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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to re-consider the aesthetics of tragedy in the work of the seventeenth-century dramatist Jean Racine. The purpose of the essay is twofold. On the one hand, the intention is to re-invigorate the reading of a dramatist whose work is too easily buried beneath labels such as "French Classicism." On the other, an attempt is made to use this re-reading to cast new light on some of the central questions of representation, pleasure and tragedy that were to become fundamental to later developments in aesthetic theory in the century that followed.

We could cast Racine's rejection of his mentor Pierre Nicole in familiar terms, describing it as the rejection of a repressive theological moralizing in favor of a hard-won "expressive freedom." However, a closer examination of both Nicole's aesthetics and Racine's dramatic art reveals a different picture. As this paper will show, Nicole's critique of seventeenth-century aesthetic practice is complex, nuanced, and trenchant. It is a critique that succeeds in posing significant questions about representation, self and other, and about the mechanics of "tragic pleasure." In turn, Racine's more private reflections (in his notes on Aristotle) as well as the development of his dramatic practice, indicate not a rejection, but a serious attempt to appropriate this critique, and transform his own dramatic practice in response to it.

KEYWORDS

Jean Racine, Pierre Nicole, tragedy, representation, pleasure

Passionate Deceptions: Nicole and Racine on the Theatre

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It is hard to read Racine's open letter to Pierre Nicole, from January 1666, without a certain measure of disappointment. The occasion such a letter might have afforded for thoughtful reflection, for a measured response, even for a graceful or elegant rebuttal of one of the theatre's most eloquent adversaries by one of its most brilliant young adherents remains sadly beyond its horizon. Instead we find a vituperative and undignified attack, by turns sarcastic and hysterical: "And what is it that novels and plays might have in common with Jansenism?" shrieks the author (*Et qu'est-ce que les romans et les comédies peuvent avoir de commun avec le jansénisme?*).¹ Still more unpleasant are the biting and insidious references to personal misfortune: "You have enough enemies: why seek out new ones...?" (*Vous avez assez d'ennemis: pourquoi en chercher de nouveaux...?*) The spectacle of a dazzlingly gifted young poet pouring scorn upon his teachers – and not just upon Nicole, but upon others like Antoine le Maistre, who had demonstrated an almost paternal benevolence toward Racine at Port-Royal – is a distinctly unedifying one. Inevitably, too, the attack is rendered still more discomforting by the sense of opportunism that surrounds it, an impression more than reinforced by

Racine's well-documented mistreatment of his friend and mentor Molière just one month before.²

However, beyond the somewhat dark light that these incidents cast on Racine's character, they tend to simplify the picture of his position relative to the critique of the theatre launched from Port-Royal and elsewhere during the 1660's. The relation between Racine and Nicole appears, in the light of his attack, as merely a rather brutal manifestation of the confrontation of intransigent adversaries. Such confrontation in turn tends to mask the complexity and subtlety of the debate itself. In particular, the intensity of Racine's attack on Nicole conceals many of the complexities of his response to the latter's critique. In light of the subsequent reconciliation with Port-Royal, it is possible to see many of the continual shifts and transformations in Racine's dramaturgy, as evidenced in the Prefaces, but also in the plays themselves, as in some measure modes of reaction, response and accommodation to that critique. Traditionally, this reconciliation is located biographically in 1677, upon the publication of *Phèdre*, and on the cusp of Racine's thirteen-year silence. At the close of the preface to that play, Racine writes explicitly of his desire to seek "a means of reconciling to tragedy a number of celebrated persons who, in their piety and through their doctrine have condemned it in recent times" (*un moyen de réconcilier la tragédie avec une quantité de personnes célèbres par leur piété et par leur doctrine qui l'ont condamnée dans ces derniers temps*). This desire, dramatically reinforced by the play's immediate presentation – at Racine's request – to Arnauld, certainly becomes explicit in this text. But the working out of complex relations with Port-Royal, and more broadly with the debates surrounding the value of the theatrical experience, can surely be traced throughout Racine's work. This is by no means to insist on a "hidden Jansenism" at play below the surface of Racine's work, but rather to suggest a way in which his output might be seen as the nexus of an ongoing debate on the nature of the theatre, and of an insistent response to a critique to which he was, at least according to the testimony of his son, very sensitive.³

On the other side, an over-simple representation of Nicole's position would tend to mask the subtlety and intensity, and therefore also the significance, of the debate itself. In this masking, this debate can come to appear, somewhat anachronistically, simply as a battle between "artistic freedom" on the one hand, and the forces of a moralizing repression on the other. The purpose of this paper will be to try to bring out a more nuanced and complicated picture of the debate that crystallizes dramatically around Racine's break with Port-Royal. To this end, the first part of the paper will

examine Racine's understanding of his praxis, as filtered through his reading of Aristotle, and made clear in contrast to the conception of tragedy articulated by Corneille. The second section will focus on Nicole's understanding of theatre, contained largely in his *Traité sur la Comédie* of 1667. The third and final section will return to Racine, and attempt to reveal a proximity between certain elements of Nicole's thinking, and the dramatic practice of Racine's exactly contemporaneous tragedy *Andromaque* (1667).

