Fontenelle, Perrault
And the Realignment of the Arts
In these pages I intend to use the fate of rhetoric as a kind of divining rod that will allow me to say something about a number of other disciplines—poetry, history, philosophy, mathematics, physics, architecture, sculpture, painting, and music—and to say something, again, about the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, itself a problem that goes far beyond the bounds of a literary dispute. I want to treat Fontenelle briefly and Charles Perrault at greater length. Through their arguments, and especially in their views concerning rhetoric, we can see the results of a change in the intellectual and artistic landscape, a change so great that these two very competent observers find themselves making new maps of the territory in which writers and artists and thinkers do their work.

What are we talking about specifically? The answer is, I think, productive techniques, kinds of knowledge, mental categories: all abstract and ambiguous entities—though no less real for that. Indeed, these abstractions are deceitful, for they gather about themselves concrete myths, imagery, and even kinds of pathos. They form one factor in seventeenth-century creative activity, certainly not the only one, but one that is indispensable. (In art, as in metaphysics, what is necessary may very well not be sufficient.) In other words, in dealing with disciplines and categories, I do not mean to overlook or to undervalue other factors more in tune with our own reflexes, like the experience of the author (with its conscious
and unconscious elements), tragic reactions to the human condition, idealism, paths to freedom, honnêteté, mondanité, crise de conscience, lumières, and other such principles that we apply in interpreting classical and postclassical literature. My point is that Fontenelle and Perrault seem unable to think without having recourse to the ideas and techniques that I am about to treat.

One further preliminary remark. The history of intellectual and artistic disciplines has to grapple with an extraordinarily complex and unstable reality, made up of varying dosages of choice, logic, chance, and fashion. More precisely: in speaking of a realignment of the arts I do not mean to suggest an abrupt shift, because on close examination one usually finds continuity. Clearly a trend lies behind the Digression sur les Anciens et les Modernes and the Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes. General interest in science, for example, had been growing for several decades. The success of Lémery’s Cours de chimie (1675) inspired Fontenelle to remark that “il se vendit comme un ouvrage de galanterie ou de satire.” Mme de Grignan was an enthusiastic Cartesian. Boileau pictures thus Mme de la Sablière:

Un astrolabe à la main, elle a dans sa gouttière
A suivre Jupiter passé la nuit entière.
(Satire 10.429-30)

There is a lot of evidence of a more serious kind that one might adduce.

The sixteen pages of the Digression (1688) contain a startling demotion of rhetoric and poetry. The general question has to do—as we all know—with the relative position of the Ancients and Moderns. Fontenelle answers it, to his own satisfaction, at least, by comparing men to trees: if nature produces trees as tall today as in ancient times, there is no reason to suppose that the creative powers she distributes to men are weaker in the present than in the past. I have not used in
this "proof," says Fontenelle pointedly, flights of eloquence: "J'ai cru que le plus court était de consulter un peu sur tout ceci la physique, qui a le secret d'abréger bien des contestations que la rhétorique rend infinies" (p. 164).

A few paragraphs later Fontenelle does something quite radical: turning to psychology and the faculties of the soul, he assigns eloquence and poetry mainly to the imagination, and then physics, medicine, and mathematics to reasoning ("raisonnement"). By this one stroke the intellectual seriousness and respectability of rhetoric is undermined. Generally speaking, in the seventeenth century, for a discipline to be dependent on imagination is a bad sign: Pascal, Spinoza, and Malebranche, to cite three notable examples, agreed in thinking it the mistress of error. And again, we must consider Fontenelle's additive notion of the way in which sciences and arts are constituted. At any moment they consist of a collection or sum of views ("un amas de vues") and rules. If we accept this, he can lead us to another unflattering conclusion: eloquence and poetry require only a limited number of these views and rules in order to reach their perfection as arts, whereas physics, medicine and mathematics are composed of an infinite number of views.

Fontenelle sums everything up devastatingly:

Pour ce qui est de l'éloquence et de la poésie, qui font le sujet de la principale contestation entre les anciens et les modernes, quoiqu'elles ne soient pas en elles-mêmes fort importantes, je crois que les anciens en ont pu atteindre la perfection, parce que, comme j'ai dit, on la peut atteindre en peu de siècles. (p. 167)¹

Here we see the specific terms (éloquence and poésie) in which he understands the central issue of the Quarrel and how he will deal with it, unblinkingly. In Greece and Rome excellence in public speaking led to the highest honors and positions. But that is all changed; rhetoric has no such utility now. As for poetry, well:
La poésie au contraire n'était bonne à rien, et ç'a été toujours la même chose dans toutes sortes de gouvernements; ce vice-là lui est bien essentiel. (p. 168)

Even if one allows for irony in this judgment, it hurts.

