CHAPTER VII
Views of Poetry and the Poet

THE FOREGOING CHAPTERS HAVE TRIED TO SHOW HOW IT was that from Horace to Héraclitus Corneille planned his career and articulated his plays in emulation of Torquato Tasso. Such extensive emulation implies an exceptionally high degree of poetical self-consciousness, for the playwright is constantly measuring his present play by the standard of some previous work, and his own accomplishment in writing it by the accomplishments of those greats who have preceded him, particularly Tasso. In this chapter I propose to look at Corneille’s self-consciousness from two other angles: one still inside the plays, but at another level from that of the rectification of earlier literary texts; the other, in a major critical work, the “Discours de la tragédie.” What we see from these two additional perspectives will, I hope, serve to confirm the coherence and the continuity of Corneille’s inspiration from Horace to Héraclius and will suggest once more the crucial importance of Tasso and the Quarrel of the Cid to the elaboration of Corneille’s modernist vision.

PART I: ALLEGORIES OF POETRY AND THE POET

The limits of allegory are not easy to define. The dialogue between Melpomène and Le Soleil in the prologue of Andromède surely qualifies, as does the more complex prologue of La Toison d’or, where Corneille assigns roles to La Victoire, Mars, La Paix, and La France, among others. The outer-frame play of L’illusion comique develops a somewhat more subtle form of allegory, but one that still leaves no doubt as to an intended second meaning for the magician (he is the playwright) or for the magi-
cian's grotto (it is the theater). When Corneille elsewhere speaks of Cléopâtre (in Rodogune) as being a "seconde Médée," is he, by inviting us to view his heroine as at one and the same time herself and another, tending toward allegory? Is the little parody of Médée in act 5 of L'Illusion, by any stretch of the imagination, also an allegory? If so, then it is clear that Pauline, whose role rectifies those of Dido and Chimène and is thus both herself and two others, may also reveal allegorical aspects. In this final chapter, I shall aim at uncovering, within Horace, Polyeucte, and Théodore, what I think can legitimately be called a series of allegories, and if not always allegories, then at the very least extended metaphors, symbols, or images. They all have to do with the poet and poetry and, in one way or another, they all lead back to the Quarrel of the Cid, the formative event in Corneille's emergence as the dramatic poet we know today.

Horace and the Allegory of the Duellum

The Quarrel generated a number of allegories, by far the most important of which was the allegory of persecution. We shall have occasion later on to consider it in some detail. For now let us begin with the allegory of the duellum, which Chape-lain proposed in the opening pages of the Sentiments as a means of countering the idea that the Academy was persecuting Corneille. Ideally, he says, literary dispute ought to be viewed as "une espece de guerre qui est avantageuse pour tous," as "une course, ou celuy qui emporte le prix semble ne l'avoir poursuivy que pour en faire un present à son rival" (Gasté, p. 357). The prize, to be shared by all, would be deliverance from "l'inquietude des doutes," or, to put it more positively, the attainment of "cet agreable repos que [l'entendement humain] trouve dans la certitude des connoissances." The basic condition for a happy outcome of this sort is that the combatants should be "honnestes" and respect each other: "C'est une espece de guerre qui est avantageuse pour tous, lors qu'elle se fait civilement, et que les armes empoisonnee es y sont defenudes." Chapelain does not use this allegory throughout; he begins by saying, in rather more straightforward fashion: "On peut mesme meriter de la louange en donnant du blasme, pourveu que les reprehensions partent du zele de l'utilite commune, et qu'on ne pretende pas eslever sa reputation sur les ruines de celle d'autruy" (Gasté, p. 355). He
resorts to allegory as a means of strengthening his argument. The allegory ennobles the idea of literary controversy by likening it to an idealized form of chivalric warfare. And when he alludes to Tasso and Guarini, it is not only as literary figures, but also, by implication, as knights: "En effect nous en avons la principale obligation aux agréables différens qu'ont produit la Hierusalem et le Pastor Fido, c'est à dire les Chef-d'œuvres des deux plus grands Poètes de de-là les Monts; après lesquels peu de gens auraient bonne grace de murmurer contre la Censure, et de s'offenser d'avoir *une aventure pareille à la leur*" (italics added).

Corneille, to whom this last remark was undoubtedly directed, hesitated for a while but eventually took Chapelain’s advice to heart. He opted to look on the Quarrel, not as a persecution, but rather as a noble encounter, nobly engaged in, from which mutual benefits might be expected to come. The model for this type of encounter was, of course, the *duellum* such as Dante, for example, had described it in his *De Monarchia* (2. 9–13). In putting the concept of *duellum* at the very center of his next play, Corneille must surely have been thinking back to the Quarrel and to his own dilemma at its conclusion.

His first reaction upon reading the *Sentiments* had been to set to work preparing a reply. Boisrobert made it clear, however, that to do so would be to anger Richelieu. Corneille had to choose, then, between persisting in the defense of his play or abandoning it out of deference to the cardinal. Realism and prudence prevailed, but the playwright was not proud of himself:

... Maintenant que vous me conseillez de n'y répondre point, veu les personnes qui s'en sont mêlées, il ne me faut point d'interprète pour entendre cela; je suis un peu plus de ce monde qu'Héliodore, qui aima mieux perdre son Évesché que son livre, et j'aime mieux les bonnes grâces de mon Maître que toutes les réputations de la terre. (Gasté, p. 488)

Heliodorus’s refusal to repudiate the work of his youth—the *Aethiopica*, which related the love and adventures of Theagenes and Chariclea—appealed to the imagination of the beleaguered playwright as a perfect example of resistance to pressure, an example that he himself obviously admired but could not or would not follow.

If one is to judge by the letter that Chapelain wrote to Balzac
a year later, Corneille had a hard time coming to terms with himself about the outcome of the Quarrel: "Il ne fait plus rien, et Scudéry a du moins gagné cela, en le querellant, qu'il l'a rebuté du métier et lui a tari sa veine" (Mongrédiien, p. 85). Instead of turning his attention to the future, he remained obsessed with the past: "Il ne parle plus que de règles et que de choses qu'il eût pu répondre aux Académiciens, s'il n'eût point craint de choquer les puissances." He had accepted his fate outwardly but not inwardly. He kept silent in public, only to complain endlessly in private. And his art was suffering.

If he had followed the example of Heliodorus or if he had remained forever divided against himself, Corneille might never have written another play. He most certainly would not have written *Horace*, for *Horace* not only articulates the main options open to Corneille at this juncture, it reflects the very dynamics of his choice among them. The play, I have said, assumes the allegory of the formal *duellum*, together with all the conditions and all the faith in Providence that go along with it. Of all the characters, only Horace gives himself up wholeheartedly to this enterprise, however; the others all hold back in some way or other. Though he has a wife and a father, Horace is perhaps closest to Curiace and Camille. During the course of the play, it is with them that he has his most painful confrontations, two instances of what the hero himself refers to as a "combat contre un autre soi-même." In real life Corneille appears to have begun by choosing acceptance over rebellion, then later on to have made a secondary choice between whole- and halfhearted commitment to the principle of acceptance. In the play this order is reversed, probably to enhance both the dramatic and the ethical effect. Horace confronts his weaker, more irresolute self first, in the scenes with Curiace in act 2; then, in the highly charged dramatic situation of act 4, he confronts the temptation to strong but negative commitment in his sister, Camille.