• 1 •

Amongst the most intriguing of the vast array of personal documents and letters bequeathed to Racine's son Louis upon his death is the poet's own copy of Aristotle's *Poetics*, in a sixteenth century Latin translation. For in its margins are translations and annotations, clearly made for Racine's own personal reflection, of certain key passages of the text. The translations are by no means literal, and the additions and interpretative remarks can provide certain clues to Racine's understanding of Aristotle. However, the aim here will not be in any way to provide a full account of the presence of Aristotle's thought in Racinian tragedy. Rather, what is to be attempted is more modest: to point out evidence, via his annotations of Aristotle, of a subtle shift in the understanding of tragedy that will place Racine at odds with the theoretical speculations of his most celebrated contemporary Pierre Corneille, and thereby lay the theoretical ground for his confrontation with Nicole.

Particularly germane to our purpose is the translation and annotation of what was, and remains, the most famous passage in Aristotle's text: his definition of tragedy (1449b24–30). Racine begins his translation as follows: "Tragedy is the imitation of an action that is serious and complete, and which has an appropriate grandeur. This imitation is created by discourse, in a style constructed for pleasure" (*La tragédie est l'imitation d'une action grave et complète, et qui a sa juste grandeur. Cette imitation se fait par un discours, un style composé pour le plaisir...*).⁴

Two aspects of this translation must be noted at the outset. The first concerns the translation of "*magnitudinem habentis*" (*megethos echouses*) as "*juste grandeur*." Vinaver has pointed out that this

translation is in fact Corneille's:⁵ the phrase occurs twice in his *Premier Discours: De l'utilité et de la partie du poème dramatique* of 1660.⁶ Corneille's treatises were, of course, widely read in the 1660's, but it is significant to note that Racine's reading of them may have been sufficiently close as to have absorbed and appropriated specific formulations. More particularly, this derivation from Corneille suggests that, in considering Racine's reflections on Aristotle, we might simultaneously need to understand that we are considering a reflection on Corneille's dramaturgy. And indeed, it will become evident that the central aim of Racine's reading of Aristotle is not merely to turn to the "authority" of Aristotle, but more particularly to address himself to a conventional contemporary perspective on tragic poetry, in so far as this is expressed by Corneille.

The second translational interpolation to note is the phrase "*un style composé pour le plaisir*." This phrase adapts the Latin "*condita oratione*" (literally "ornamented speech") in such a way as to place a very specific emphasis on both *style* and *pleasure*. Whilst it is true that Aristotle's Greek (*hedousmenon men logon*) refers to an effect of pleasure, it is clear from his explication at 1449b29 that this pleasure involves the need for a pleasing resonance of the words themselves; a pleasure, one might claim, that whilst belonging to the essential definition of tragedy, does not represent its central thrust. Now, to say that this language represents *un style composé pour le plaisir* is to effect a subtle but significant shift in the orientation of the definition. This shift is such that, all of a sudden, the entire tragic discourse begins to revolve around pleasure: tragedy becomes, literally, a discourse composed *pour le plaisir*—*in order to* produce pleasure in spectator or reader.

More significant still than these interpretative additions is the extensive annotation that Racine adds to his translation of Aristotle's famous definition of "catharsis." Aristotle writes that catharsis in a tragic representation "accomplishes by means of pity and fear the cleansing of these sorts of feeling."⁷ Racine translates as follows: "*une représentation vive qui, excitant la pitié et la terreur, purge et tempère ces sortes de passions*." But then he adds: "This is to say that, in moving the passions, it relieves them of that [part] that is excessive and vicious, and brings them back to a condition that is moderate and in conformity with reason" (*C'est-à-dire qu'en esmovant ces passions, elle leur oste ce qu'elles ont d'excessif et de vitieux, et les rameine à un estat modéré et conforme à la raison*).⁸

