“Pour moi, ( . . . ) je trouve que toute imposture est indigne d’un honnête homme.”

Molière, Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme.

“Je crois vous avoir déjà dit autrefois, que cet air [de Paris] me dispose à concevoir des chimères, au lieu de pensées de philosophe.”

Descartes, Letter to Chanut, May, 1648.

“Il est donc vrai de dire que tout le monde est dans l’illusion: car, encore que les opinions du peuple soient saines, elles ne le sont pas dans sa tête, car il pense que la vérité est où elle n’est pas. La vérité est bien dans leurs opinions, mais non pas au point où ils se figurent. Ainsi, il est vrai qu’il faut honorer les gentilshommes, mais non pas parce que la naissance est un avantage effectif, etc.”

Pascal, Pensées.
MOLIÈRE IN HIS OWN TIME

The foregoing chapters have brought to light a number of themes which seem to be common to all the plays we have looked at. In the present chapter it is proposed to examine these same themes as they appear in the work of other writers and thinkers of Molière's time, in Descartes, in Corneille, and in Racine. By comparing Molière with his two great fellow-dramatists, in particular, we shall try to elucidate what special qualities, what unique privilege, allowed him to see in a comic light situations which they saw in a dramatic or even a tragic light. We shall find ourselves forced to distinguish between an authentic tragic situation in the seventeenth century and a pseudo-tragic situation, which is the one that Molière himself invariably presents as comic. We shall also extend the relatively detailed examination of individual plays that we have pursued hitherto to the body of Molière's work in general, and we shall attempt to show that the themes and structures we have found in the plays which we have examined in detail are characteristic of all Molière's major comedies.

Following this, we shall devote a final chapter to showing, very sketchily indeed, that the basic structures of Molière's comedies are deeply relevant to the whole of modern life and literature. As in Molière's time, they have not always been discerned as comic. Indeed the comic perspective seems to have become progressively more difficult for writers to attain since Molière's time. Why this should have been so and what special objective conditions seem
to favor the writing of comedy are questions that we shall also attempt to deal with in this final chapter.

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Violence that concealed weakness, willfulness that concealed despair and fear, order that concealed anarchy, these are characteristic manifestations of the world of the early and mid-seventeenth century in Europe. This is the age of civil wars and of absolutism, the age in which a king was beheaded by his subjects, and the age in which a subject made himself absolute master of a kingdom. "Il s'agit pour Descartes et ses précurseurs," writes M. Perelman, "de remplacer la force par un autre impérialisme qui serait l'impérialisme de l'ordre, et de l'ordre de la vérité" (in *Descartes, Cahiers de Royaumont* [Paris, 1959], p. 322). But the order even of truth can be imposed only by violence and tyranny. The Inquisition is simply the most notorious of efforts to impose the order of truth. And what truth? Whose truth? Is the measure of truth the strength of will and the power behind it? Questioned about the polygamy of the Patriarchs, Mersenne replied that God is free to define virtue and sin as He wills (cf. Robert Lenoble's contribution to *Descartes, op. cit.*, and the same author's *Marin Mersenne ou la naissance du mécanisme* [Paris, 1943]). The good which the scholastics, as well as the humanist theologians had placed in the understanding of God becomes with Mersenne a free and gratuitous creation of the divine will. In creating the universe God did not follow the logic present in His understanding; He acted freely and gratuitously by fiat of His divine will: "Omnia quaecumque voluit fecit, sit pro ratione voluntas" (*Quaestiones in Genesim*, quoted by Lenoble in *Descartes, op. cit.*). If he were to give the palm to any of God's attributes, says Mersenne, it would be to His will (*Impiété des déistes*, quoted by Lenoble, *loc. cit.*). It is not surprising that the good Father, who said of the *De Cive* of his atheist friend Hobbes that it should
be printed in letters of silver, extended the pre-eminence of will over reason in a God *cujus unica ratio est voluntas* to man or at least to certain privileged men. The prelates of the Church, God's ministers on earth, have the right, says Mersenne, in the interest of order, to exercise a dictatorial power over moral and even over scientific truth. In this they resemble monarchs, who are likewise to be considered divinely appointed. They may, for instance, prohibit books which in effect contain no falsehood "comme le Roy peut justement deffendre les jeux de chartes, de dez, d'échets, de paume (...) s'il juge que ces deffences soient necessaires pour maintenir son royaume (...) encore que le jeu ne soit pas mauvais de soy-mesme" (*La Vérité des sciences* [Paris, 1625], pp. 111-12).