As he shaped the material borrowed from Roman history, Corneille infused it, then, with the urgency of his own dilemmas. The sympathy that he elicits for Curiace and Camille and the hint of brutishness with which he endows Horace suggest that, though he had taken the option represented by Horace, he still felt very close to the other two, rejected options also.

To be sure, *Horace* is not an allegory of the conventional
sort. But, along with its primary story of an early Roman hero, it
seems to reenact the parallel story of the poet's own ordeal, his
own encounter with destiny. On one level, then, Corneille liter­
alizes Chapelain's allegory of the duellum; but on another, he
develops it still further.

Polyeucte and the Allegory of Iconoclasm.

Respect for the other person is central in Corneille, as it is in
the ideal of the duellum. Horace bears no hatred for Curiace or
Camille, nor Polyeucte for Pauline or Félix. The magnificent ex­
change between Polyeucte and Pauline in act 4 constitutes a kind
of duellum, greatly transposed but true to the inner spirit of the
original model:

—Imaginations!
—Célestes vérités!
—Etrange aveuglement!
—Eternelles clartés!
—Tu préfères la mort à l'amour de Pauline!
—Vous préférez le monde à la bonté divine!

(4. 3. 1285–88)

By the end of the play, Providence will have granted victory to
Polyeucte, a victory in which, according to the promise, Pauline
and Félix may also share. Polyeucte thus retains much of the
ideology of Horace; but it adds something new of great impor­
tance, something centering on the violent act that Polyeucte per­
foms in the pagan temple when he destroys the idol.

The Quarrel raised anew the age-old question of the rela­
tionship of art to truth. In L'illusion comique, a few months be­
fore the Cid, Corneille had celebrated the power of the dramatic
poet to create illusions; and the image, or allegory, that he em­
ployed to stand for the dramatist was that of a magician, Alcan­
dre. Whether with this fact in mind or not, Corneille's critics dur­
ing the Quarrel took great delight in making references to the
"fausse gloire," the "faux esclat," the "fausses beautez" of the
Cid; and in dubbing its author himself a mountebank, an al­
chemist, a worker of enchantments, and a magician. Mairet, dis­
missing a play of his own the better to attack Corneille, wrote that
"la Silvie de Mairet, et le Cid de Corneille, ou de Guillen de
Castro, comme il vous plairra sont les deux pieces de Theatre,
dont les beautez apparentes, et phantastiques, ont le plus abusé d'honnestes gens" (Gasté, p. 286). The public's blindness was soon likened to idolatry, and it became the goal of Corneille's opponents to bring down the "idol" of the Cid and to convert the Cid's "idolaters" to the truth. Faucon de Ris seems to have been the first to use the image, writing that, having seen the light himself, "je fis donc resolution de guerir ses idolatres de leur aveuglement" (Gasté, p. 203). Mairet, among others, picked up the figure of speech and developed it at length. Faucon de Ris had hailed the Observations of Scudéry for opening the eyes of the blind; Mairet, for his part, in his "Epistre familiere" to Corneille, credits Scudéry with having won still more converts with the proofs he had offered the Academy in substantiation of his charges against the Cid. Little by little the number of the deceived are diminishing, he says; and he looks forward to the day when the Academy will complete the process of conversion:

Je vous assure que vostre Cid a bien perdu de son embonpoint depuis quelque temps, et qu'on peut dire justement de luy,

Qu'il est sur le Parnasse un Idole brisé,
Et que de jour en jour sa secte diminüe
Tant il est malayse
De ne pas embrasser la vérité connue.

(Gasté, p. 288)

... Vous estiez encore en possession de cette fausse gloire que le Cid vous a donnée; vous aviez encore le peuple et la pluspart des femmes de vostre costé; de façon que si vous eussiez eu seulement l'adresse de chicaner bien à propos il vous estoit facile d'empescher la conversion de ces Idolatres, qui se fussent bien contenté de l'apparence de vos raisons, puis qu'ils avoient pû s'esbloyyr au faux esclat de vostre Chef-d'oeuvre. (Gasté, p. 292)

Il est indubitable que le champ de bataille vous demeuroit, mais apres que Monsieur de Scudery vous a convaincu luy-mesme de fausseté par une ample et autentique preuve des passages alleguez contre le Cid qu'il adresse à Messieurs de l'Academie, les plus raisonnables de vostre secte n'ont pas fait difficulté de l'abjurer ouvertement et les plus obstinez se sont contentez de dire qu'ils aymoient mieux mourir Heretiques, que d'estre sujets à la honte de confesser publiquement leur erreur. J'espère neantmoins que l'exemple des meilleurs es-
prits obligera bien-tost ces honnестes vergongneux à se ranger insensiblement au bon party, principalement après ce qu'en doit prononcer l'Illustre Academie, au jugement de laquelle vous eussiez fait tres-sagement de vous soubmettre de bonne heure, et de bonne grace. (Gaste, pp. 293–94)

In the closing pages of the *Sentiments*, Chapelain alludes indirectly to this same leitmotiv of conversion to the truth. The Academy, he says, has labored selflessly for the good of all; and its fondest hope is to see "le plaisir d'une veritable connaissance" replace "celuy d'une douce illusion." Since the Academy seeks the instruction of the ignorant rather than glory for itself, it does not ask for any public display of recantation: "Il lui suffit qu'ils se condamnent en particulier, et qu'ils se rendent en secret à leur propre raison" (Gaste, p. 414). At the same time that he thus moderates the allegory of conversion, Chapelain modulates the concept of error and correction of error into the theory of rectification that we have been examining throughout this study. The *Cid*, he thought, had not been all false; and where it was false, it was only perpetuating errors inherited from the past. History, for Chapelain, brought with it a progressive revelation of truth. What Guillen de Castro or the Ancients mistook for truth cannot be adopted innocently by a poet living in France in the seventeenth century. The poet of today, full of respect as he is for the Ancients, must correct their errors:

. . . Les fautes medmes des Anciens qui semblent devoir estre respectees pour leur vieillesse, ou si on l'ose dire, pour leur immortalité, ne peuvent pas defendre les siennes. Il est vray que celles la ne sont presque considerées qu'avec reverence, d'autant que les unes estant faittes devant les regles, sont nées libres et hors de leur jurisdiction, et que les autres par une longue duree ont comme acquis une prescription legitime. Mais cette faveur qui à peine met à couvert ces grands Hommes, ne passe point jusques à leurs successeurs. Ceux qui viennent apres eux heritent bien de leurs richesses, mais non pas de leurs privileges, et les vices d'Euripide ou de Seneque ne scauroient faire approuver ceux de Guillen de Castro. . . Le Pèlete François qui nous a donné le Cid, est [donc] coupable de toutes les fautes qu'il n'y a pas corrigées. (Gaste, pp. 415–16)

The theory of rectification alerts the modern poet to the neces-
For recasting those elements of a subject that time has revealed to be false; it thus protects him from the danger of raising up what for him and his age would be a false idol.