We are offered, thus, a very specific interpretation of catharsis, whose significance can be gauged in contrast with Corneille's reflections. Corneille, acknowledging Aristotle as his authority, begins his first *Discours* by acknowledging the centrality of pleasure in drama, but is careful from the outset to restrict that pleasure to a very specific kind: the pleasure obtained in the observance of "rule." On condition of this restriction, he is quick to argue that the pleasure that obtains in the dramatic spectacle is in no way to be separated from its usefulness, its "utilité." Indeed, in claiming that "that which is useful can appear there [in tragedy] only via the pleasurable" (*l'utile n'y entre que sous le delectable*) he is rapidly able to subordinate pleasure to utility – the former will be simply a mode of access to the morally effective.⁹ Corneille goes on to describe four kinds of moral utility that are to be discovered in theatrical representation, the first being just the simple inclusion of morally appropriate maxims. The second utility consists in what he terms "the naïve painting of virtues and vices" (*la naïve peinture des vices et des vertus*).¹⁰ According to this conception, the morally efficacious quality of the drama will necessarily appear *if* the drama is successful. It is impossible, Corneille assures us, that vice could ever be mistaken for virtue under these conditions: "this latter always makes itself loved, even though unhappy; and the former is always detested, even though triumphant" (*Celle-ci se fait alors toujours aimer, quoique malheureuse; et celui-là se fait toujours haïr, bien que triomphant*).¹¹ Within a successful dramatic representation, then, pleasure itself – the observance of rule – will necessarily entail an absolute clarity of moral light. This intrinsic clarity enables the third utility, which is that "the happy success of virtue...excites us to embrace it, and the unhappy success of crime and injustice is capable of augmenting in us natural horror" (*Le succès heureux de la vertu...nous excite à l'embrasser, et le succès funeste du crime ou de l'injustice est capable de nous en augmenter l'horreur naturelle*).¹² The moral compass then, fixed and immutable, dominates the drama, to the extent that the efficacy of the dramatic spectacle involves simply an "augmentation" of our natural moral coordinates. The effect of drama on the spectator revolves around the self-evidence of moral characteristics, a self-evidence which becomes apparent precisely to the extent that the drama is successful. It is in consequence of this that the notion of catharsis, which Corneille acknowledges as the "fourth utility," is downgraded to a mere "speculation": "I am very much afraid that Aristotle's reasoning on this point is no more than a fine idea, with no effect in reality" (*J'ai bien peur que le raisonnement d'Aristote sur ce point ne soit qu'une belle idée, qui n'ait jamais son effet dans la vérité*).¹³ Corneille embraces the significance

of "pity" and "fear," describing the experience of tragedy as a movement from one to the other: "The pity for an unhappiness into which we see those like ourselves fall brings us to a fear that we might experience something similar" (*La pitié d'un Malheur où nous voyons tomber nos semblables nous porte à la crainte d'un pareil pour nous*).¹⁴ The question of "catharsis," thus, is suspended, placed in abeyance by a conception which is grounded upon the self-evidence of moral norms. In such a conception pity and fear become merely one of the mechanisms by which these moral norms reveal themselves: there is, thus, no need for an experience of "catharsis," however that may be construed.

This, then, is the background against which we must understand Racine's marginalia. However brief and inconclusive, they point toward a theoretical conception quite at odds with Corneille's. In the first place, one must note Racine's translation of catharsis: "*purger et tempérer*." The significance, for Racine, of this translation is attested by the remark (cited above) which he appends to this phrase. Catharsis is a "purging" but also a "*tempering*." What is to be tempered is, precisely, the pity and the fear – "*ces sortes de passions*." In other words, "pity and fear" are not simply incidental mechanisms of moral utility. Rather, for Racine, drama is essentially shaped by the movement which awakens these passions (*en esmouvant ces passions*) – that stirs them, that brings them forth – but in so doing tempers them. The meaning of this tempering is very precisely described by Racine: that which is to be excised from these passions through their representation will be that which is "excessive" (*elle leur oste ce qu'elles ont d'excessif*). In consequence of this circumscription they will be withdrawn to a condition that "conforms to reason." Thus we can see that, far from being controlled in advance by the self-evidence of moral dicta, Racine's dramaturgy assumes the dominance of passion, which it is the role of tragic emotion to temper, to isolate from the risk entailed in an embrace beyond reason.

It is clear from our brief comparison that Racine's annotations represent more than his own attempt to grapple with the Greek legacy. They represent a decisive shift in, and thus a critique of the principles that govern Corneille's understanding of theatre. If the central narrative of the development of French drama through the 1660's and 70's can be understood, biographically, in terms of the gradual eclipse of its leading figure by its new rising star, it is equally possible to interpret this eclipse in terms of a gradual re-orientation of attitudes towards passion and pleasure within the theatrical spectacle. It is in light of this development that it is possible to move now to examine certain key moments in Nicole's

Traité de la Comédie, in order to shed light on the ambiguities surrounding the role and purpose of theatrical representation that the differences between Corneille and Racine make apparent, by viewing them through the lens of a most trenchant Jansenist critique.

• 2 •

Nicole's *Traité de la Comédie* appeared first in 1667, appended to the republication of his *Héresies Imaginaires* and *Lettres Visionnaires*, aspects of which had so offended Racine. Included in the volume were two letters, addressed to Racine, by Jansenist supporters of Nicole.¹⁵ Thus, it can be assumed that, although Nicole himself did not deign to dignify Racine's attack with a direct response, the publication of the *Traité* was conceived, in part, as a rebuttal.