In Mersenne, however, as in Hobbes, there is little attempt to fuse the two realms of God and of man. On the contrary, Mersenne's vision tends to be as realistic as Hobbes's. Mersenne may well consider all customs and social orders, however different they may be from each other, as so many institutions of God's will for the maintainance of order in society (cf. Lenoble, *Marin Mersenne, op. cit.*, pp. 266-72, 542-43)—this indifferentism places God at such a remove from the world that it is easy for the divine guarantee to disappear altogether without anybody's noticing. Social order becomes a human affair and the justification of any particular order becomes a practical one, as it is for Hobbes, or for that matter for Pascal. Mersenne's ideas about scientific knowledge continue the separation of the divine and the human. Most of the scientists in his circle—Gassendi, Boulliau, Roberval—readily accepted that man can know neither essences nor the true nature of the physical world, these remaining the secret of God. Man's truth and man's science are thus entirely his own work and they need not correspond to absolute truth or to the real nature of the world. "Je ne doute pas," Mersenne writes, "que nous pourrons voir le contraire de ce que nous disons ici en matière de philosophie, quand le voile sera tiré, et que la lumière du Ciel
nous éclairera” (Impiété des déistes, quoted by Lenoble in Descartes, op. cit.). Mersenne goes so far as to say that if we could create an automaton which would fly exactly as a “real” fly does, it would matter little that there are other beings created by God that are “real” flies. The true for us is as valid for us as the true in itself, which cannot be known (Harmonie universelle; cf. Lenoble in Descartes, op. cit.).

The separation of God and the world, of reason and will, of nature and Grace, is by no means a purely Pascalian invention. Pascal’s two radically distinct orders are characteristic of a whole current of Baroque thought and experience. Naked force, emptied of all reason, impenetrable to the understanding, unquestionable, and intolerant, rules over both orders, the divine and human. Separated by a chasm that no one can bridge except by the forceful annihilation of his own will, the divine and the human are alike in that both are equally marked by power and violence. Everywhere there is conflict of wills, within society between individuals and in the universe between man and God, and nowhere is order maintained except by the violent annihilation of one will by another or by the violent sacrifice of one will to another. Order in the relations among men or in the relation between man and God is achieved not by co-operation, not by a reaching out of one toward the other, not by love (love on the human level, in the order of nature, is never more than desire for dominion), but by violence, the violence of empire or the violence of sacrifice. The dialectic of the Baroque is resolved—if it is ever resolved—not in harmony but by the forceful imposition of one of its terms on the other.

The work of Descartes, of Leibniz, of Spinoza, each in its own way, represents an attempt to find an alternative to this solution of violence. Spinoza saw very well that the vision of God as pure voluntas mirrors the violence in the heart of the beholder. Nothing in God’s creation is arbitrary, according to Spinoza, “... all things follow from the necessity of the divine nature; so
that whatsoever (man) deems to be hurtful and evil, and whatso-
ever, accordingly, seems to him impious, horrible, unjust, and
base, assumes that appearance owing to his own disordered,
fragmentary, and confused view of the universe.” Despite all the
differences that separate them, Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza
are all concerned to heal the wounds that have opened up between
power and truth, between will and reason, to substitute the im-
perialism of truth, in Professor Perelman’s words, for the im-
perialism of force. All the new orders, however, carry marks of
blood. Every one of them participates in the tensions it is sup-
posed to overcome, and in the end there is no closing of the
wound. The forms of monism evolved by Spinoza and Leibniz
do not really resolve the dualism they seek to replace, and it is
no accident that in the following century Voltaire, who owed
much to the humanist education he received from his Jesuit
teachers, took issue with both Pascal and Leibniz. As for Descartes,
whose work Molìère can scarcely have ignored, the failure of the
attempt to close the breach is most obvious in his case.