In choosing for the last play of the trilogy a Christian hero who is an iconoclast, Corneille appears again to have literalized one of the dominant allegories of the Quarrel. Polyeucte destroys the pagan idol during the temple ceremony as a means of demonstrating the new Christian truth that burns within him. This act of literal iconoclasm serves to sum up a whole series of other iconoclastic gestures that Corneille himself is making about poetry in and through the play. At the end of the trilogy, the playwright openly affirms the Christian ideology implicit in the preceding two pagan plays. He is thus destroying an illusion. At the same time, inasmuch as he rectifies book 4 of the *Aeneid* and, in the process, the *Cid*, he also refashions the partially false or defective images of Dido and Aeneas and of Chimène into more perfect, more truthful images. Finally, he takes Tasso’s “erroneous” denial of perfection in any but the epic hero and, in its place, sets up as true the new image of a tragic hero without flaw.

Chapelain spoke of the “heureuse violence” by which “on tire la Verite du fons des abysmes.” He was thinking of the violence of literary controversy allegorized as a kind of *duellum*, but he might just as well have said it in the context of the recasting of an icon. In order to make *Polyeucte*, Corneille had to do some violence to Vergil and to Tasso as well as to himself as author of the *Cid*; but he directed the violence not at individual poets or at individual poems but rather at the errors they happened to carry within them. Just as Polyeucte loves Pauline while hating her blindness, so Corneille respects the works that he chooses to rectify. Polyeucte would like to lead Pauline to God, and in the end he does. *Mutatis mutandis*, Corneille’s goal in writing *Polyeucte* was to bring Dido and Chimène out of their error into the presence finally of Christ. A number of saints’ stories might have served the playwright’s purpose of rectifying the *Aeneid* and the *Cid*. Almost any Christian hero who could seem to abandon his wife might have satisfied the requirements. Polyeucte, however, was not only a Christian and a martyr and a husband who “left” his wife; he was also a destroyer of false images. As such he must have appeared to Corneille as, indeed, the perfect hero for the occasion.
Theodore and the Allegory of Persecution

The Christians in Polyèucte suffer persecution, but the play concentrates more on the hero’s provocation of his persecutor than on the evils of persecution itself. Persecution becomes the dominant theme in Théodore, however; and for Corneille it offers a third (and I think last) occasion for extending an allegory first encountered in the Quarrel. The Quarrel, I have said, was widely referred to as the “persecution” of the Cid. It is necessary, however, to divide the controversy into two phases: a preliminary, more or less personal phase during which individual writers and their supporters traded insults and accusations; then, with the intervention of the Academy, a second, formal, judicial phase consisting of more or less secret deliberations behind closed doors. Only the last phase qualifies as a possible persecution because only the Academy, backed by Richelieu, had any real power. Corneille no doubt felt harassed by the attacks of Mairet and Scudéry, but at least he was free then to counterattack. The Academy had been set up to foster the development of French letters, but from the outset Corneille opposed the idea of referring the debate to the Academy. He also opposed the idea of measuring the Cid, not by the standard of recent French plays, which he knew were inferior to his own, but rather by the ideal standard of the theorists and, in particular, the “Observateur.” In the end he was forced to consent to procedures that he felt to be patently unjust. Since he was not a member of the Academy, he was not allowed to take any part at all in the deliberations. The fate of his play was to be decided in his absence and without his testimony being heard. During the five months that it took the Academy to weigh the evidence and reach its verdict, all Corneille could do was wait and meditate on the pitiful state of impotence to which he had been reduced: “J’attends avec beaucoup d’impatience les Sentimens de l’Académie, afin d’apprendre ce que doresavant je dois suivre; jusques-là je ne puis travailler qu’avec défiance, et n’ose employer un mot en seureté” (Gaste, p. 485). If Corneille is being ironic here, as Jacques Maurens has suggested (p. 251), it is only because irony, like gallows humor, is one of the last defenses of the condemned. The author of the Cid was surely the first to believe in his own persecution.
Placide's situation in act 4 of Théodore recapitulates the main aspects of Corneille's situation during the deliberations of the Academy. Placide loves Théodore, wishes to protect her, and will suffer a loss of honor himself should anything dishonorable happen to her. He is forced into inactivity, however, by means of a Machiavellian trick played on him by Marcelle. Marcelle promises to protect Théodore, then, with the gullible Placide lulled into false security, secretly orders Théodore taken to the brothel. Placide learns of his error too late and for most of act 4 is condemned to endure the torments of a protracted interval of waiting to find out what Théodore's fate has been. The concordance of Placide's suffering with Corneille's is striking; but, before we can speak of allegory, it is necessary to consider other parallels, too, parallels having to do with Théodore.

The judgment that the Academy finally handed down on Chimène was severe and went a very long way toward supporting the charges that Scudéry had made. Here is how the Sentiments ruled on the lovers' first interview, in act 3:

L'Observateur apres cela passe à l'examen des moeurs attribuées à Chimène, et les condamne. En quoy nous sommes entiérement de son costé; car au moins ne peut-on nier qu'elle ne soit, contre la bien seance de son sexe, Amante trop sensible, et Fille trop desnaturee. Quelque violence que luy peust faire sa passion, il est certain qu'elle ne devoit point se relascher dans la vengeance de la mort de son Pere, et moins encore se resoudre à espouser celuy qui l’avoit fait mourir. En cecy il faut avoier que ses moeurs sont du moins scanda­leuses, si en effect elles ne sont depravées. (Gasté, p. 372)

Chimène does not redeem herself in the Academy's eyes during the second interview, in act 5. On the contrary, "[elle] y abandonne tout ce qui luy restoit de pudeur" (Gasté, p. 389). This is precisely the kind of condemnation that Corneille had reason to fear when the Quarrel entered into its second phase, for during the initial phase his critics had already proved relentless in their attacks on Chimène. Scudéry had set the tone in the Observations with a string of epithets ranging from "fille desnaturée," "cette Danaide," and "cette impudique" all on one page (Gasté, p. 80), to "ce Monstre" (p. 82), to "cette criminelle" (p. 93). He finally went so far as to liken her to a prostitute in act 5: "Elle luy dit cent choses dignes d'une prostituée, pour l'obliger à tuer ce
pauvre sot de Don Sanche . . . ” (p. 94). The threat of enforced prostitution that faces Théodore and, through Théodore, Placide as well thus parallels the fate that had befallen Chimène and Corneille during the second part of the Quarrel. During the long deliberations of the Academy, Corneille no doubt hoped that the Academy would clear his heroine’s reputation, but he obviously knew that it might also do just the opposite. The ordeal in Théodore reflects the playwright’s ordeal in the Quarrel down to the common specter of possible defilement.