The *Traité* sets the full weight of an entirely different tradition – the Augustinian legacy – against the contemporary preoccupation with an Aristotelian vision of the dramatic spectacle. The fundamental contours of Nicole's treatise can be mapped in terms of this confrontation, in which the nexus of pleasure and utility will become the object of profound suspicion. Indeed, even in the preface, Nicole addresses himself to those who would insist on "a certain metaphysical notion of drama," abstracted from its connection with sin: "Theatre, they say," writes Nicole, directly referencing Aristotle, is "a representation of actions and words as if present; what harm can there be in that?" To this abstract notion of pure representation Nicole will oppose considerations grounded not in "chimerical speculation" but in "common and ordinary practices of which we are witness."¹⁶ From the outset, then, Nicole's intention will be to see *through* the veil of theatrical spectacle. In so doing, he will attempt to cast its aesthetic and moral aspirations in the unwelcome light of a critique that refuses to allow theatrical representation the suspension of rigorous moral judgment just because such a representation might contain an obscure cathartic efficacy.

Nicole, in fact, draws into his consideration the fundamental notions that govern the Aristotelian definition of tragedy – the evocation and production of pity and fear – but casts them into a framework in which they no longer belong to the representation of actions on the stage, but become the source of an antipathy toward representation itself: "There is

nothing more contrary to the condition which obliges one to penitence, to tears, fleeing from useless pleasures, than the seeking out of a diversion as vain and dangerous as the theatre" (*Il n'y a rien de plus contraire à cet état qui l'oblige à la penitence, aux larmes et à la fuite des plaisirs inutiles, que la recherche d'un divertissement aussi vain et aussi dangereux que la Comédie*).¹⁷ Tears will have their source and their value in the penitent's inward reflection upon his own condition: pity, if there is to be pity, will not be a sympathy aroused by the spectacle of an action outside the self, but a reaction to the abject condition of that very self. Likewise, fear has a deep efficacy: "True piety cannot exist without a salutary fear, which the soul conceives in view of the dangers with which it is surrounded" (*la véritable piété ne peut subsister sans une crainte salutaire, que l'âme conçoit à la vue des dangers dont elle est environée*).¹⁸ But this fear will not be merely evoked through an involvement in the spectacle. This fear will be extended to the act of representation itself, which becomes the object not merely of suspicion, but of disgust. In a sense, then, Nicole is radicalizing "pity and fear" – the central coordinates of the Aristotelian definition – drawing them beyond the limits of the dramatic spectacle, and allowing them to roam freely across the entire spectrum of human activity, across the act of representation itself.

Henceforth, though, there will be not merely pity and fear, but pity, fear, and *horror*. Speaking of the dangers of the representation of love, Nicole writes, "the principle rein that would serve to prevent it is a kind of horror" (*Le principal frein qui sert à l'arrêter est une certaine horreur*). This "horror" is a reaction of recoil, a movement of withdrawal that returns us upon ourselves, that opens up the possibility of a recognition of one's own ineluctably sinful nature – of the inevitability of concupiscence, and the perils of *amour-propre*. Regarding the former, Nicole argues that the representation of desire, of concupiscence, is necessarily sinful: it is not a question of degree, of intention, or of effect, "for even if marriage makes proper use of concupiscence, [the latter] is nonetheless evil and unruly" (*car encore que le mariage fasse un bon usage de la concupiscence, elle est néanmoins mauvaise et déréglée*). It is inadequate to claim that "reason" returns desire to controllable limits, because however controlled, desire is always desire: "always unruly in itself" (*toujours déréglée en elle même*). Nicole, thus – foreshadowing a debate that would soon rage fiercely in his own circles around the "in-itself" of pleasure and the interpretation of Malebranche – insists on the univocity of desire, and thus on the inevitability of sin.

In describing the theatre as "*un divertissement...vain et...dangereux*" Nicole is setting his critique within parameters established by Pascal, who had already described the theatre in unequivocally negative terms. For Pascal, it is precisely the "natural and delicate representation of passions" that renders the theatre most odious – the naturalistic transparency of representation, its verisimilitude.¹⁹ In similar fashion, Nicole will decry the representation, specifically in Corneille, of the whole paraphernalia of "honor," of "*gloire*": "this Roman 'virtue,' which is nothing else than a violent love of oneself" (*cette vertu Romaine, qui n'est autre chose qu'un furieux amour de soi-même*). Again following Pascal's lead, and in a move that will recur again and again in attacks on the theatre, Nicole insists that the theatre is most dangerous precisely when it appears innocent: "and often, the representation of a passion covered over by a veil of 'honor' is still more dangerous, because...it is received with less horror" (*et souvent même, la représentation d'une passion couverte de ce voile d'honneur est plus dangereuse, parce que...elle y est recue avec moins d'horreur*). It is not in its most glaringly flagrant extremes that the representation of passion is most dangerous: it is precisely in the moments which would seem to display the triumph of virtue that the theatre may slip through the defense of *horreur*. Always, deception lurks, the risk that the pleasure that such a spectacle might bring would lead to a certain self-satisfaction, a vanity which is the principle index of *amour-propre*.

