A Theatrical Reading of *Cinna*

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In interpreting *Cinna*, not only do I favor a metadramatic approach, but I go so far as to postulate that a given character's so-called tragic flaw coincides with performative failure, or sometimes self-defeating success, as dramatist, director, actor, spectator.

Auguste, in substituting Cinna and Maxime for Maecenas and Agrippa, has hardly shown skill in casting. He has picked as advisers the leaders of a conspiracy against his life; he has substituted for his wayward daughter a firebrand eager to destroy him. Grown weary of the imperial role he himself had imposed, he wishes to abdicate and thus cease altogether to function as dramatist.

Emilie fares no better, for her part as lover constantly interferes with her star role as avenger. Inevitably, she lapses into a state of confusion, akin to the bewilderment of her beloved Cinna, that reluctant assassin who would gladly accept his casting as chief counselor in the imperial establishment. In Maxime, we find a character repeatedly upstaged and outperformed by every one, including his own confidant Euphorbe whose trite plotting generically belongs to comedy. Paradoxically, Corneille's remarkable success as playwright depends on these performative shortcomings of his dramatis personae—but naturally not on inadequacies on the part of his actors and actresses.

Metaphorically, exchange, as Jacques Ehrmann has shown, dominates the play; while dramatically the big switch, as Susan Tiefenbrun has proved, operates throughout, even to the point of turning the political world upside down. Finally, the often repeated motif of sacrifice relates equally to exchanging and switching; by reason of ambiguity, it contains within itself all the dynamics of reversal.

Cinna plans to kill the emperor during the religious ceremony, thereby conveniently substituting one sacrificial victim for another. The emperor's punishment would thus fit his numerous and well-documented crimes against the citizens of Rome. Cinna, Emilie, and even Auguste frequently describe the proscriptions and massacres of the civil war in terms of sac-
rificial immolations, a metaphorical switch conducive to dramatic reversal. The entire play lends itself to a Girardian interpretation; indeed, Corneille has dramatized a sacrificial crisis similar to those described in *La Violence et le sacré.* One might even claim that the denouement of *Cinna* shows how Auguste puts an end to this crisis, not by a sacrifice but by the imposition of a new order based on law, relegating violence and religion to an inoperative past. But from a theatrical standpoint, Auguste has assumed a new role and assigned specific parts to his subordinates who must henceforth perform according to his script. Instead of rewriting chronicles, they face with equanimity a rigorously programmed future. Corneille, a thoroughly modern dramatist, not to say legal mind, dispenses altogether with scapegoats—not only here but even in his *Œdipe.* The emperor’s achievement at the denouement may provide a *mise-en-abyme* of Cornelian drama, for he succeeds in imposing a workable order on the world, an order reflecting the efficacy expected of a well-made and professionally staged play. Auguste’s historical triumph, which ends the tragedy, appears to arise from and reflect on Corneille’s theatrical mastery.

The play opens with Emilie’s dramatically complex soliloquy. She generates a plurality of voices pertaining to two conflicting personifications or, if you prefer, actants, each one striving for domination: revenge and love. Reversal operates from the beginning, for revenge, clearly defined as duty, arrogates the vocabulary of Eros: *désir, séduction, ardent trans­ports* as well as such metonymies as *enfants* and *naissance.* Conversely, love, deprived in part of its usual terminology and forced to fall back on the vocabulary of duty, uses terms indicative of subordination or morality such as *sers, céder, honte, gloire, généreux.* Emilie reaches paradoxical heights in stating:

> Au milieu toutefois d’une fureur si juste,
> J’aime encore plus Cinna que je ne hais Auguste,
> Et je sens refroidir ce bouillant mouvement
> Quand il faut, pour le suivre, exposer mon amant.

[17-20]

Coldness pertains to love; boiling and fury to the self-imposed duty of avenging her father. As she no longer knows what role to perform or what play to write, she exhorts the warring factions within her to exchange their parts. In other words, she requires an impossible perform-
ance that would reflect not only her own predicament but also the proneness to reversal so characteristic of the play as well as the sacrificial crisis that undermines all action.