Corneille had, of course, tried to counter the effect of Scudéry’s accusation, first, by noting the favorable reaction of the court toward Chimène:

Quand vous avez traité la pauvre Chimène d’impudique, de prostituée, de parricide, de monstre; Ne vous estes vous pas souvenu, que la Reyne, les Princesses, et les plus vertueuses Dames de la Cour et de Paris, l’ont receu et caressée en fille d’honneur . . . [?] (Gaste, p. 148)

and later on by pointing out how many recent heroines of the French stage were infinitely more deserving of Scudéry’s epithets than poor Chimène. Of these, the most notorious seemed to him the gaily immoral heroine of Mairét’s Galanteries du duc d’Ossonne (written in 1626 but published only in 1636):

Je vous donneray seulement un mot d’advis avant que d’achever, [qui] est de ne mesler plus d’impietéz dans les prostitutions de vos Heroines[;] les signes de Croix de vostre Flavie [= les signes de croix qu’elle fait ironiquement juste avant de pécher] et les Anges de lumiere de vostre Duc [= les anges qu’il invoque par moquerie], sont des profanations qui font horreur à tout le monde. (Gaste, p. 327)

It can scarcely be an accident that Marcelle’s sickly daughter, whose hopeless love for Placide sets the persecution in motion, also bears the name Flavie. Corneille, it would seem, wants the opposition Théodore/Flavie, among other things, to figure the opposition Chimène/Flavie that developed in the course of the Quarrel in connection with the attempted vilification of Chimène.

At the very start of the Quarrel, still another opposition had developed—between the muses of Corneille and Mairét. Corneille’s muse, briefly glimpsed in the closing lines of the “Ex-
"Cense," is presented as free and capricious—free, because she insists on satisfying herself rather than others, including the supposedly influential Ariste, who has requested a song; capricious, no doubt because capriciousness in a young woman is an acceptable way of accounting for intransigence:

N'y penses plus, Ariste, une telle injustice  
Exposeroit ma Muse à son plus grand supplice,  
Laissez la toujours libre agir suivant son choix  
Ceder à son caprice et s'en faire des loix.

(Gaste, p. 66)

In Corneille's view the muse of his rival Mairet was totally different. In the "Excuse" he had expressed great scorn for the poet who lowers himself to making the rounds "de Reduit en Reduit" in search of supporters for his work. Stung by the "Excuse," Mairet had replied with a poem denouncing Corneille for his overweening pride and accusing him of having plagiarized Guiller de Castro:

Je croy que ce suject esclatant sur la Scene,  
Puis qu'il ravit le Tage a pu ravir la Seine.  
Mais il ne falloit pas en offencer  
L'Auteur,  
Et par une impudence en orgueil confirmée,  
Asseurer d'un langage aussi vain qu'imposteur,  
Que tu dois à toy seul toute ta Renommée.

(Gaste, p. 67)

Corneille replied to this reply with a violent direct attack on Mairet and Mairet's muse:

Chacun connoist son jaloux naturel  
Le monstre au doigt comme un fou solennel,  
Et ne croit pas, en sa bonne escriture,  
Qu'il face mieux [.]  
Paris entier ayant leu son cartel,  
L'envoye au Diable, et sa Muse au Bordel.

(Gaste, p. 70)

The "Advertissement au Besançonnois Mairet," at the same time it formulates the opposition Chimène/Flavie, reiterates the opposition of a pure Cornelian muse, on the one hand, and a corrupt, infinitely compromised Mairetian muse, on the other: "On sçait le petit commerce que vous pratiquez, et que vous n'avez point d'applaudissements que vous ne gagniez à force de Son-
nets et de reverences. Si vous envoyiez vos pieces de Besançon, comme Mr Corneille envoye les siennes de Rouen, sans interesser personne en leur succes, vous tomberiez bien bas . . . " (Gasté, pp. 324–25).

Théodore first appears in act 2. She has been summoned to the palace in circumstances that do not bode well. As she is waiting to see Valens and Marcelle, she talks with her cousin-confidant Cléobule. For safety’s sake, Cléobule presses her to relent and choose a husband: “Dans un péril si grand faites un protecteur” (l. 421). The scene is clearly a variation of the traditional opening scene in a pastoral, wherein a friend urges the chaste heroine to taste of the fruits of love. Here, it is not just the heroine’s happiness but her very life that is at stake. Théodore remains adamant and refuses all prospect of marriage, however. For the time being, she does not wish to divulge her specific reason (which is that she has already promised herself to God), but she offers Cléobule a choice of three general motives for refusal, any one of which, she implies, would be sufficient:

Voilà quelle je suis et quelle je veux être;
La raison quelque jour s’en fera mieux connoître:
Nommez-la cependant vertu, caprice, orgueil,
Ce dessin me suivra jusque dans le cercueil.

(2. 2. 407–10)

Théodore has all the attributes originally associated with the Cornelian muse. Fiercely independent, she will accept help from her protectors if necessary (at least from Didyme), but whether out of virtue, capriciousness, or pride, she will never consent to enter into a marriage with them.

Between Placide and Théodore, Corneille has succeeded, then, in evoking the ordeal of the poet (reduced to impotence), the ordeal of the heroine (threatened with defilement), and the virginal purity of the poet’s muse, as the Quarrel had variously revealed them. He does not seem to be allegorizing because as usual he has taken care to literalize, on one level, all the allegories that he has taken over from the past. There can be little doubt, however, that he intended us to read Théodore on more than its literal level.

The renewal of interest that Corneille shows in the Quarrel at this relatively late date poses something of a problem, how-
ever. One can easily understand why the controversy should have been uppermost in his mind when he was writing *Horace* and *Polyeucte*; he was struggling to prove himself, struggling to transcend the limitations of the *Cid* and, if possible, win acclaim eventually as the new Tasso. Between *Polyeucte* and *Théodore*, however, there lies a considerable interval—four years and as many plays—during which time he evinced no discernible interest in returning to the allegorical frame of reference of the Quarrel. Something must have happened to stir up memories of earlier days. In fact, I think it was a combination of several factors. For one thing, the source material he was using probably acted to stimulate him to think allegorically about poetry and the poet. Godeau, in a narrative poem on the subject, "La Vierge d'Anti-oche," as well as in the "Discours" that served as a preface to his *Oeuvres chrestiennes* (1641), had interpreted Theodora's story as an allegory of the redemption of poetry through the sacrifice of martyrs' blood; that is, as a rectification of poetry itself insofar as poetry dedicated itself to Christian truths. Corneille's heroine figures the Cornelian muse more than she seems to figure anything like the Christian muse, but the playwright may well have begun with the broader allegory and little by little particularized it as he was working with the subject. The *Aminta*, on the other hand, offered him, at the end of act 1, a charming little allegory of the happy results of enlightened patronage. Corneille had only to reverse the terms of patronage—and the tragic genre in which he had elected to work would naturally have favored such a reversal—in order to go from the idyllic to the horrific, from ideal protection of the poet to his outright persecution.