The theatre, then, represents a danger unequivocally, in itself. It is not that some kinds of theatre are more or less dangerous: the theatre is not susceptible to reform in some way, by attending to the "content" of drama. Clearly, and explicitly, Nicole is setting himself against Corneille's notion of moral utility (discussed above), but also against those, like the Abbé d'Aubignac, who would embrace theatre on condition of certain reforms.²⁰ Rather, it is the theatrical spectacle in itself that is dangerous. But how is this danger to be understood? What, really, is at stake in the threat that theatrical representation brings? In addressing these questions, it is valuable to note that, in Nicole, we do not encounter a thinker who is fundamentally unattuned to poetry, to the aesthetic. Indeed, as Thirouin and others have pointed out, Nicole was considered, amongst the circles of Port-Royal, "an expert in aesthetics and poetic theory."²¹ In the treatise of 1657, *La Vraie Beauté et Son Fantôme*, for example, Nicole develops a theory – of farsighted implications – of the beautiful as reaching beyond the internal coherence of an object and towards a "conformity" with our own nature.²² And any simplistic suspicion of a fundamental antipathy, on Nicole's part, toward the

expressive power of language is easily confuted by taking note of his insistence, for example, in the same treatise, that the accord which the beautiful achieves with our own nature must depend upon the "*sonorité agréable*" of the words themselves.²³ Nicole's antipathy to theatre, then, will not involve dismissal of the pleasure involved in the representation of poetic utterance. What is dangerous, in the theatre, is "spectacle" itself. The key notion, here, will be Nicole's description of drama as "*divertissement*." This term, deriving its resonance and significance from Pascal, becomes far more than a dismissive deflation of the ambition of drama. The notion of theatre as "diversion" (*divertissement*) will be central to its danger, and crucial to Nicole's concerns.

In a telling phrase, Nicole describes the theatre-goer "softened by pleasure" (*le coeur amolli*), "entirely intoxicated (*entièrement enivré*) with the follies he sees represented there, and by consequence outside of the state (*hors de l'état*) of Christian vigilance." The spectacle, then, takes us outside of ourselves, intoxicates us, removes us from the awareness of our own condition. Likewise, the actors, for Nicole (unlike other contemporary critics of the theatre) cannot "represent" passions without being in some manner carried away by them.²⁴ The distance, then, between the "representation" of passion and its experience is elided. The actors, as much as the spectator, drawn into the intoxication of the spectacle of passion, must necessarily experience that passion themselves, at least for the duration of the representation: "Those who would represent the passion of love," he writes, "must in some fashion be touched by it, *during the representation itself*."²⁵ It is in this intoxication, in the abandonment to what is outside the self, that we will find the paradoxical key to the "distraction" that theatre represents.

"*Le moi est haïssable*" ("the I is detestable") Pascal had declared, and much of Nicole's writings in the *Essais de Morale* are devoted to an exploration of the ramifications of this dictum – to an excruciating, painstaking analysis of the subtle deformation that the *moi* effects on the soul.²⁶ The essay "*De la Connaissance de Soi-Même*" describes succinctly the paradox of the self whose self-scrutiny necessarily ends in the discovery of its own emptiness: "and thus it is necessary to know oneself, in order to conclude, through this bizarre reasoning, that it is good *not* to know oneself" (*Et ainsi il faudrait toujours se connaître, pour conclure même par ce bizarre raisonnement, qu'il est bon de ne se connaître pas*).²⁷ That which, for Nicole as for Pascal, is detestable about the *moi* is not its activity as such – perceptual, cognitive, affective – but rather its capacity to represent itself to itself, to form an idea, a vision of itself: "the greatest

pleasure of a man of pride is to contemplate *the idea he forms of himself*.”²⁸ The *moi* is formed as a reflection, out of the experiences, contexts, etc. in which we discover ourselves. This reflection is indistinguishable from attachment, which serves to conceal the blank emptiness of our existence without the intervention of grace. The paradox, then, is the desire to “see ourselves,” to yearn for a representation that, were it to reach clarity, would reveal itself only as the horror of an infinitely reflecting mirror–play of our vanity and self–love: “Man wants to see himself, because he is vain. He avoids seeing himself, because he cannot suffer the sight of his faults and his misery” (*L’homme veut se voir, parce qu’il est vain. Il évite de se voir, parce que étant vain il ne peut souffrir la vue de ses défauts at de ses misères*).²⁹

So subtle are the wiles of the *amour-propre* which is at the heart of the paradox of the self–representing I, that it becomes almost indistinguishable from attempts to overcome it. In the essay “*De la Charité et de l’Amour-Propre*” Nicole describes the complex itinerary of a self–love that knows so well how to “counterfeit charity” as to make it “almost impossible to know precisely what distinguishes it.”³⁰ Almost, but not quite, for within this insatiable self–love itself lies the moment at which it can come to recognize its own ugliness, to recoil from the endless mirroring of its own vanity. It is in this sense that charity “defaces with a marvelous subtlety all the signs and characters of self–love.”³¹ Imitating the imitation, charity subverts the constructions of vanity with a sense of the self that cannot be anything other than void, empty, blank – precisely because it cannot turn back into an image, cannot become a representation of itself, without falling prey once again to its vanity. It is this absolute negation, this abasement which cannot recognize itself as abasement, which opens onto the possibility of grace. Indeed, “one of the first effects of the light of grace is to uncover to the soul the emptiness, the nothing, the instability of all the things of the world.”³²