As we put down the Digression, we know that we have left behind the notion—inscribed in the program of the Academy and often echoed on many levels of what was said and thought in the seventeenth-century literature that we call classical—the notion of rhetoric as a basic and unavoidable discipline, as the cornerstone of a quadrivium made up of eloquence, poetics, history, and philosophy: in Fontenelle’s hands it has been narrowed to oratory, tied to the imagination, assimilated to poetry, shown to be irrelevant to the facts of political life, and set in invidious contrast with other disciplines.

In some ways it is hard to imagine two works more different than Fontenelle’s pamphlet and the four ample volumes of Perrault’s Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes. But the relationship is obvious: Perrault elaborates in the latter what is sketched in the former. (And he is also continuing, of course, to develop themes from his poem Le Siècle de Louis le Grand, which had caused a sensation when read to the Academy in 1687.) His undertaking is spread over the period from 1688 to 1697: in 1688 the first volume (containing the first two of what was to be a set of five long dialogues) appeared, to be followed in 1690, 1692, and 1697 by volumes completing the series. Within the framework of a two-day visit to Versailles—that image de notre siècle, as he says—Perrault shows us a Président, an Abbé, and a Chevalier, who examine first the “préjugé” in favor of the Ancients, then the status of the arts and sciences as divided into (1) architecture, sculpture, and painting; (2) eloquence and poetry; and (3) a mixed but important bag, ranging from astronomy to gardening and cooking, with a final bit on fireworks. For my purposes it seems best to start in medias res, with the question of eloquence.
From that we can work out toward a view of Perrault’s “système,” as he calls it from time to time.

Like Fontenelle, Perrault is capable at moments of using rhetoric in the narrow sense of oratory, but for the most part he reverts to a broad conception: rhetoric is once more the basis of belles-lettres. The Abbé, the Président and the Chevalier discuss, à propos of eloquence: Plato and Aristotle—not as philosophers, not as two great sources in any theorizing about rhetoric, but as writers, and their works are judged as examples of expository discourse; the histories of Thucydides and Livy; dialogues (here they praise Pascal’s Lettres provinciales); fables; novels; allegories; literary correspondence; Demosthenes and Cicero; Theophrastus and La Bruyère; the speeches of Le Maistre; and sermons. In short, the area over which rhetoric presides directly is that of expression in prose. Moreover, it would not be hard to show that Perrault carried over into the dialogue on poetry the ideas and terms used in the discussion of prose.

Now in the decades when what we call “classical doctrine” and “classical taste” were developing, we often find in critical statements both narrow uses and broad uses of the terms rhetoric and eloquence. Where, then, is the realignment of the arts promised in my title? The transition that I wish to indicate amounts to this: the superiority of an essentially verbal culture is now debatable in the face of achievements in the nonverbal spheres of plastic arts and music, and in the sciences of nature, where words are less important than things. Rhetoric, and poetry along with it, must in this emergent situation find their proper place. Of course, in line with his thesis, Perrault defends them in their modern state, but what makes his thought particularly interesting is not so much his defense as the attempt that he makes to integrate these formerly supreme arts into his picture and not simply to demote them or to juxtapose them alongside the other arts and sciences. I do not want to oversystematize the Parallèle, but there is evidence for this organizing tendency.
For example, the Président opens the discussion of poetry on a sharp note by saying flatly that modern poets can never equal the beauties that one sees in the ancients, because la fable et les fictions, which form the most beautiful parts of poetry, cannot be used in a vital way by modern poets. The Abbé counters with a definition:

La poésie n’est autre chose qu’une peinture agréable, qui représente par la parole tout ce que l’imagination peut concevoir, en donnant presque toujours un corps, une âme, du sentiment et de la vie aux choses qui n’en ont point. (pp. 285-86, 7-8)

This reminds us at once of the phrase from Horace, ut pictura poesis, an idea that Perrault takes very seriously; and used as a principle, it obviously can unify, in spite of differences in media, two great areas of creative activity.