Corneille seems to have written *Théodore* sometime during the course of 1644, when his enthusiasm for Mazarin knew no bounds. The cardinal had immensely gratified the playwright the year before by granting him a pension even before the playwright had had time to petition him for one. Corneille had expressed his gratitude twice already, first, with a poem of "Remerciement," then with the dedication of *Pompee* to his new patron in February of 1644. *Théodore*, I suspect, was to have been another, more elaborate celebration of Mazarin's qualities as a patron. Mazarin's ties with the Barberini family in Rome were common knowledge. This family—notably the cardinals Antonio and Francesco and their uncle, the pope Urban VIII—had
protected Mazarin before Mazarin came to France. They had also protected dramatic poetry: the Barberini palace had its own sumptuous theater, and it was there, during two consecutive carnival seasons, that the *Teodora* of Rospigliosi had been performed to great acclaim. Through a French *Théodore*, Corneille could draw attention to the Roman origins of the enlightened patronage that Mazarin had just introduced into France. If the play had not failed, my guess is that the author would have dedicated the work to the cardinal, in a letter referring to the earlier Barberini *Teodora*.

Of course, Corneille could have written a new version of the Theodora story without connecting it to the allegory of the Quarrel. And it is not readily apparent, perhaps, how insistence on the theme of persecution together with allegorical reference to the Quarrel could serve the playwright’s supposed purpose of hail­ing Mazarin as a model patron. One must remember, however, that freedom to complain is a precious right not enjoyed by vic­tims of repression. Public complaint about persecution, espe­cially past persecution, is often a sure sign that persecution has been lifted. Corneille had agreed, reluctantly, not to publish an answer to the *Sentiments*; and in the Epître for *Horace*, he had done more than make his peace with Richelieu. He had opted to put all thoughts of persecution behind him and to concentrate on moving forward, dialectically, from his position in the *Cid*. The death of Richelieu, followed by the advent of Mazarin, in all probability resulted in the playwright’s experiencing a sudden sense of relaxation. Under Mazarin he was free to look back in a way that he could not have afforded to do earlier. In this psycho­logical context, it is not hard to see how his sources might have prompted him to go back to the Quarrel and to give expression now to long-repressed thoughts and emotions. Corneille was perhaps not altogether proud of his own conduct following the Quarrel. He probably had a bad conscience about yielding to force (his admiration for Heliodorus would suggest as much). And he probably wrote the Epître for *Horace* in partially bad faith, attributing a very great deal more influence to Richelieu than actually existed. If all this be so, then Corneille may even have looked on *Théodore* as a kind of rectification of past errors, a means of setting the record straight now that he was free to tell the truth. Strange as it seems at first, the negativities of *Théodore*
could very well have been intended after all as an expression of real affirmation.

Allegorizing in literary debate did not begin with the Quarrel of the Cid. As Marc Fumaroli has shown, it was a vigorous phenomenon in France during the period 1578-1630, when its principal focus was prose ("Rhetorique, dramaturgie, critique litteraire"). During the 1630s, as theoretical interest shifted from prose to dramatic poetry, literary debate and its attendant allegories spilled over into the theater, with plays like L'Illusion comique, Les Visionnaires, and La Comédie des Académistes. The allegorizing that has concerned us here is something new, however, or at least different. For in Horace, Polyeucte, and Théodore, Corneille is writing tragedy, a genre whose aims far transcend the limited frame of reference of literary debate. He wants, in these works, not to inform or persuade his audience but to stir, if he can, their very deepest emotions. Ultimately, however, he wants also to assure himself great fame as a poet, as great a fame as Tasso had won, or Homer and Vergil before him. It is this personal quest that sometimes reveals itself allegorically in Corneille’s tragic theater. The Quarrel of the Cid contributed more than anything else to the definition of the playwright’s quest, and, that being so, it is not surprising that the allegories through which he later chose to express his authorial aims, interests, or anxieties should also have come from the Quarrel.

PART II: THE “DISCOURS DE LA TRAGÉDIE”

In the preface to his translation of the Imitation de Jésus-Christ (1656), Corneille indicated that he was already at work on the collected edition of his plays that would appear four years later. He refers to the Examens, though not by that name: fresh commentaries on each individual play to replace the prefaces that had been accumulating regularly all along. They would be, he says, "[des] réflexions sur chaque poème, tirées de l’art poétique." Among other things, he hoped they would serve as a guide for "ceux qui se voudront exercer en ce genre de poésie" (Oeuvres 8:12 n. 8). He did not, in 1656, mention the three discourses. Who conceived the idea of having one discourse for each of the three volumes of the collected works we do not know. It was likely Corneille himself, though it may also have
been his publisher. In any event, the discourses were destined to fulfill an important function over and above any considerations of textual layout. The poetics on which Corneille said he was going to base the individual reflections (that is, the Examens) did not exist in 1656—or existed only in scattered, incomplete statements and in the playwright's own head. For Aristotle's *Poetics* would obviously not do, at least not without substantial revision. The *Discours* supplied what was missing, a formal Cornelian poetics to which the Examens could refer.

Corneille throughout his career had demonstrated considerable independence of mind as regards Aristotle. At the outset he had adopted the attitude that the "rules" were no more than an interesting option, which a playwright could exercise or not as he wished. In the dedicatory letter for *La Suivante*, which came out while the Academy was deliberating the fate of the *Cid*, Corneille had already begun to moderate his stand, however, and expressed a willingness, in the interest of attaining "un applaudissement universel," to take steps to please the learned critics in his audience as well as the general public. That he acted on these intentions is proved by the greater care he took, beginning with *Horace*, to incorporate Aristotelian principles into his now tighter dramaturgy. It is only in the preface to *Polyeucte* (the "Abrégé du Martyre de saint Polyeucte"), however, that he began, tentatively, to comment critically on his efforts to "regularize" his theater.