We saw that Mersenne found no need to reconcile the true
nature of the universe, known only to God, with the nature of
the universe as it was constructed by the mind of man. There is
truth for God and there is truth for man; truth for man is not
absolute truth, just as Hobbes’s sovereign has no inherent claim
to sovereignty but only a practical claim. Whereas in practical
politics, however, human freedom splits and creates further prob-
lems (who is free, the individual or the group, in a society that
is free to create its own destiny and its own justice?) in the realm
of science, freedom is relatively unproblematic. Disagreements are
not conflicts of will and desire. Each scientist can thus easily ac-
cept the coexistence along with his own of the world-order created
by other scientists. Indeed these creators of worlds are fully aware
that their world-order is at the same time their liberty and they
do not seek to destroy the liberty of their neighbor. It is at this
point that Descartes appears as dictatorial on the level of truth
as Hobbes on the level of practice and utility. Descartes will admit of no rival to his world-order. It is the only true one. And it is the only true one because it claims to be not a free creation but a discovery of the true world-order, the world-order of God. Precisely because he posits that each individual is his own liberty, Hobbes is forced, in order to maintain order in the practical area of social relations, to require the annihilation of this liberty for the sake of peace. Peace and order are founded not in any objective limitation to human liberty but in the imposition of an arbitrary limitation, which this liberty wills upon itself. Descartes' insistence that his science is the only true science, on the other hand, rests on the claim that it is objectively true, not on any criterion of convenience. In political terms this would be equivalent to saying that the sovereign must be obeyed because he is divinely appointed, because he is in his very nature just. Descartes' science claims to be as divine as the Right of Kings.

Descartes' problem is to reconcile the independence of his own mind and will with the omnipotence and omniscience of God. The difficulties that Henri Lefebvre pointed out in the Cartesian doctrine of will and freedom (cf. his Descartes [Paris, 1947]) have been explored again by Kemp-Smith and Father Lenoble. It is in virtue of our will that we can refuse our assent to the evidence of mere sense, according to Descartes, but, as Father Lenoble properly asks, "l'envers de la liberté de douter n'est-il pas nécessairement la liberté de dire oui?" (Descartes, op. cit., p. 320). When he finds the truth, Descartes tells us, he feels liberated, that is his own will finds itself in accord with the will of God, source of all truth. Descartes is sparing, however, of information as to how this accord takes place. "A fréquenter Descartes," Father Lenoble writes, "on se demande si, même pour lui, les choses se passaient aussi simplement qu'il le dit. Il me semble que sa pratique de l'adhésion au vrai nous montre, beaucoup mieux que sa théorie—élaborée, encore une fois, avec de très gros plans—qu'il n'a pas oublié aussi complètement qu'on pourrait le croire son volontarisme" (ibid., p.
Lenoble draws attention to the confidential and intimate utterances of Descartes the seeker, rather than to those of Descartes the theoretician, utterances which show him groping toward the truth by a series of practical decisions, just as in ethics he felt his way toward the Good. The abyss that is supposed to exist between the Cartesian search for the Good—a slow approximation—and the search for the True—a series of illuminations—is an invention of Descartes’ scoliasts, Lenoble contends, though in this respect Descartes may well have been, as Lenoble wittily puts it, the first of his scoliasts. Henri Gouhier (“Doute méthodique ou négation méthodique,” *Les Etudes philosophiques*, 1954, No. 2) had already indicated that Descartes’ confident statements about the irresistible force of truth are complemented in his actual work by a very prudent understanding of the real difficulties in the way of any discovery and recognition of truth. The difficulty of assenting to evidence is admitted by Descartes himself in several places. Gouhier quotes a passage from the Replies to the Sixth Objections where, having applied his method to the distinction of body and mind, Descartes adds: “Toutefois je confesse que je ne fus pas pour cela pleinement persuadé.” He felt rather like those astronomers “qui, après avoir été convaincus par de pressantes raisons que le soleil est plusieurs fois plus grand que toute la terre, ne sauraient pourtant s’empêcher de juger qu’il est plus petit lorsqu’ils jettent les yeux sur lui.”