From this perspective it becomes easier to grasp the reasons for Nicole’s disdain for theatrical representation. The *enivrement* through which the spectator loses himself in the object represented, resists the recoil upon the emptiness of the self that is the first opening onto the possibility of grace. What is required, then, at all times, for Nicole, is a kind of double gaze. He writes, in Augustinian fashion, of a kind of seeing that is opened up by sin onto the pleasures of the world, but that is then confronted by a another kind of seeing – “opening the eyes of the soul” – which is at the same time a kind of blinding (*aveuglement*), “happier, by far,

than the unhappy sight that sin has procured."³³ The gaze that looks upon the world will be one that simultaneously recoils upon its own emptiness.

Perhaps Nicole's most vivid, one might almost say theatrical images of this double sight appears in his essay "*De la Crainte de Dieu*." The image he provides is one of a ball. Imagine, he says, "an assemblage of pleasant people who think of nothing but diverting themselves (*se divertir*) ...They see a spectacle that flatters their senses, fills their spirit, which softens their heart, and allows, gently and pleasantly, a love of the world to enter."³⁴ But what is it that the "light of faith" will see in this spectacle?

It will uncover a hideous massacre of souls destroying each other...It will see demons entering into these souls through all the senses of their bodies, that poison them them...that bind them with a thousand chains, that prepare for them a thousand tortures...and who laugh at their illusion and their blindness. It will see God, who regards these souls with anger, and abandons them to the fury of the demons.

In the theatrical spectacle too, such a double gaze must be operative, one that sees, and yet withdraws from the intoxication of absorption in the image. But the theatre is too dangerous to think that one might expose oneself to its pleasures and emerge unsullied. Interestingly, for Nicole, the effects of the representation of vanity work their effects at a level beyond our conscious grasp: they "remain hidden for a long time in the heart without producing any perceptible effect."³⁵ The spectacle, then, works its effects not through the production of tears, of pity, but rather through the unconscious mechanism of an "*impression insensible*," that insinuates itself with the same subtlety as the wiles of *amour-propre*, leading us incrementally into the web of our own vanity.³⁶

• 3 •

The principle thematic that governs Nicole's approach to the theatre is a drive towards an unmasking of deception – towards a purification, a purging of our vanity. The subtlety and depth of Jansenist critique, though, lies in its refusal to allow the possibility that this purging can succeed in restoring a positive conception of human behavior. Innocence is out of the question. The drive to purity is possible only under the sign of a negation, only on condition that we accept the impossibility of such a purity. It is only in recognition of our fractured, torn identity that the hope

of grace can emerge. Thus it is unsurprising that Nicole should so vigorously turn against any conception of moral utility in the representation of human affairs in the theatre. These latter, for Nicole, present to the fractured gaze of the Christian subject an image of such unremitting horror that their representation can never be anything more than merely seductive: they are nothing more than the deceitful blandishments of an inescapable *amour-propre*.

Fundamentally, then, Nicole's critique aims not merely at the indulgence of passion and its theatrical display, but also – perhaps even more particularly – at conceptions of theatre such as Corneille's, that sought to clothe the representation of passion in the garb of moral utility. Such a conception, for Nicole, is profoundly deceptive. The only moral utility that could emerge from the spectacle of passion lies in a reaction of recoil from the representation as such: not pity and fear, but a horror which must always be at the same time a kind of self-disgust. His critique is unforgiving and uncompromising, and refuses to entertain a positive dialogue with those who would write for the theatre. For Nicole, they are always, indeed, "poisoners of souls" (*empoisonneurs des âmes*). This phrase, which so infuriated the young Racine, does in fact provide the conceptual basis for Nicole's vision of theatrical representation, and prevents easy appropriation by any sort of dramaturgy whatsoever.³⁷ Within the coordinates of the quarrel, between Racine and Nicole, one could indeed easily stop there. One would, in this way, remain with a vision, certainly supported by both men in 1667, of an implacable mutual hostility, rendered bitterer still by the knowledge that the two enemies were, once, teacher and student. On another level, such a vision would insist on an absolute and unbridgeable divide between the theatre and its critics: it would be only a question of competing ideologies. But to stop with this quarrel would be to ignore the subsequent history of Racine's relations with Port-Royal. The question, then, to be addressed now, if only briefly, is to what extent these implacable opponents share a vision that might render the well-documented rapprochement more than a biographical accident, but rather a movement grounded in common assumptions.