Stylistically, Emilie keeps at a distance the competing and alienating personifications she has herself set in motion. By thus combining displacement with presence, elusion with illusion, she automatically condemns herself to failure in everything she undertakes. Her own statements, in so far as we can distinguish them from the voices she puts into play, involve the related themes of evaluation and exchange, which we can also consider as metaphorical equivalents of her initial displacement and elusion. Exchange and evaluation, however, have very little in common with love or with the kind of generosity which, at the end, will impose an acceptable order. Indeed, they can only lead to blackmail and a perpetuation of the sacrificial crisis: “... des mêmes présents qu’il verse dans mes mains / J’achète contre lui les esprits des Romains” (79—80). Auguste’s material generosity will, by reversal, lead to his own undoing. But Emilie here and elsewhere advocates a moral switch, similar to the exchange of terminology between love and revenge: “Pour qui venge son père il n’est point de forfaits, / Et c’est vendre son sang que se rendre aux bienfaits” (83—84), and later: “Je fais gloire, pour moi, de cette ignominie” (973). Duty, through this reversal, assumes all the verbal characteristics of crime.

Unlike the secretive Emilie, Cinna, according to the narrative of his meeting with his co-conspirators, knows how to manipulate an audience:

\[
\text{Au seul nom de César, d'Auguste, et d'empereur}
\text{Vous eussiez vu leurs yeux s'enflammer de fureur,}
\text{Et dans un même instant, par un effet contraire,}
\text{Leur front pâlir d'horreur et rougir de colère.}
\]

[159–62]

Cinna’s imaginary audience, by thus achieving a physionomical impossibility in responding to an identity, leaves far behind Corneille’s real audience which, at that moment, can hardly feel hatred against an emperor who gave his name to a century. Moreover, this imaginary audience serves as a magnifying mirror for both Cinna’s and Emilie’s postures:

\[
\text{Tous s'y montrent portés avec tant d'allégresse}
\text{Qu'ils semblent comme moi servir une maîtresse;}
\]
In this manner, Cinna, even before he addresses them, has transformed the conspirators into performative extensions of himself and Emilie. Their behavior as audience leads from the beginning to an impossibility, as the models he provides for avenging a father and serving a mistress would seem to exclude one another no less than joy and wrath. Perhaps the behavior of the conspirators reflects the contradictions inherent in both Cinna and Emilie. Moreover, Cinna, in order to spellbind his audience, merely narrates the past; and the conspiracy against the emperor's life, by adding just another sacrifice and immolation, will do no more than repeat what has happened so frequently in the recent history of Rome.

Although Corneille may not have entrusted Cinna with his own superlative intelligence and imagination as dramatist, he has given him a keen sense of the spectacular and a remarkable understanding of his various audiences—the conspirators, Emilie, and the emperor. Like Emilie, he shows a weakness for personified abstractions:

Ma vertu pour le moins ne me trahira pas:
Vous la verrez, brillante au bord des précipices,
Se couronner de gloire en bravant les supplices,
Rendre Auguste jaloux du sang qu'il répandra,
Et le faire trembler alors qu'il me perdra.