Assenting to the truth, it would seem, thus involves an act of will similar to that involved in assenting to Grace in Thomist theology. Truth liberates, according to Descartes, and man is not free until he possesses it. But he already has a kind of freedom, in virtue of which he can will to be free. For Pascal and the anti-Cartesians, God’s knowledge and man’s knowledge are separated by an abyss, just as the realm of nature and the realm of Grace are. To be united with God, to share with Him, to enter into His will and His understanding requires a complete break with the self, a total annihilation and transmutation of the natural man. Since man’s will never
leads him to the Divine but always away from it, this will must be destroyed and completely absorbed by the divine will. For Descartes, on the other hand, knowledge of the truth involves the acquiescence of man’s will, its active assenting as human will to the truths created by the divine will. Man submits to God, in Descartes, without thereby losing or denying his own will. On the contrary his will is elevated by being identified with that of God.

The ambiguity in Descartes’ doctrine of knowledge pointed out by Lenoble and Gouhier is a crucial one. The fact is that Descartes must maintain both that man finds his own way to truth and that this truth is a divine illumination. Man’s freedom, the independence of his will, and the validity of his thought must be maintained; man is not to be the slave of God; he is to be himself capable of raising himself to the divine. At the same time only the divine sanction can guarantee the objective and universal validity of the knowledge he thus discovers for himself.

It is significant that a similar ambiguity to that discovered in Descartes’ scientific method by Lenoble and Gouhier was discovered in the cogito itself and discussed by Ginette Dreyfus in an article published a decade or so ago (“Discussion sur le Cogito et l’axiome ‘Pour penser il faut être,’” Revue Internationale de Philosophie, 6, 1952, pp. 117-25). Descartes maintains that the validity of the cogito rests on the axiom “to think it is necessary to be.”¹ But what is the validity of the axiom? Is it valid in the way mathematical principles are? If so, then its validity must be subjective until the hypothesis of the malus genius has been overcome, for the malus genius puts in doubt not that $2 + 3 = 5$ or that a square has no more than four sides in my mind, but that these truths are