But more important, I think, is the fact that essential analogies of poetry, painting, and rhetoric are involved here. Perrault finds three elements in painting: lines, by which one gives to figures their characteristic images; shadings ("les jours et les ombres"), by which the painter causes the objects shown to take on relief and volume; and colors, the natural colors of things, by which he achieves true and complete likenesses. These elements have their counterparts in language. You will note in the following lines the unmistakable references to the main topics of rhetoric.

Les mêmes choses se rencontrent dans l’art qui conduit la parole: les termes simples et ordinaires dont on se sert dans le langage le plus commun, sont comme le premier trait et la première délinéation des pensées que l’on veut exprimer; les mouvements et les figures de la rhétorique, qui donnent du relief au discours, sont les jours et les ombres qui les font avancer ou reculer dans le tableau: et enfin les descriptions ornées, les épithètes vives, et les métaphores hardies sont comme les couleurs naturelles dont les objets sont revêtus et par lesquelles ils nous apparaissent tels qu’ils sont dans la vérité. (p. 286, 8-9)
We have, therefore, two parallel sequences: lines, chiaroscuro effects, and colors matched with common terms, figures, and verbal ornaments.

Actually, in the earlier dialogue on architecture, sculpture, and painting, Perrault had laid the groundwork for a far-reaching integration of all the arts. Lines, shadings, and colors were there, but his distinction of the three parts of a painting came out somewhat differently.

Pour bien me faire entendre, il faut que je distingue trois choses dans la peinture: la représentation des figures, l'expression des passions et la composition du tout ensemble. (p. 153, 209)

These three topics—figures, passions, composition—appear in one guise or another throughout most of the rest of the dialogue. They guide Perrault in analyzing particular works (The Pilgrims of Emmaus by Veronese and The Family of Darius by Lebrun) and in sketching a history of painting as well as in setting up parallels with other arts, such as music or eloquence. Each of the three parts of painting corresponds to a psychological power.

Car il faut remarquer que comme la peinture a trois parties qui la composent, il y a aussi trois parties dans l'homme par où il en est touché, les sens, le cœur, et la raison. (p. 154, 213)

And so the delineation of objects with their colors strikes the eye agreeably; the expression of feelings in the attitudes and faces of the figures touches the heart; and, in the picture taken as a whole, gradations of light, shade, and proportion please reason.

The Abbé adds: “Il en est de même des ouvrages de tous les autres arts” (p. 154, 214). He keeps up for a while this process of arranging things in chains of proportions. In music, sounds and voices appeal to the ear, expressive changes in the voices to the heart, and the harmony of the parts to the mind. In eloquence, the diction and gestures affect the senses, the
figures win the heart, and the general plan or economy of the speech satisfies the mind. Such is the key to his unifying scheme: three aspects of art and three aspects of the human psyche are distinguished; the two lists are seen to correspond; and on the side of art, one arrives at a synoptic view that links the arts by analogies, while at the same time, on the side of man, one arrives at a corresponding table of effects and pleasures.

Another kind of unity appears in a comparison of the two paintings. The Abbé admits that Veronese's picture is very beautiful, but, he adds,

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\text{comme un tableau est un poème muet, où l'unité de lieu, de temps et d'action doit être encore plus religieusement observée que dans un poème véritable, parce que le lieu y est immuable, le temps indivisible, et l'action momentanée, voyons comment cette règle est observée dans ce tableau.} \quad (p. 156, 223)
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Veronese's people are assembled in the same place, but they do not cooperate in a single action; the painter seems to have put them together arbitrarily, whereas Lebrun does everything in a more regular fashion.

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\text{Je ne crois pas que nous ayons aucun de ces reproches à faire au tableau de la famille de Darius. C'est un véritable poème où toutes les règles sont observées} \quad (p. 157, 226-27).
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And so, the Horatian formula turns out to be reversible: \textit{ut poesis pictura}.