It has been noted that Racine's reflections upon Aristotle also provide a ground for a conception of drama that is in opposition, as is Nicole's, to any naïve conception of moral utility. In Corneille's conception, the witness of the dramatic spectacle will be rendered virtuous simply by being exposed to the self-evidence of virtuous actions. We have seen how implacably Nicole's vision will resist these assumptions. But it is no less

true that Racine's conception of catharsis prevents such a straightforward assimilation of virtue. For Racine, the function of theatrical representation is a tempering of passion, the absolution of the excess that intrinsically belongs to our comportment in the world. In the very most general sense, then, we can already trace the outline of a conception, shared by Racine and Nicole, of the human as riven by passions barely susceptible to control. If a shared vision of the dominance of passion in human endeavor underscores both Racine's and Nicole's conceptions, it may be possible to track within Racine's dramas themselves certain thematic elements that render them unexpectedly close to the vision of his Jansenist enemies. It is beyond the scope of this paper to undertake an examination of the entirety of Racine's output in this light. We will rather, now, focus on certain moments, and point to certain thematic elements, which might begin to point the way toward such a shared ground. These observations will center around the tragedy *Andromaque*, precisely because this is the drama upon which Racine was working at the time of the confrontation with Nicole.³⁸

Philippe Sellier has noted, most lucidly, that any hope of uncovering a "hidden Jansenism" in Racine's early work must run aground upon the figure of injured innocence that is continually to be discovered there.³⁹ When Oreste, in *Andromaque*, cries out:

My innocence begins at last to weigh upon me...
Wherever in my life I turn my eyes
I see only misfortunes that condemn the gods...

(*Mon innocence enfin commence à me peser...
De quelque part sur moi que je tourne les yeux,
Je ne vois que malheurs qui condamnent les dieux...*) (III,i)

This is a sentiment which clearly confutes any attempt to assimilate Racine's vision to a Jansenist model. Indeed Sellier goes so far as to suggest that it is precisely Racine's preoccupation with tortured innocence that drew him back towards Port Royal, whose associates increasingly, through the 1670's and 80's, came to represent the image of guiltless oppression.⁴⁰ However, given the conception of catharsis that we have observed in Racine's annotations of Aristotle, we should resist assimilating the self-observations of Racine's characters to a representation of his own vision: exposure to the extremes of passion, we remember, is designed to "purge and temper" those extremes. From this perspective, even

protestations of innocence might come to seem the signs of a passionate self-delusion. Racine's characters, wrapped up in the intensity of their desire, cannot be claimed as knowing arbiters of their own condition; rather, their self-knowledge is subject entirely to the oppression of frustrated desire. From the perspective of a Jansenist interrogation of the self, Oreste's acknowledgement:

Such is the fatal blindness of my love!
(*Tel est de mon amour l'aveuglement funeste*) (II, ii)

or his despairing question:

What do I know? Was I master of myself?
Fury carried me away...
(*Que sais-je? De moi-même étais-je le maître?
La fureur m'emportait...*) (III, i)

represent moments of insight – paradoxically – precisely because they acknowledge the inadequacy of self-knowledge. And indeed, the intensity of *Andromaque* is heavily invested in the character's absolute lack of rational self-understanding. "I, love her?" asks Pyrrhus angrily (*Moi, l'aimer?*) (II, v) and the self-assurance of his "moi," here, his recourse to the certainty of his own power, would seem completely to fly in the face of Pascal and Nicole's subversion. Until, that is, one realizes that what is exposed on stage is precisely his self-delusion, his vain assumption that he is in control of his feelings:

But forgive a residue of tenderness...
The last flickering of a dying love...
(*Mais excuse un reste de tendresse...
D'un amour qui s'éteint c'est le dernier éclat...*) (II, v)

he declares, but we already know that this "almost extinguished" fire will destroy him utterly.

Racine presents his characters as caught in a web of desire. They yearn, one and all – for an experience of love that eludes them continually. Longing for happiness, the tortured protagonists are driven ineluctably towards the pursuit of a pure joy, toward the perfect consummatory instant. That they are doomed not to achieve this consummation, that the perfect instant of bliss is discovered not in the requital of love, but in death and madness, is what renders *Andromaque* tragic. What we see on the stage is a play of self-deception, a network of passionate claims and counter-claims, in which the protagonists are, one and all, deceived both as to their own intentions and those of others. Governing, driving the action is a desperate and tragic hope that they may be freed into an instant of happiness through the fulfillment of their desires. There is no small sense in which the tragic impossibility of this drive – of this desire that can end only in collapse, in death, or in madness – projects nothing if not the vanity of their passion. Perhaps then, after all, the recoil upon the horror of our own vanity that Nicole longed for is not so far from the effects of Racinian catharsis as both men would have maintained in 1667. Racinian tragedy rests upon the blighted, vain hope of an impossible happiness. Nicole's equally tragic vision rests upon the hope of a grace that can be glimpsed only in the impossible collapse of our *amour-propre*. But both men, in a sense, pursue a vision of purity – a vision that seeks to rend the veils of self-delusion and set up before us a hope. For Nicole this is the hope of grace, for Racine the hope of love. But both are located beyond our self-understanding and searing in their desire.