¹ Cf. Discours de la Methode, 4 partie: “Il n’y a rien du tout en ceci: Je pense, donc je suis qui m’assure que je dis la vérité sinon que je vois tres clairement que, pour penser, il faut être”; also Principes, I, 10: “Lorsque j’ai dit que cette proposition Je pense, donc je suis est la première et la plus certaine à celui qui conduit sa pensée par ordre, je n’ai pas nié qu’il ne fallût savoir auparavant ce que c’est que penser, certitude, existence et que pour penser il faut être,” also “Replies to Sixth Objections.”
valid for things considered as independent of my mind. I may, to be sure, when I apprehend myself thinking, apply the axiom to my thinking and postulate in consequence that I exist, but if the necessity of the axiom is only a subjective one, the necessity of the link between my thinking and my existing can also be only subjective. Similarly, while it is true that the axiom finds an application through the *cogito* to the real world, it is not clear how this confers an objective validity on the axiom or on the necessity it pretends to. The fact that my experience provides the opportunity to apply the rule to a real datum does not suffice to found the objective validity of the rule. One might, on the other hand, choose to consider the axiom as being discovered immediately in those things (*res*), which, unlike mathematical things, are not subject to doubt. If the *res* are in doubt, the axioms they contain are in doubt: this is what happens to the axioms of mathematics as soon as the fiction of the *malus genius* puts mathematical propositions themselves in doubt. But if the *res* are not doubtful, the axioms they contain are not doubtful either. As my thinking is not in doubt and as I perceive in the reality of this *res* that it is necessarily bound to a being, the axiom "to think it is necessary to be" cannot be in doubt either. The necessity of the axiom in this interpretation is that of a rational truth and of a rational truth which is not to be thought of as a law that thought imposes on things, but rather as imposed on thought by things themselves. In short, the necessity of the axiom "pour penser il faut être" is not purely subjective; it is objective, being the direct expression of a necessity written into the existents that are given me in direct apprehension. In the *cogito ergo sum*, thought and being are thus two sides of the same medal and it is impossible to think the one without thinking the other. For this reason, so this argument would conclude, it is easy to understand why Descartes could affirm that the axiom "to think it is necessary to be" escapes the doubt introduced by the hypothesis of the *malus genius*, whereas the axioms of mathematics do not. Descartes himself, however, explicitly states not that the
axiom is derived from the *cogito*, but that the axiom is prior to the *cogito* (cf. note 1, *supra*). Furthermore Descartes preserves the axiom from the doubt introduced by the *malus genius*, not by supposing it contained in any indubitable *res*, but by arguing that it does not involve the affirmation of any *res*, of any actual existence at all. Again if the necessity of the axiom rested on the intuition of certain *res* that contain it, the axiom would be subject to doubt for as long as I had not obtained through the *cogito* the intuition of these indubitable *res*. It would therefore be doubtful from the outset in exactly the same way as the axioms of mathematics. The difference between the two kinds of axioms would become apparent only at a later stage: in the case of the axiom "to think it is necessary to be," I would always be able to call up the indubitable existents which contain it and make it itself indubitable, whereas in the case of the axioms of mathematics I would not be able to do this, and the *res* which contain them remaining doubtful, the axioms would also remain doubtful, until such time as I had proved the existence of a truthful God to replace the hypothetical *malus genius*. But Descartes himself declares that the axiom "to think it is necessary to be" is *ab initio* free of all doubt, even that brought on by the *malus genius*. When Descartes states that the axiom "to think it is necessary to be" is not one of those eternal verities which the hypothesis of the *malus genius* puts in doubt, he is distinguishing between the absolute objective necessity of this axiom and the subjective necessity of those axioms—the axioms of mathematics for instance—which become objective only after the arguments derived from the *cogito* have disposed of the fiction of the *malus genius*. (The hypothesis of the *malus genius* in no way destroys the subjective necessity of mathematical propositions and axioms, as Kemp-Smith and others have properly insisted: $2 + 3 = 5$ for me, even while the hyperbolic doubt introduced by the *malus genius* is in operation. It is only the objective necessity of the propositions that is suspended.) Now it does not seem that a subjectively necessary axiom acquires the quality of objective neces-