Unlike Emilie, he makes his abstraction act in a spectacular and heroic manner. His narrative, written in the future tense, brings about another dramatic reversal, for it shows Auguste behaving like a craven victim and Cinna like an intrepid hero. The conspirator resembles La Fontaine's milkmaid Perette, even though he pitches his rhetoric on a somewhat higher plane. But recourse to rhetoric, particularly in the future tense, makes one suspect that Cinna does not exactly coincide with the heroic posture he intended for Emilie. In a sense, he sorely needs to limit himself to vertu, Roman of course, in the same way that Emilie has to exclude all but filial revenge. Both of them personify abstractions, perhaps because neither one has discovered a valid part to play or a suitable drama in which to perform.
Cinna achieves his greatest theatrical triumph in convincing Auguste to change his mind and continue to perform as emperor. Auguste had spoken of his political power in the vocabulary of personal, almost erotic, gratification, using such terms as aimer, beautés, jouit, déplait, assouvie, charmes, plaisirs, désir, possession. He has thus operated a lexical reversal not unlike Emilie's, between personal and collective values. To convince Auguste of his error, Cinna reinstates the emperor’s public image and the idea of glory or, in theatrical terms, his spectacular role in the universe as opposed to his private identity. Cinna’s strategy consists, so to speak, in reasserting the positive values and attitudes prevalent in practically every serious play Corneille ever wrote. Although Cinna expresses opinions at variance with those he had advocated in his fiery statements to the conspirators, he nonetheless reasserts the compelling influence of the past, whereby he differs from the emperor who sees only the present. Theatrically, these two opposed standpoints express the relationship between immediacy and historical representation, between presence and fable. Cinna paradoxically reaffirms the historical perspective of the audience off-stage against the very statesman who had shaped the historical events! These events appear in three different perspectives: Auguste views them from the vantage point of personal gratification; Cinna, in his speech to the conspirators, as a pure unfolding; and, in his advice to Auguste, from the perspective of an admiring historian—after the fact and with an eye to the results:

Si le pouvoir suprême est blâmé par Auguste,
César fut un tyran, et son trépas fut juste,
Et vous devez aux Dieux compte de tout le sang
Dont vous l’avez vengé pour monter à son rang.

[429–32]

According to this advice, only a positive political attitude toward power can give meaning to the past. Corneille’s Cinna, a prize pupil of the Jesuits, justifies the emperor in terms of an implicit declaration of intentions. He himself had merely redirected his own intentions in moving from one audience to the next. In both instances, he provides his listeners with precisely the ideas they wish and expect to hear. Although he knows how to appeal to any audience, he does so in the manner of a catalyst rather than a dramatist. Worse still, he falls under the spell his own words have cast.
In attempting to counter Cinna’s argument, Maxime also invokes the judgment of posterity, but in terms of personal transcendence rather than history:

Votre gloire redouble à mépriser l’empire;
Et vous serez fameux chez la postérité
Moins pour l’avoir conquis que pour l’avoir quitté.
Le bonheur peut conduire à la grandeur suprême;
Mais pour y renoncer il faut la vertu même.

By following Maxime’s advice, Auguste would admire his own transcendent image in a sort of self-perpetuating immediacy. Maxime fails because the emperor must situate his role historically and perform actively rather than contemplatively in front of a vast and changing audience. Nonetheless, both Cinna and Maxime advocate complementary aspects of Cornelian drama: historical representation and heroic admiration, here given as antithetical, but that Auguste will reconcile and combine in the final scene.

In clinching the argument, Cinna associates two apparently antithetical concepts: finance and, surprisingly, pity, an inconspicuous commodity in Octave’s rise to power:

Que l’amour du pays, que la pitié vous touche;
Votre Rome à genoux vous parle par ma bouche.
Considérez le prix que vous avez coûté.

How can Auguste possibly resist the touching spectacle of himself as leading man in a historical love duet with suppliant Rome? By comparison, Maxime’s abstract images of virtue and generosity would hardly hold the stage.

Cinna, both in his address to the conspirators and his counsel to the emperor, merely catalyzes a mixture already present. He does not even possess a theatrical presence that he can claim as his own. His role in the imperial establishment derives from the emperor’s miscasting, and his part in the conspiracy from Emilie’s dramatization of past events. In both these contradictory capacities, he functions as a deputy, as an extension of competing playwrights, Auguste and Emilie.

Torn between the two of them, he has recourse to a reversal, to a lexical switch, whereby the beloved Emilie assumes all the characteristics of
a tyrant, while Auguste, because of his appreciation of Cinna, deserves only love and service. In a sense, his advice to the emperor, based, or so he tells Maxime and Emilie, on deception, untruth and illusion, has convinced him as much as it has Auguste. He thus becomes an admirer, so to speak, of his own discourse, which happens to coincide with political truth, circa 1640. Through his mediation, the emperor has at last understood the value of historically motivated performance.

