1

Neo-classicism and Boileau

I

Boileau's reputation has two aspects, and this book is concerned with both. First, there is Boileau's standing as an individual critic and poet: a seventeenth-century writer of Satires and Epistles on moral and literary subjects, and of a verse *Art Poétique* and prose works of criticism. This reputation has varied extravagantly. To many of his contemporaries a writer of low lampoons and clumsy panegyrics, to others and to the eighteenth century a model of poetic elegance and critical perception, to the nineteenth century an example of stilted unreality, Boileau had dwindled by the mid-twentieth century to the status of an interesting but minor poet.[1]

The second aspect of Boileau's reputation has reflected his standing as a representative rather than an individual. To the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, he was pre-eminently the theorist, polemist and spokesman of French neo-classicism. To those who admired neo-classicism, he could seem the legislator of Parnassus, the critic who had shown how all good writing depended on the discipline of Reason and Good Sense, the master and model of poets, the wise and severe friend who had guided La Fontaine, Racine and Molière towards their highest achievements. To those who reacted against the values of neo-classicism, he could seem the pedant who had cramped and shackled French poetry in the interests of rationalism, the prosaic and pompous versifier, the critic who had denigrated Corneille, underestimated Molière, and further narrowed the already narrow taste of Racine.

Recent criticism has moved in different directions in evaluating these two aspects of Boileau's reputation. There has been a considerable reappraisal of Boileau the critic and poet. This has taken place in several stages, and with differences of emphasis between French scholars on the one hand and North American and English

scholars on the other. Starting with Révillout at the end of the nineteenth century, renewed study by French scholars of Boileau's life and historical context has encouraged a fresh appreciation of the relevance to seventeenth-century events of Boileau's works.[2] Although historical rather than literary, these studies have brought into relief his realism and verve, his taste for the bizarre, the passion and moral commitment underlying his poems, the pungent flavour of the temperament they express.

English and American approaches have been critical rather than historical. Brody has emphasised the seriousness and depth of Boileau's preoccupation with the ideas of the second-century Greek rhetorician Longinus, and what it reveals about his attitude to literature: in particular, his stress on the intuitive nature of critical perception, and on the way in which for Boileau this intuition is linked with 'knowledge' in the widest sense – not so much factual knowledge as experience, wisdom and mental vigour.[3] More recently there has been a new interest in Boileau's literary techniques. Orr has demonstrated some of the astonishing punning virtuosity in *L'Art Poétique*.[4] Others – notably France and Edelman – have brought out the extent to which his poems make their effect by taking as their subject the manipulation of their ostensible subject-matter and purpose. A poem praising Louis XIV may become a sophisticated and ambiguous game playing with the possibility of praising him.[5] *L'Art Poétique* is, in part at least, a poem which explores the possibilities of writing poetry on the subject of writing poetry.[6]

At the same time, Boileau has come to seem less important as a representative of neo-classical doctrine. In part, as will be discussed later in this chapter, this is because neo-classical doctrine itself has come to seem less important. Even if we concede its importance, however, it is clear that the neo-classical principles enunciated by Boileau were worked out long before him, mainly by the critics and commentators of sixteenth-century Italy; that they were adopted in France under the influence of critics active in the 1630s – notably one of the butts of his satire, Jean Chapelain; that the use Boileau made of them often appears inconsequential; and, finally, that his influence on his peers was negligible, coming as he did too late to form the taste of La Fontaine, Molière, or even Racine.

It is difficult not to feel a sense of liberation in recent critical approaches, which have moved the emphasis from study of Boileau as a literary influence to enjoyment of his poetry as poetry. Equally, it is hard not to agree that modern scholarship has exploded many of the old generalisations about neo-classicism and Boileau's role as law-giver. Nevertheless, I think that both these scholarly and critical approaches have gained their successes at the cost of fragmenting our view of him. The individual and representative aspects of his reputation are linked. In my view, the difficulty of reaching a unified picture of Boileau stems from the difficulty of bringing these two aspects into focus simultaneously. I propose to attempt to do so from a starting-point which is now unfashionable: that is, by tackling the significance of that complex of literary ideas which are grouped together under the heading of neo-classicism. I would argue that both Boileau's importance, and the value of his poetry, are bound up with questions about what part the doctrines of neo-classicism play in his poems, and, to some extent, what functions neo-classicism fulfilled in the society in which he moved.

2

These issues arise only because of one fact about French seventeenth-century literature which must sooner or later strike the reader. In their critical comments, the authors of the period commonly claim (or assume) that there is a doctrine relating to poetry. (And in the seventeenth century, 'poetry' usually means 'imaginative literature', though I shall use it in its more restricted modern sense.) They suppose that poetry has a function which critics can formulate; that there are techniques which can help poets to ensure their works fulfil this function, and critics to judge whether the poets have succeeded; and that there are therefore rules which are binding on poets and poetry.