sity merely by being applied to a concrete datum. The axiom “to think it is necessary to be” does not acquire objective necessity by being applied to the concrete datum: *cogito*. On the contrary, the *cogito* supplies only one indubitable term: I think. If I then affirm, as Descartes does, not only that I am, but that, in virtue of the axiom “to think it is necessary to be,” I am necessarily, this necessity of my being can be affirmed objectively only in so far as the axiom itself is objectively valid. It seems, therefore, that the *cogito* provides the axiom with an application, but does not give it its objective validity, whereas, on the other hand, the axiom, when applied to the *cogito*, provides it with an objective validity which it does not have in itself. The objective necessity of the axiom must therefore rest, several commentators have concluded, on the eternal necessities contained in the notion of the power and immensity of God. These commentators argue that the certainty of the axiom “to think it is necessary to be,” like that of the causal axiom, derives not from any *res* which may be shown to be indubitable as a result of the *cogito*, but from an absolute impossibility pertaining to the “exigencies of existence” in Gouhier’s phrase, which are founded directly in God. According to this argument, the axiom “to think it is necessary to be” derives its objective necessity and certainty, its impermeability even to the doubt introduced by the *malus genius*, from God himself, from the act by which God is His own cause. It does not rest on the *cogito* but on the immanent presence in us of the idea of God. The fact that the certitude of the axiom is not only prior to but the condition of the certitude of the *cogito* thus corresponds directly to the fact that God is prior to my own existence, of which He is the condition. The necessity of the axiom “nothing has no properties” being derived directly from the nature of God comes and consecrates from above, so to speak, by way of the axiom “to think it is necessary to be,” my intuition of my own thinking. In this way it imposes a necessary link between thinking and being which does not derive directly from any thinking, but from God himself imprinting His idea in us.
Summing up these arguments we find that from the outset there is a strange duality in the cogito. It contains two elements, each of which is indispensable to it: the direct intuition of my own thinking, and a necessary principle, the foundation of which must be looked for in God. For Descartes, however, and this is vital to the meaning which the cogito had for him and for most rationalists, this duality of self and God remains internal to the subject and does not deprive the cogito of its intrinsic rationality or of its validity as a first principle. With Malebranche, for instance, the tension of the duality is broken by the exteriorization of one of its terms, and the consequent recognition that the certainty of my own existence is dependent on an existence beyond me. Malebranche seems to be faithful to Descartes in deducing the cogito from the principle "nothingness has no properties," but this principle is known in Malebranche only by being seen in God, by being situated outwith my consciousness, and not, as in Descartes "senti en moi-même." The cogito becomes thereby a mere empirical fact, not a rational truth or a first principle of philosophy. Rationality and necessity reside in the divine reason, and the necessary connection between thinking and being is not in the cogito itself but is explicitly conferred upon it from outside the self, by our applying to it a necessary truth which resides in God and which it cannot contain within itself. While it is true that for Descartes the axiom "to think it is necessary to be" seems to be founded in God through the axiom "nothing has no properties," it nevertheless resides in me, in my innate understanding, and I know immediately that it is true and objectively valid without needing to know what I can know only later, viz., that it is founded in the immensity of God's omnipotence. It is enough that I perceive it to be evident immediately in myself, and that I find that the malus genius cannot put it in question, since it contains no actual affirmation of existence. The evidence and necessity of the relation which is established for me between my thinking and my being thereby appears to me as entirely interior to my consciousness and the cogito can thus claim
to be both a rational truth and a direct intuition, which does not require to be demonstrated by any express appeal to God.