• Notes •

¹ In Pierre Nicole, ed. Thirouin: *Traité de la Comédie et Autres Pièces d'un Procès du Théâtre* (Paris: Champion, 1998), pp. 225.

² In December 1665, Racine had, unbeknownst to Molière, who had agreed to present his second tragedy *Alexandre* at the Palais-Royal, arranged concurrent performances at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, purely in order to curry favor with the King at his erstwhile supporter's expense. Racine will subsequently compound the insult by writing, in the preface to his only comedy, *Les Plaideurs*, in 1668 of "certain writers" (by whom he certainly intends Molière, whose fortunes, at that moment, were already at something of a nadir on account of the dispute surrounding *Tartuffe*) "*qui font retomber le théâtre dans la turpitude*" on account of "*sales équivoques et... malhonnêtes plaisanteries.*"

³ Racine's son Louis claimed that his father had admitted to him that "the least criticism, no matter how poor it might be, always caused me more pain than any amount of praise afforded me pleasure" (*la moindre critique, quelque mauvaise qu'elle ait été, m'a toujours causé plus de chagrin que toute les louanges ne m'ont fait de plaisir*) (Quoted in Racine, *Théâtre Complet* (Paris: Garnier, 1960), p. 583). In a way, such a sensitivity to criticism goes some way toward explaining the sheer aggression of his response to Nicole, following an attack which was not even, in the first instance, directed at him personally.

⁴ Racine, ed. Vinaver, *Principes de la Tragédie en Marge de la Poétique d'Aristote* (Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1951) p. 11. We will retain the editor's invaluable italicization of the words and phrases that represent interpolations or particularly interpretive translations on Racine's part.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 58.

⁶ Corneille writes: "Comedy and tragedy also resemble one another in that the action chosen for imitation must possess an appropriate grandeur" (*La comédie et la tragédie se ressemblent encore en ce que l'action qu'elles choisissent pour imiter doit avoir une juste grandeur...*). Corneille, *Premiers Discours*, in Mantero, ed., *Corneille Critique et Son Temps* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1964) p. 181.

⁷ Aristotle, *Poetics* trans. Sachs (Newburyport: Focus Books, 2006) 1449b29.

⁸ *Op. cit.* p.12.

⁹ Corneille, *Discours*, p.170.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p.172.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p.174.

¹² *Ibid.* p.175.

¹³ *Ibid.* p.205.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p.201.

¹⁵ Nicole, *op.cit.* See in particular, the introduction, pp.22-25. This invaluable volume also contains the responses to Racine's letter, by Goibaud du Bois, and Barbier d'Aucour.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.34.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p.104.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Pascal, fragment 630, in *Pensées*, trans. Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) p. 136.

²⁰ See F. Hedelin, Abbé d'Aubignac, *The Whole Art of the Stage* (1657) trans. Cadman (London, 1684) Reprinted (New York: Blom, 1968).

²¹ J. Mesnard, quoted in Nicole, ed. Thirouin, *Traité*, *op. cit.* p. 28.

- ²² See Nicole, ed. Béatrice Guion, *La Vraie Beauté et Son Fantôme et Autres Textes d'Esthétique* (Paris: Champion, 1996) p. 55.
- ²³ *Ibid.* p.61.
- ²⁴ E.g., Conti. See Nicole, *Traité*, op.cit. which also contains Conti's influential polemic, pp. 185-210.
- ²⁵ Nicole, *Traité*, p.36
- ²⁶ Pascal, *op cit.* fragment 494.
- ²⁷ Nicole, *Essais de Morale* (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1999) pp. 310-379.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.* p.311 (My emphasis).
- ²⁹ *Ibid.* p.312.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 381-415. Translated as appendix in Mandeville, *Fable of the Bees and Other Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).
- ³¹ *Ibid.* p.5 (My emphasis).
- ³² Nicole, *Traité*, p. 106.
- ³³ *Ibid.* p. 108.
- ³⁴ Nicole, *Oeuvres Philosophiques et Morales* (Paris: Hachette, 1845) p. 141.
- ³⁵ Nicole, *Traité*, p. 50.
- ³⁶ Nicole, *Essais de Morale*, Op cit. p. 250. Quoted in Nicole, *Traité*, op cit. p.50 n.27.
- ³⁷ See Racine's letter to Nicole, in Nicole, *Traité*, op.cit. p. 234.
- ³⁸ Racine, *Théâtre Complet* (Paris: Garnier, 1960). English Translation by J. Cairncross in *Jean Racine: Andromache/Brittanicus/Berenice* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967). Translations emended.
- ³⁹ Sellier, P. *Essais Sur L'Imaginaire Classique* (Paris: Champion, 2003) p.234.
- ⁴⁰ See, in particular, the essay "L'Enfant de Port-Royal," in Sellier, *Port Royal et la Littérature*, vol. II (Paris: Champion, 2000) pp. 217-250.

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