Caught between his newly discovered monarchical zeal and his oath to Emilie, or, if you prefer, two mutually exclusive scripts, Cinna once again falls back on a narrative written in the future tense:

Vous le voulez, j’y cours, ma parole est donnée;
Mais ma main, aussitôt contre mon sein tournée,
Aux mènes d’un tel prince immolant votre amant,
A mon crime forcé joindra mon châtiment,
Et par cette action dans l’autre confondue
Recouvrera ma gloire aussitôt que perdue.

[1061–66]

The two irreconcilable texts will coincide, thanks to Cinna’s imagination, in a spectacularly sacrificial display, hardly acceptable to Emilie or even the emperor. And like Auguste, Cinna combines, by means of illusion, the roles of sacrificer and victim.

Once he has discovered the conspiracy, Auguste, like Emilie and Cinna before him, hesitates between incompatible roles of revenge and clemency, but finally combines the part of victim with that of executioner in a spectacular narrative where Rome’s sacrificial crisis reaches a climax:

Meurs; mais quitte du moins la vie avec éclat;
Eteins en le flambeau dans le sang de l’ingrat;
A toi-même en mourant immole ce perfide;
Contentant ses désirs, punis son parricide;
Fais un tourment pour lui de ton propre trépas,
En faisant qu’il le voie et n’en jouisse pas.
Mais jouissons plutôt nous-même de sa peine,
Et si Rome nous hait, triomphants de sa haine.

[1179–86]

Auguste’s narrative provides the same spectacular features as Cinna’s, but stresses erotic, not to say sado-masochistic, gratification rather than heroic gesture and replaces the future tense by the imperative, in keeping
with the speaker's rank. Moreover, Auguste reverts to the private world from which Cinna's counsels had momentarily dislodged him, for once again he views power, punishment and sacrifice in terms of personal reaction. Clearly, he has not yet succeeded in putting his role, his act, and his play together. He too compounds elusion, for he describes himself as a "Coeur irresolu / Qui fuit en mème temps tout ce qu’il se propose!" (1188-89).

Another kind of discrepancy or displacement resulting from personal feelings occurs in Emilie: "D'où me vient cette joie? et que mal à propos / Mon esprit malgré moi goûte un entier repos!" (1288-89). And she adds: "A chaque occasion le ciel y fait descendre / Un sentiment contraire à celui qu’il doit prendre" (1292-93). It would seem that no character in the play can maintain any kind of unity of focus. A civil war rages within every one of them, leading to betrayal and self-betrayal.

Emilie's use of the word "descendre" may provide a clue to these discrepancies. Ascent and descent throughout the play appear equally favorable or unfavorable. Emilie cannot accept Cinna as a gift from the emperor, for this downward movement would bring shame and servitude, while an upward thrust on the part of Cinna, by immolating Auguste, would win her hand. However, Octave's usurpation of power, with its accompaniment of proscriptions, had certainly followed an upward movement, as the emperor himself suggests in a famous line: "Et monté sur le faîte, il aspire à descendre" (370). Perhaps the trouble derives from the inevitability of displacement and from the tendency to confuse identity with position or role.

Despite these contradictory feelings and movements, Auguste will nevertheless discover a solution acceptable to all, but only after he has uncovered the full extent of everybody's betrayal, proof of his descent into hell. Indeed, the downward movement must reach rock bottom before the resulting upward thrust can take over. Auguste exclaims:

Je suis maître de moi comme de l'univers;
Je le suis, je veux l'être. Ô siècles, ô mémoire,
Conservez à jamais ma dernière victoire!
Je triomphe aujourd'hui du plus juste courroux
De qui le souvenir puisse aller jusqu'à vous.

[1696-1700]

The emperor, speaking authoritatively in the present tense, finally puts his personal reactions and the world on precisely the same footing, with
the full knowledge that he must impose his will both inside and outside. He realizes that these personal reactions had mattered even more, perhaps because they could do more damage, than all the conspiracies arrayed against him. Indeed, he insists on his triumph over his wrath, without even mentioning his victory over the conspirators. He has laid the past to rest and takes charge of posterity. History, finally made meaningful, or suitable for representation, fills the stage at the moment the curtain drops.

Notes