The difficulty of the *cogito*—as well as its historical significance—lies precisely in this union of self-sufficiency and duality. On the one hand its immediacy and rationality, which assure its independence, imply a necessity that seems to have only a subjective foundation—the directly experienced impossibility of denying myself in the act of affirming myself. On the other hand the necessity of the *cogito* is objective and immediately so, because it comes not from myself but from elsewhere, being imposed on myself by God. An objective idealism thus lurks behind the apparent subjective idealism of the *cogito*, and in fact the Third Meditation does seek to found in something other than myself the necessity I discover in myself.

Just as truth for Descartes is at once a divine illumination and a result independently arrived at and freely assented to by the human mind, so the certainty of my own existence is at once self-contained in me and objectively validated by something beyond me. With Malebranche’s version of Cartesianism, God is restored to His position as the unique source of all certain knowledge. The innate qualities of the human understanding thereby cease to provide the foundation of science and philosophy. This is the cost of Malebranche’s greater coherency. As in so many other cases (the pineal gland, for instance), Descartes prefers an uneasy reconciliation of opposites to strict coherency, and it is precisely in these uneasy reconciliations that the greatness and historical significance of his thinking lies. The deep underlying tendency of Descartes’ thought, as his opponents clearly recognized, is the deification of man, the attribution to him of that absolute autonomy, certainty, and self-sufficiency that belong traditionally to God. Concealed within this claim to autonomy and absoluteness, however, is the secret poison that transforms them into total dependence and contingency. No one expressed the duality lurking in the apparent unity of autonomous rational man better than Valéry. In the
"Lettre d’un ami" appended to the Soirée avec M. Teste, Valéry writes: “J’imagine qu’il y a dans chacun de nous un atome important entre nos atomes, et constitué par deux grains d’énergie qui voudraient bien se séparer. Ce sont des énergies contradictoires, mais indivisibles. La nature les a joints pour toujours, quoique furieusement ennemies. L’une est l’éternel mouvement d’un gros électron positif, et ce mouvement engendre une suite de sons graves où l’oreille intérieure distingue sans nulle peine une profonde phrase monotone: Il n’y a que moi. Il n’y a que moi. Il n’y a que moi, moi, moi . . . Quant au petit électron radicalement négatif, il crie à l’extrême de l’aigu, et perce et reperce de la sorte la plus cruelle le thème égoïste de l’autre: Oui, mais il y a un tel . . . Oui, mais il y a un tel . . . Tel, tel, tel" (Monsieur Teste, 23rd ed. [Paris, 1946], p. 84). By surreptitiously introducing God as the objective guarantor of the autonomy of the self—in such a way, to be sure, that this autonomy seems in no way compromised—Descartes succeeds in holding together the two aspects of the self, its consciousness of itself as utter absoluteness and its consciousness of itself as utter contingency, its apprehension of itself as a plenitude of being and its apprehension of itself as constantly dissolving into nothingness, its desire to realize its own total independence and its need to found itself objectively in something transcending its own self-awareness, its assertion of its complete freedom and its experience of its complete subordination. One of the main themes of Molière’s comedy, as we saw in the foregoing analyses of individual plays, is the falseness and imposture of the self that proclaims its independence of and indifference to others. Whereas Descartes is arguing for the autonomy of a universal self, however, the subject of Molière’s comedies is an historically concrete self, which in its general form becomes not universal, but a social type. The question of autonomy is raised and answered in Molière only in concrete social terms. At the limit, the problem of the autonomy of Descartes’ self is the problem of the autonomy of Molière’s honnête homme, who, like Descartes himself, accepts his social role as a role, while re-
remaining free of it as a mind. The honnête homme, however, is not the central figure of Molière's comedies. It is the false independence of the Dom Juans and the Sotenvilles that Molière laughs at, discerning clearly the contradictions in the pretensions of these outmoded and impoverished grandees.

In Corneille, on the other hand, although some of his heroes have a fairly obvious historical relevance, there is still a tendency toward abstraction, which may partly account for the attempts of literary historians to discover a similarity between the playwright and the philosopher. The self in Corneille, the moi of which he writes so generously, is often conceived abstractly in typical Baroque style. This moi, however, seeks to incarnate itself historically, and it is in this attempt to achieve a concrete form that its double aspect is clearly visible, as Rousset and Starobinski have amply demonstrated. At the very moment it proclaims: "Je suis maitre de moi comme de l'univers," the moi is the supreme technician of its own theatricality. "La maîtrise de soi," writes Starobinski (p. 47), "est une activité réfléchie qui suppose le dédoublement de l'être entre une puissance qui commande et une nature réduite à obéir, entre une autorité hégémonique ( . . . ) et des parties subordonnées. Cette force hégémonique n’est pas tout l'être; pour qu'elle règne, il faut qu'elle réduise au silence d'autres forces, ou du moins qu'elle les cache aux regards du dehors. Ce qui fait la grandeur ostentatoire du héros est aussi ce qui l'engage à dissimuler l'appétit inférieur qu'il refreine en lui-même. Ainsi en va-t-il des rois, lorsque l'amour vient contredire leur passion de régner. S'ils ne parviennent à détruire en eux cet amour, leur souci est alors de le refouler consciemment au plus secret d'eux-mêmes, pour n'en rien laisser paraître au-dehors."

2 Jean Rousset, La Littérature de l'âge baroque en France: Circé et le Paon (Paris, 1954); Jean Starobinski, L'Oeil vivant (Paris, 1961). I am particularly indebted for the following remarks on Corneille to the brilliant essay of Starobinski. I agree entirely with Starobinski's analysis of the structures of Corneille's plays. I disagree with him, to some extent, if I am not mistaken, as to the significance of these structures. I have consequently allowed myself to give some of his insights a meaning that he does not give to them.
The heart of the problem of the self in Corneille is not to be looked for among those characters who are satisfied with appearances.