By 1648, when he wrote the Avertissement for the *Cid*, to appear in a collected edition published that same year, his attitude toward Aristotle had matured; and he was able to articulate very clearly what, in his mind, had to be adhered to in the *Poetics* and what could, and should, be revised:

*Ce grand homme [Aristote] a traité la poétique avec tant d’adresse et de jugement, que les préceptes qu’il nous en a donnés sont de tous les temps et de tous les peuples; et bien loin de s’amuser au travail des bienséances et des agréments, qui peuvent être divers selon que ces deux circonstances sont diverses, il a été droit aux mouvements de l’âme, dont la nature ne change point. Il a montré quelles passions la tragédie doit exciter dans celles de ses auditeurs; il a cherché quelles conditions sont nécessaires, et aux personnes qu’un introduit, et aux événements qu’on représente, pour les y faire naître; il en*
a laisse des moyens qui auroient produit leur effet partout dès
la création du monde, et qui seront capables de le produire
encore partout, tant qu'il y aura des théâtres et des auteurs; et
pour le reste, que les lieux et les temps peuvent changer, il l'a
négligé, et n'a pas même prescrit le nombre des actes, qui n'a
été réglé que par Horace beaucoup après lui. (Oeuvres,
3:85-86)

Corneille stresses here more strongly than ever before his faith
in the eternal verity of Aristotle's views concerning human
nature and the dramatic poet's interest in appealing, through his
art, to the deeper recesses of the heart. This ringing endorsement
gives way in the end, however, to the equally important proviso
that "pour le reste" there is nothing wrong with adding to the
Poetics. To be sure, he does not venture to say that Aristotle is
ever at fault and that succeeding generations, in what they have
added, in effect have rectified the Poetics. Still, the view he de­
defines here is clearly in harmony with the principle of rectification
as we have seen it applied to poetry, and close to Tasso's idea of
the constancy of poetic genres and poetic talent versus the evo­
lution, through the ages, of heroic decorum. Corneille hints, in
his remark about Horace and the convention of dividing plays
into five acts, that criticism, like poetry itself, undergoes change
as it moves from place to place and age to age. The Discorsi had
sketched out a grand evolution in heroic decorum going from
Homer's Iliad to Vergil's Aeneid down to modern Christian epic.
Corneille seems to be assuming a like evolution in criticism—
one that would run from Aristotle's Poetics to Horace's Art of Po­
etry to Tasso's Discorsi and, thence, by implication to his own
critical view. That view achieved its full maturity only in the Dis­
cours of 1660, which besides echoing the Discorsi in its title also
reflects a thoroughgoing modernism that the example of Tasso
no doubt strengthened in the French poet.

The first and third discourses, on dramatic poetry and on
the unities, offer the widest and the narrowest focuses on the
playwright's art. The middle discourse, on tragedy, for many rea­
sons claims priority of attention. Like books 2 and 3 of the Dis­
corsi, it represents the essence of the author's thinking on poetics
and contains his most vigorous and most original arguments. In
what follows I shall therefore concentrate on the "Discours de la
tragédie." The discourse is not easy to read because Corneille
adopts a strategy that does much to conceal the far-reaching implications of what he has to say. Instead of developing his own ideas directly, as Tasso does in the Discorsi, Corneille most often begins with Aristotle, whose ideas he is at pains to explicate as thoroughly as possible before moving on to outline his own theories, which he presents as extensions of, or options to, the Poetics. Corneille obviously disagrees with Aristotle, or questions Aristotle’s conclusions, on quite a few issues, but it is hard to see on first or second reading exactly what the significance of these divergencies is. For Corneille makes no attempt to separate the incidental from the essential or to connect one essential point of difference with another. In the following analysis, I shall try to do what the playwright chose not to do, in order to bring out as forcefully as possible the real originality of his conception of heroic tragedy.

As in the Avertissement for the Cid, so in the discourses, Corneille takes care to distinguish between what is eternally valid in the Poetics and what is time- or culture-bound. For all his professions of respect, one often gets the impression, nevertheless, that in Corneille’s opinion Aristotle made more sense for the Greeks than he does for Frenchmen living in the seventeenth century. The playwright notes that the tragic emotions of pity and fear are inspired, according to Aristotle, by the fate that befalls a flawed hero, and the action of the tragedy is supposed somehow to effect the purging of these same emotions. He expresses doubt as to whether catharsis actually takes place in tragedy and even hazards the opinion that Aristotle himself proposed the theory only in order to combat Plato, who had condemned poets and poetry as harmful to the republic. Aristotle’s insistence that the tragic hero must have a flaw, the playwright traces to another accidental circumstance. The heroes of Greek tragedy, he points out, were usually monarchs. The Greeks themselves, however, cherished democratic ideals and so naturally delighted in seeing kings and queens depicted as imperfect. The Greek tragedians, he suggests, were only appealing to this anti-monarchical bias when they created the model of the necessarily flawed tragic hero.

Having thus characterized the Poetics’ view of tragedy as “Greek,” Corneille proceeds to elaborate a series of alternatives. A playwright may, but does not have to, follow the Greeks in
exciting pity and fear through the same hero. If he wishes, he may excite pity through one character and fear through another (as in *Rodogune*) or even choose to ignore fear altogether and excite only pity (as in *Polyeucte*). (In a passage later deleted, he considered the possibility that tragedy might also excite only fear, but rejected the idea on grounds that such a play would not work and that, furthermore, no example of the type appeared to exist.) The hero of these alternate forms of tragedy no longer need be flawed (e.g., Antiochus, Héraclius, and Nicomède) and indeed may be saintly (e.g., Polyeucte). And, in lieu of purgation, tragedies may now derive their usefulness either from "la naïve peinture des vices et des vertus" or from poetic justice.

The distance that Corneille places between his own theater and the Greeks' can best be measured, however, by seeing how he revises Aristotle’s list of possible tragic situations. Aristotle observes, and Corneille agrees, that conflicts occurring between persons who are closely related to one another are the most apt to excite the tragic emotions. These persons may recognize one another or not, and the terrible acts that they are planning may or may not actually be performed. These factors give rise to four basic situations, which Aristotle ranks in order of their decreasing effectiveness as follows: (1) the act is planned in ignorance of a true relationship, then the true relationship is discovered and the act is not performed (as in *Iphigenia in Tauris*); (2) the act is performed in ignorance, after which the true relationship is discovered (as in *Oedipus*); (3) the act is planned and performed in full knowledge of the true relationship (as in *Medea*); and (4) the act is planned in full knowledge of the true relationship but then not performed (as in *Antigone*). Aristotle finds *Oedipus* more effective than *Medea* because the revelation of truth in *Oedipus* creates an agreeable surprise and, contrariwise, Medea’s act, performed in full knowledge of her relationship to her children, provokes a sense of outrage. The fourth possibility he virtually rejects because this situation, he says, “merely shocks us, and, since no suffering is involved, it is not tragic. Hence nobody is allowed to behave like this, or only seldom, as when Haemon fails to kill Creon in the *Antigone*” (*Poetics* 14). Corneille’s preferences are almost the reverse of Aristotle’s. Situation (1)—in which an act is planned in ignorance, but not performed because of timely discovery of a true relationship—this
situation, the playwright says, is capable of creating suspense but will not excite pity or elicit many tears. Furthermore, situations of this type must necessarily be invented by the poet, inasmuch as so few examples can be found in history, either because they have occurred only very infrequently or else because they have not been deemed worthy of being written about. Situation (2), as typified by *Oedipus*, stands to produce more interesting theatrical effects, he believes, but situations of this type are extremely rare. It is not often that closely related persons fail to recognize one another. The poet, moreover, cannot invent a situation of this sort; for the sake of credibility he is forced to use one of the few such situations provided by history or legend. Situation (3), which is represented by *Medea*, appeals to Corneille more than either of the other two. Though it too requires the support of history, it avoids the extreme of rarity found in (2), where violence occurs among closely related persons who do not recognize their relationship, but it does not fall into the domain of the commonplace, as in (1). Corneille's favorite situation, however, is the one that Aristotle had judged to be unsuitable: that in which the act is planned in full knowledge of a true relationship, but, for some reason or other, is not performed. This is the situation found not only in *Antigone* but also in *Le Cid, Cinna, Rodrigue, Héraclius,* and *Nicomède,* he says. He agrees that the characters' failure to carry through with a planned course of action would be ineffective if it depended solely on an unmotivated change of heart; but, handled well, this situation seems to him to hold the greatest of possibilities:

... Quand ils y font de leur côté tout ce qu'ils peuvent, et qu'ils sont empêchés d'en venir à l'effet par quelque puis­sance supérieure, ou par quelque changement de fortune qui les fait périr eux-mêmes, ou les réduit sous le pouvoir de ceux qu'ils vouloient perdre, il est hors de doute que cela fait une tragédie d'un genre peut-être plus sublime que les trois qu'Aristote avoue; et que s'il n'en a point parlé, c'est qu'il n'en voyoit point d'exemples sur les théâtres de son temps, où ce n'étoit pas la mode de sauver les bons par la perte des mé­chants. ... (*Oeuvres*, 1:68–69)

The playwright tries to minimize the importance of his break with Aristotle by continuing to express the greatest respect for his predecessor, but his modernist position remains clear:
"Ce n'est pas démentir Aristote que de l'expliquer ainsi favorablement, pour trouver dans cette quatrième manière d'agir qu'il rebute, une espèce de nouvelle tragédie plus belle que les trois qu'il recommande, et qu'il leur eût sans doute préférée, s'il l'eût connue. C'est faire honneur à notre siècle, sans rien re­trancher à l'autorité de ce philosophe . . . " (Oeuvres, 1:69).

Again, near the close of this section of the "Discours de la tragédie," the author sums up his thinking in the following paragraph:

Il y a grande apparence que ce qu'a dit ce philosophe de ces divers degrés de perfection pour la tragédie avoit une entière justesse de son temps, et devant ses compatriotes; je n'en veux point douter; mais aussi je ne me puis empêcher de dire que le goût de notre siècle n'est point celui du sien sur cette pré­férence d'une espèce à l'autre, ou du moins que ce qui plaisoit au dernier point à ses Athéniens ne plait pas également à nos Fran­çois; et je ne sais point d'autre moyen de trouver mes doutes supportables, et demeurer tout ensemble dans la vê­nérâtion que nous devons à tout ce qu'il a écrit de la poétique. (Oeuvres, 1:72)

Corneille's ideal hero is very good, then, if not perfect; and he naturally elicits the sympathy of the audience. ("[Cette] maxime de faire aimer nos principaux acteurs n'étoit pas de l'usage de nos anciens" [Oeuvres, 1:80]). Opposite him is a very wicked person who tries to achieve the hero's downfall. Aristotle thought that if either the very innocent or the very wicked were shown falling into misfortune, the audience would fail to expe­rience the proper tragic emotions. In one case, they would feel indignation toward the source of the misfortune rather than pity for the innocent hero. In the other case, they would experience neither pity (because the misfortune of the wicked character would be deserved) nor fear (because they could not identify with excessive wickedness). Corneille, on the contrary, claims that pity is not necessarily outweighed by indignation and that audiences can find something (of a lesser degree) with which to relate even in the most wicked. Consequently: "En voici deux ou trois manières [d'exposer sur la scène des hommes ou très vertueux ou très méchants qui sont dans le malheur], que peut-être Aristote n'a su prévoir, parce qu'on n'en voyoit pas d'exemples sur les théâtres de son temps" (Oeuvres, 1:63). Poetic justice is,
in fact, a magnificent adornment. Combined with the audience's natural affection for innocence, it can produce a powerful effect in the theater: "Il semble alors que la justice du ciel ait présidé au succès, qui trouve d'ailleurs une croyance d'autant plus facile qu'il répond aux souhaits de l'auditoire, qui s'intéresse toujours pour ceux dont le procédé est le meilleur" (Oeuvres, 1:92). Po­etic justice proves not only pleasing but morally useful as well: "Le fruit qui peut naître des impressions que fait la force de l'exemple lui manquait [à Aristote]: la punition des méchantes actions, et la récompense des bonnes, n'étoient pas de l'usage de son siècle ..." (Oeuvres, 1:58).

Corneille never tries to specify in detail what exactly determines the differences in usage or taste between ancient Greece and modern France. He speaks, but only in passing, of the denouement that seems to imply "la justice du ciel" (Oeuvres, 1:92 and 79). Elsewhere he notes that "il faut s'accommoder aux moeurs de l'auditeur et à plus forte raison à sa croyance"; Christians, he says, will not tolerate the intervention of Greek gods into the action of a modern play, "parce que nous en savons manifestement la fausseté, et que [ces apparitions] choquent notre religion" (Oeuvres, 1:75–76). Undoubtedly it is Christianity that makes the difference throughout, but Corneille does not emphasize the fact, as Tasso does in the Discorsi. He is constrained probably by the unresolved conflict in the society around him between the belief that the theater can and should aim at the utmost seriousness and the contrary belief that the theater, even though purified, is still unworthy of dealing with the most serious subject of all, the Christian faith. Corneille points a very tentative finger toward this contradiction later on in the paragraph just quoted from. Apollo and Mercury, he says, would prove displeasing in a modern play. Playwrights can always make adjustments, and a Christian playwright in theory might be expected to substitute angels and saints for the gods of the Ancients. Such is not the case, however: "Qu'auroit-on dit, si pour démêler Héraclius d'avec Martian, après la mort de Phocas, je me fusse servi d'un ange? Ce poème est entre des chrétiens, et cette apparition y auroit eu autant de justesse que celles des Dieux de l'antiquité dans ceux des Grecs; c'eût été néanmoins un secret infaillible de rendre celui-là ridicule ..." (Oeuvres, 1:76). Corneille approaches the problem in typically indirect
fashion by focusing on the device of the *deus ex machina*, where the ancillary problem of arbitrariness tends to confuse the basic issue of the acceptability of direct divine intervention in the theater. The conventions of the modern epic allowed for free and open interaction of the divine and the human planes; neither Tasso nor any of his French imitators needed skirt the issue either in their poems or in their theoretical works. Corneille, as we saw, had to replace the god Mercury with a human agent, Néarque, in *Polyeucte*; and in the “Discours de la tragédie,” he permits himself only the most oblique reference to the real nature of the gulf dividing his theater from the Greeks.

