however, very fortunate to have a recent very good article by Michael Edwards, “A Meaning for Mock-Heroic,” in The Yearbook of English Studies 15 (1985). The article deals with The Rape of the Lock as well as Le Lutrin and shows through subtle and convincing analyses how the transformation of the real into poetry operates in both poems.

11. The word was used to mean any fantastic being, including the muses. There is no question of Boileau introducing here an allusion to the national folklore.