There is one last area to be added to this "système": the sciences. Perrault does not have a neat map of this sector. In it lie parts of philosophy—logic, morals, metaphysics, physics—and mathematics and those spectacularly successful modern arts or sciences—like navigation, geography, astronomy—that depend on accurate observation and precise measurement. What Perrault does in order to bring these fields into line with
the other arts we have been discussing makes a complicated story that I can only refer to here. Suffice it to say that, in his mind, these renewed and corrected disciplines, clearly superior in their modern forms to what the Ancients had, may be reduced to ensembles of *vues* and *règles*, of conclusions and of techniques. And so we find ourselves using once more the same vocabulary that served in analyzing eloquence, poetry, sculpture, architecture, painting, and music. (Fontenelle had used this vocabulary, too.)

Now it might seem that rhetoric, which by its shifting relative position has given us some insight into the restructuring of an ensemble of disciplines, would now go out of the picture in the treatment of natural and other sciences. That is not the case, however. Perrault’s definition—and then redefinition—of rhetoric will show what I mean.

Pour y procéder avec ordre je crois que nous devons commencer par convenir de ce que c’est que l’éloquence. Cicéron que nous reconnaissons tous pour un excellent maître en donne plusieurs définitions. L’éloquence, dit-il, consiste à parler avec abondance et avec ornement; l’orateur, dit-il ailleurs, n’est autre chose qu’un homme de probité qui parle bien, et dans un autre endroit il dit qu’être éloquent c’est savoir dire des choses qui persuadent. (p. 190, 41)

The Chevalier makes immediately one of his little jokes: “Je crois que Cicéron a fait la première de ces définitions pour lui-même: car il parle fort abondamment” (p. 190, 41-42). Then the Abbé (i.e., Perrault), in a decisive move inspired in great part—I am convinced—by the *Art de penser* or *Logique* of Port-Royal, leaves all those definitions behind.

Je voudrais donc que l’éloquence en général ne fût autre chose que l’art de bien parler selon la nature du sujet que l’on traite, et selon les lieux, les temps et les personnes. (p. 190, 42-43)

This way of conceiving rhetoric establishes in one sentence the general perspective in which all the dialogues of the Pa-
rallèle become truly intelligible, and by the same token, the perspective in which the exact sciences will be treated. Rhetoric involves itself in a work of mediation between specialists in the arts and sciences—who must be allowed their technicalities wherever necessary—on the one hand, and on the other, readers who are not savants, whose times, places, and persons must be taken into account. What I am saying is that the realignment of the arts and sciences toward which Fontenelle to some degree and Perrault in a much ampler way are moving includes rhetoric (1) as one among many elements in the system and (2) as a pervasive instrument that is needed if the system itself is to be brought into being and made accessible. In the second case we have the comprehensive art of expression once more, but not exactly in the sense favored by earlier, more “classical” theorists. In the earlier phase of the discussion, when it was the basis of belles-lettres, rhetoric sought to guide writers who had something to create in writing; in its new role it provides a relevant line of thought to those who have something to communicate in writing.

If at times we are very conscious of the weaknesses and superficialities of the Parallèle, we must on the whole recognize the skill, tact, and good humor that inform it. Anecdotes, facts, erudition, contemporary allusions: the author knows how to use them all in realizing his plan. He and his public were struggling with the original form of what we have come to know in the twentieth century as the problem of the “two cultures,” one mainly verbal and inventive and the other scientific and investigative. By 1688 the latter had become so imposing that some kind of mutual adjustment was required. Indeed, Perrault does more than bring the “two cultures” together, since he is au courant of what has happened in a third area, that of the plastic arts. In the context of use and enjoyment he unifies the arts by referring their effects to a certain image of man—with his powers of sense, feeling, and reason; and in the context of production he unifies both arts and sci-
ences by referring them again to man—specifically, to taste and imagination for the arts and to reason and sense for the sciences.

In short, what Perrault did in the Parallèle was to illustrate—at times brilliantly—a kind of encyclopedic thinking that makes of him a worthy forerunner of Diderot and his collaborators. Like them, he saw the possibility of drawing up an inventory of knowledge that would discriminate, unify, and popularize.

1. My quotations from Fontenelle are taken from Robert Shackleton’s edition of the Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes and the Digression sur les Anciens et les Moderns (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955); those from Perrault are taken from the Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes en ce qui regarde les arts et les sciences as reprinted in 1964 by Eidos Verlag München. With introductory material by H. R. Jauss and M. Imdahl, it forms volume 2 of the series “Theorie und Geschichte der Literatur und der schönen Künste.” Page references given in the text are to this reprint (first series) and to the original edition.