In the last half of the “Discours de la tragédie,” Corneille moves on to another, related problem. Ostensibly he is scrutinizing each of Aristotle’s four basic situations to see for which ones the poet must turn to history or legend and to what extent the poet is free to modify what he borrows. Indirectly, Corneille is discussing rather how to adjust any material, whether borrowed from history or from the work of an ancient poet, so as to make it conform to his own preferred range of tragic possibilities. Corneille has no interest in a play that is totally invented by the poet. The central incident must be extraordinary and therefore requires the support of some known or citable precedent. Aristotle’s first choice among the four situations, it will be recalled, seemed quite uninteresting to Corneille precisely because it involved commonplace happenings: the planning of action in ignorance, followed by cancellation of the plan after discovery of a truth. Here, Corneille thinks that the poet not only might but would probably have to invent, since history books rarely report such mundane affairs. Clearly, what interests Corneille must come from history or legend; but it has to be adapted to a special mold.

He cites Antiochus and Nicomède as examples of historical figures whom he changed for the better. The first, having become suspicious of his mother, in historical fact forced her to drink poison. Corneille retains the death by poisoning of Cléopâtre but does not make Antiochus the cause of that death. As a consequence, he says, Cléopâtre’s punishment appears even more exemplary than it does in history; moreover, the punishment is brought about with no loss of audience sympathy for Antiochus. Similarly, Corneille’s Nicomède has the power to
cause his father's death, but unlike the historical Nicomède, he does not do so. Corneille does not admit to rewriting the works of ancient poets along the same lines, but it is clear he did precisely that in both Polyeucte and Rodogune itself. What he does do, as we have seen elsewhere, is to theorize about a possible rectification of Sophocles' Electra: "Pour rectifier ce sujet à notre mode, il faudroit qu'Oreste n'eût dessein contre Egisthe; qu'un reste de tendresse respectueuse pour sa mère lui en fit remettre la punition aux Dieux; que cette reine s'opiniâtrât à la protection de son adultere, et qu'elle se mît entre son fils et lui si malheureusement qu'elle reçût le coup que ce prince voudroit porter à cet assassin de son père" (Oeuvres, 1:81).

Weaving a circuitous path through questions of the necessary and the verisimilar, on the one hand, and of regular and extraordinary verisimilitude on the other, Corneille defines his own idea of a theater with intermittent clarity. The poet may, if he wants, invent everything or nothing, imagine all the characters and all the action or merely dramatize history. Whichever path he chooses, he will not be violating the rules of his art. To test himself to the utmost, however, to attain the highest reaches of the playwright's art, he must take the risk of mixing fact and fiction (Oeuvres, 1:83). For it is through verisimilitude that the dramatic poet works his greatest effects, and particularly through "la vraisemblance extraordinaire." Corneille never rejects outright anything found in the Poetics; but he is forever modifying, attenuating, accommodating, or simply adding to what Aristotle has said. He is, in short, rectifying Aristotle without saying so outright.

In his letter to the Abbé de Pure (Oeuvres, 10:485–87), Corneille indicated that writing the three discourses had not come easily; and in truth the strain shows. The problem was that he was trying to reconcile too many disparate ideas and please too many factions while still remaining true to his new vision of tragedy. Certain of the great prefaces provide, on isolated topics, a stronger sense of the playwright's originality as a theoretician: the preface to La Suite du Menteur on the question of utility; the prefaces of Rodogune and Héraclitus on uses of history and invention; and the preface of Nicomède on the new hero without a tragic flaw. One would expect the "Discours de la tragédie" to pick up from this last preface the theory of the hero who excites
neither pity nor fear but only admiration. No such thing occurs, however. *Admiration* is nowhere mentioned as an alternative tragic emotion; and, in contradiction to the preface of *Nicomède* (and also the Examen, which in this matter repeats the preface), the discourse looks on Nicomède only as a hero who excites pity: “L'auditeur peut avoir de la commiseration pour Antiochus, pour Nicomède, pour Héraclius . . .” (*Oeuvres*, 1:60). The preface of *Nicomède* marks the farthest point that Corneille reaches in defining his new hero in terms normally associated not with tragedy but rather with the epic; and he retreats from that position, presumably out of respect for the *Poetics*, or out of fear of provoking his neo-Aristotelian critics.

The presence of Aristotle dominates the “Discours de la tragédie,” distorting and inhibiting not so much Corneille’s thought as his expression of it on the page. Tasso, in many ways, is just as powerful an influence as Aristotle. The Cornelian conception of a new tragic action owes a great deal to the *Discorsi*, even though Tasso would not have approved of the shift that Corneille makes from epic to tragedy. Tasso no doubt also contributed to the modernism that marks the “Discours de la tragédie,” even though, because of the situation in France, Corneille feels obliged to mute it. His new tragic hero is always at least implicitly Christian; and the reshaping of history to accommodate this new model of heroic action is a form of Christian revisionism. If Corneille appeals insistently to Aristotle in the discourses, he does so with a clear sense of the great distance that separates them, of things that Aristotle did not see and could now know in his day—in short, of the new dispensation under which he himself, like Tasso, writes. Corneille would undoubtedly have disagreed with Aristotle in any event; but the example of Tasso very likely helped him define his independence.

As theoretical works the *Discorsi* and the *Discours* share many of the same aims. Though Tasso almost never refers to his own work whereas Corneille always does, both are attempting to explain and to justify their own poetic practice and to situate it in the great poetic tradition inherited from the past, while demonstrating its relevance to the needs and the beliefs of the present. The greatest poets do not always let us see them reflecting as critics on the art they practice so well. Tasso and Corneille in this respect are quite exceptional, and their critical work is especially
valuable for being conceived from within the citadel of poetic creativity. In writing the “Discours,” Corneille thus went beyond the challenge laid down to him during the Quarrel of the Cid. He joined the twin traditions of greatness in poetry and greatness in poetic theory. Like Tasso, who had led the way and set the example, he distinguished himself finally not only as a poet but also as a critic of poetry.

The “Discours de la tragédie” is one kind of reflection on poetry; the literalization of critical metaphors that we saw in Horace, Polyeucte, and Théodore is another form of the same self-reflectiveness. What they show, taken together, is that throughout this crucial middle period of his long career, Corneille held fast to a single strong vision that he had forged from the double fires of the Quarrel of the Cid and his subsequent ardent desire to emulate Tasso. In this vision Corneille saw himself as a modern; that is, as a Christian poet, and his art as a modern, Christian art, however discreet he had to be about proclaiming it.