Over the last three centuries, the nature and importance of this doctrine have been very variously assessed. To many students, the apparent existence of the doctrine is a stumbling-block: how can intelligent people have spent so much energy on questions which seem always pedantic, often trivial, and sometimes patently nonsensical? To others – and this is an attractive view – the whole

question of doctrine is largely irrelevant, and we can concentrate on the power and beauty of the individual poems. Nevertheless, the doctrine, in some sense at least, did exist. It has been described in detail in a famous and much-criticised book, René Bray's *La Formation de la Doctrine Classique en France*, but I will attempt an outline of it here.[7]

To take the most superficial aspect first, neo-classical doctrine included a body of rules, in the sense of more or less technical prescriptions for poetry. The basis of the more detailed of these was that each work of literature had to fit into one of a set of definite kinds of poem: *les genres*. These *genres* were ranked in a more-or-less agreed order of merit. At the top came the great Classical *genres* of Epic and Tragedy, though opinions might differ as to which was the more 'noble'. Comedy came next, with a distinction between elegant literary comedy and 'low' comedy or farce, which condescended to amuse the lower classes. Pastoral poetry and the more elevated forms of lyric came somewhere in the middle. Satire was usually less elevated, because of its 'low' content. Minor forms of lyric and such miscellaneous forms as epigram came at the bottom. New prose *genres* such as the novel might be slotted in somewhere, the novel sometimes being regarded as a form of epic. Mixed forms such as tragi-comedy were usually frowned on by the stricter critics, though tragi-comedy might be considered as lying between tragedy and comedy.

The individual *genres* had their own rules, sometimes extremely detailed, and quarrels about them fill the pages of the theorists. Everyone agreed that an epic should be noble in tone and language, that it should deal with heroic actions and stimulate people to admire them, that it should be a unity, and that it should be further elevated by using machines – that is, by introducing supernatural beings who take part in the action. But did the treatment of heroic actions require that the poem should end happily? (Having chosen Joan of Arc as the heroine of his epic *La Pucelle*, Chapelain had to explain that her death at the stake was happy, because a martyrdom.) Did unity demand that an epic should observe a unity of time? (The favourite period was a year.) Should the supernatural machines be pagan (which would be incredible) or Christian (which might be blasphemous)?

The theatre was especially well provided with rules, which have been exhaustively analysed by Scherer. Tragedies must be elevated in tone and subject, and admit no comic or low elements, though they need not end unhappily. By the 1640s, it was generally agreed that a tragedy must keep strictly to the three unities. Of these, the unity of action was the most important, though the most difficult to define. For most writers, it meant that the plot should be unified, but not that it should be simple. The unity of time meant that the imagined duration of the action should not be more than twenty-four hours, or perhaps twelve, or perhaps even the length of the performance itself. (Corneille, while agreeing that the last was best, was willing to stretch the limit to thirty hours if need be.) In the 1620s, unity of place meant that the action should take place within one town and its surroundings. By the middle of the century, it usually meant that the action must take place in a single spot, though there are occasional exceptions. A proper tragedy must have five acts. Within each act, the scenes must follow each other in such a way that the stage is never empty. Exits (and, if possible, entrances) must be plausibly motivated. Comedy must be amusing instead of serious, but ideally such rules as the three unities apply to comedies as much as to tragedies. In practice, they are followed much more loosely in comedies, and also in such novel *genres* as the spectacular 'machine play' and opera, in which scenic effects and music are the main attractions.

It would be tedious to enumerate the rules proposed for all the minor *genres*. Although a considerable part of Boileau's *Art Poétique* deals with rules for the minor *genres*, the critics never in fact succeeded in achieving a comprehensive set of rules for them.

But neo-classicism was by no means concerned only with rules at this technical level. The technical rules rested on two requirements which were from one aspect aesthetic but in a more fundamental way moral. First, poetry must treat of what is natural and probable; and, second, in doing so it must be decent. In seventeenth-century terms, it must be *vraisemblable* and respect *les bienséances*. Both these requirements proved difficult to define in the abstract, and there were considerable differences of opinion among the critics and creative writers. Poetry certainly had to concern itself with what in some senses was striking and unusual:

le merveilleux, in seventeenth-century language. *Vraisemblance* did not mean realistic representation of everyday happenings, although (and this is a significant point) some critics came close to implying it should. Nor did it mean that the happenings depicted should be literally true: though Corneille was inclined to appeal to factual truth, *le vrai*, as a means of justifying departures from the banality of *vraisemblance*. *Le vraisemblable* usually meant a generalised, idealised probability. As such, it had philosophical and even religious overtones. The concept was derived from respectable Classical precedent. Aristotle had said that poetry was more philosophical than history because it imitated not what had happened but what was likely to happen: universals, not particulars. The expression of his thought is not entirely clear, and in the seventeenth century it was nearly always interpreted as meaning that poetry imitated what ought to happen. More prosaically, but more intelligibly, Horace had recommended playwrights to express human character in terms of what was known or traditionally thought about named individuals (Medea: fierce; Orestes: sorrowful), or in terms of what was appropriate to the character's age, sex and situation. These two strands of the concept, *vraisemblance* as idealised truth and *vraisemblance* as what we normally expect, run through neo-classical criticism. At times, critical debate is concerned with high principles of morality and truth; at another, critics are arguing whether it is probable that a man can fight two duels and a battle within twenty-four hours.

There is a similar quality about the purpose of observing *la vraisemblance*. To judge from some seventeenth-century pronouncements, the purpose is an expression of that aspiration of Classical art towards the permanent and universally valid, disdaining the ephemeral and freakish. But in many seventeenth-century critics, it is motivated by what seems to us an excessive timidity about the imaginative capacity of the audience or reader. Following Horace's celebrated maxim: 'I dislike it if I don't believe it', critics insisted that events which strained an audience's belief would disturb their aesthetic response. Modern critics have tended to defend rules like the three unities as means of achieving a concentrated and hence powerful aesthetic effect. Seventeenth-century critics usually defended them on the grounds that they were necessary for *vraisemblance*, and in the narrowest sense: the

spectator would be confused and upset if a single stage which he watched for two hours had to be taken as several places distant from each other, accommodating events taking place over a long period.

Vraisemblance is closely connected with *les bienséances*, and the requirements imposed on the author in observing them are often hard to distinguish. In both cases, there is a mixture of what we should be inclined to regard as moral and aesthetic factors at work, expressed in arguments on points which sometimes seem to us serious but more often trivial. The root idea is that *les bienséances* represent what is seemly or fitting: the high Renaissance concept of Decorum. At its lowest, it is often a footling concern with the minutiae of social convention. It is not in accordance with etiquette that in *Andromaque* a king (Pyrrhus) should seek out an ambassador (Oreste). The idea of *vraisemblance* is also present here: because behaviour of this sort is not conventional, it is unlikely and hence *invraisemblable*. But *les bienséance*s are also linked with decency in a moral sense. In French seventeenth-century literature, no heterodox ideas or behaviour must be represented, except in very muted form and in contexts which clearly show they are not to be admired. Anything which smacks of political or religious subversion is banned. Sexual passion is, of course, prominent in literature, and adultery, incest, and even homosexuality are occasionally portrayed. But their expression is always extremely discreet. Neither the language nor the physical actions described or acted are sexually explicit. Again, *vraisemblance* and *les bienséances* work together. In a comic verse tale, relatively 'low' characters may do relatively 'low' things. In a noble *genre* like Tragedy, it is neither probable nor seemly that kings and queens should behave in an unbuttoned fashion.

At their highest interpretation, however, observance of the rules of *les bienséances* and *vraisemblance* work in a deeply moral and philosophical way. An example comes from the most famous of all seventeenth-century critical debates, that over Corneille's *Le Cid*. The crucial point was whether the subject was well chosen, in that it required the heroine, Chimène, to marry the hero, Rodrigue, even though he had killed her father. Modern disdain for this controversy seems to me misplaced. That Chimène

should marry her father's murderer is a breach of *vraisemblance* and *les bienséances*, in the sense that it is indeed unconventional, and might be regarded as a breach of good manners. But if we take her dilemma seriously, it is more than that. For a woman we like and admire to do such a thing should be a shock to our sensibilities, a blow to assumptions on which civilised behaviour rests, an affront to our conceptions of how people do and should behave. Familiarity lessens the shock to us, just as we miss the sense of outrage in Chapelain's criticism of Chimène as 'dénaturée' – a violation of the order of Nature, a betrayal of normal human decency, a monstrous contradiction of natural impulses. When Corneille's contemporaries made this criticism they may have been influenced by many factors, but the criticism itself is not nonsense. To them, Chimène's behaviour 'feels wrong', in the sense both that this is not how people behave, and that if it were it would still be morally wrong.

This duality of moral and aesthetic arguments comes out most strongly at the most fundamental level of neo-classical theory, which deals with the purpose of poetry. The question had occupied Aristotle, and his answers seem to modern scholars reasonably clear. The purpose of poetry is pleasure. Other statements expand or refine this fundamental assumption: poetry expresses a fundamental urge in human nature to make rhythmical imitations; poetry satisfies the natural pleasure in learning; each type of poetry must give its proper pleasure; serious poetry (or perhaps only Tragedy) is 'more philosophic' than history; and Tragedy performs the famous act of catharsis (which, even if interpreted in the modern physiological or psychological sense of removing excessive passions, seems to have some moral implications).

Horace is pithier. In a famous line, he emphasises that a poet who combined the pleasant and useful has won every suffrage: 'Omnia tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci.'[8] By its neatness and brevity, the dictum invites quotation. Familiarity, and the connotations since acquired by its key words, may hinder us from appreciating its depth. 'Dulcis' has English echoes, in 'dulcet', of 'soft' and 'sweet'. 'Utilis', with its English echo of 'utilitarian', suggests something very humdrum, and the moral aim implicit in the epigram does not make it any more enticing. It is only when

we consider the greatest Latin poetry, as written by Horace and his contemporaries, that we begin to suspect the power and complexity of the effects which the formula attempts to cover. Whatever we get from the *Aeneid*, it is rarely dulcet, or didactic in the sense of giving useful advice. And I think the same is true of Horace's own *Odes*, though here the moral element is more explicit. What we get from the *Aeneid* and the *Odes* is rather that eliciting of an effort of emotional and intellectual imagination which great literature achieves.

There is a similar difficulty with the corresponding formula in French neo-classicism, which is that poetry should 'plaire' and 'instruire'. The meaning of 'plaire' has weakened since the seventeenth century, but even so these little words do not at first convey the effects achieved by the works of the great writers. The word 'pleasure' can certainly embrace the delight afforded by word-play, smooth cadences and striking turns of phrase, which is perhaps what 'plaire' at first sight implies. But it also means the excitement and disturbance induced by such works as *Phèdre*, the effect of which can be compared with that of any Greek or Shakespearean tragedy. 'Instruction' can take such simple forms as the moral maxims abundantly found in tragedies of the period; but what we value in French seventeenth-century literature is rather its insights into the dilemmas of moral behaviour, which work on us through our imaginations, as literature always must. It is hard, on reflection, to identify any effect of great literature which cannot be brought under the heading of either 'pleasure' or 'instruction', if interpreted in any other than the most literal way. And the formula, like that of Horace, links the 'useful' and the 'pleasant'. This, again, corresponds to our experience. Characteristically, the pleasure and instruction are fused, and we should be hard put to it to distinguish the two elements. The formula is apparently simple, but full of complexity: in itself it is one more effort to capture the effect on us of poetry, which can be so powerful, but is so difficult to define.

This interpretation of the formula in terms of the effect which the poems themselves have on us seems to me important, in view of the fact that those who wrote and first responded to the poems were apparently content to think of their experience in these terms. But, if we turn to the works of the theorists of neo-classicism,

matters appear in a different light. There is no doubt of the slant which neo-classical critics – including often the poets themselves when speaking as critics – give to the pronouncements of Aristotle and Horace, or to the formula that poetry should please and instruct. The emphasis so far as critical theory is concerned is strongly placed on instruction. As Bray has shown, the overwhelming consensus is that art has a moral function; and this moral function is conceived of in an extremely literal way. There are, of course, exceptions. The Italian critic Castelvetro had insisted that pleasure was the aim, and many of the great seventeenth-century French poets – Corneille, Molière, La Fontaine, Racine – emphasise that poetry must give pleasure and stir the emotions. But, with very rare exceptions, even the most heterodox acknowledge that moral instruction is, or should be, one of its aims.[9] The main weight of opinion is on the side of moral instruction, with pleasure as the means or a secondary purpose. Aristotle's theories are interpreted in a moralistic fashion. The function of Tragedy is not psychological catharsis, but the demonstration of poetic justice, which rewards the good and punishes evil. Morality is the centre of neo-classicism, and its gravitational force governs the greater and lesser rules. *Vraisemblance* is important because it alone provides the basis for persuasive teaching. In Bray's words, 'la fonction moralisatrice de la poésie est la base la plus sure que puisse trouver Chapelain pour établir l'omnipotence du vraisemblable'.[10] Observance of *les bienséances* ensures moral conformity, as well as reinforcing *vraisemblance*. And the technical rules, in the eyes of seventeenth-century critics, are derived from these fundamental principles.

3

This outline has not explicitly included three points which are often said to be cardinal: imitation of Nature, imitation of the Ancients, and the importance of Reason. Of these, imitation of Nature can be quickly dismissed. The 'Nature' to be imitated does not consist of trees and mountains but is contained in the concepts of *vraisemblance* and *les bienséances*, and of the moral function of art. It is a general, idealised Nature (what usually is, or what ought to be), and the objects to be depicted are human activities, which are the stuff of moral dilemmas.