Il faut (. . .)
Trouver à ma disgrâce une face héroïque,
Donner à ce divorce une illustre couleur
Et sous de beaux dehors dévorer ma douleur

says Irène in Pulchérie (IV, 1, 1109–12). These lines strikingly recall certain lines spoken by Molière’s Amphitryon. They indicate acceptance of a total split between the reality and the appearance of the self. Far more significant are those characters, like Cornélie in La Mort de Pompée or Auguste and Emilie in Cinna, for whom the task is to be truly that which they present themselves as and to present themselves as that which they truly are (“dissimuler l’appétit inférieur qu’il refrène en lui-même”). In fact this involves their shaping themselves according to an ideal model which is no longer appropriated from the outside world of others, but invented by the character himself. “L’on peut croire,” says Starobinski (p. 55), “qu’il s’est fait lui-même à partir d’une libre affirmation de ce qu’il veut être. Etre et faire se répondent à la rime: ‘Ce que vous faites / Montre à tout l’univers, Seigneur, ce que vous êtes!’” At the same time this supreme independence must be recognized by others in order that the hero can recognize it himself. The fatal flaw of the hero, the crack in his absolutism is the need he has in order to take cognizance of his absolutism, of the eye of the other. The axiom which in Descartes’ cogito guaranteed the objective validity of the self that takes cognizance of itself becomes, in Corneille, the world, which in its admiration of the hero and its recognition of his absoluteness guarantees the self-awareness of the hero. In both cases, however, there is equivocation. Descartes interpolates the axiom surreptitiously, without justifying it or explaining its provenance,

*Sertorius, 1, 3, 297–98.*
in order to preserve the autonomy of the self; Corneille presents the awed admiration of the world as the consequence of his heroes’ absolute independence and superiority, whereas in fact it is the condition of it.

In his early comedies, Corneille presents his young heroes as completely dazzled by the blinding glory of some supreme beauty. The word éclat which recurs so frequently in his works expresses the power of these splendid visions. These beauties do not have to do anything in order to overwhelm all who see them, their victories are effortless and immediate, due only to the inherent power of their presence. In similar fashion, the victories of Louis XIV are almost magical: “Louis n’a qu’à paroître” (“Sur les Victoires du Roi en l’année 1677,” Oeuvres complètes de Corneille, ed. Marty-Laveaux, Les Grands Ecrivains de France, Vol. X, p. 323, l. 3). For the beholder the danger is great, however, that the fascination of which he is the victim may become a veritable death. Confronted with the plenitude of being of the “God,” he himself may easily shrink into nothingness like the moth that burns in the flame. Thus the éclat of the beloved, by its very excess, threatens the lover with annihilation. The beauty of Mélanie is such, thinks Tircis, that the entire universe is at her feet. And if this is so, where does he stand, obscure and insignificant as he is? Others may well be more favored than he and he has no real assurance that he is loved. The beloved becomes an enigma that he cannot penetrate. “L’objet admirable, dans l’exacte mesure où il est fascinant,” writes Starobinski, “ne peut être possédé: il s’impose sans se laisser saisir. Offerte aux regards, mais rendue lointaine par l’intensité même de son éclat, la figure séductrice échappe à l’amour que sa présence enflamme” (op. cit., p. 40). The ruses of his rivals—lies, counterfeit letters, impostures of all sorts—are immediately believed, because the lover is so overwhelmingly convinced of his own nothingness and of the beloved’s absolute indifference, but far from removing him from the competition, as they are intended to do, and so freeing him from his fascination, they succeed only in intensifying his obsession
with the beloved. Starobinski has drawn attention to the struggles of these early Cornelian lovers to assert their independence of the beloved, and to their failure to do so:

"Un moment vient où la raison se ressaisit et regimbe. Il y a quelque chose d'inacceptable et de dangereux dans ce bouleverse­ment soudain. C'est une faiblesse inavouable, qui livre l'âme sans défense à l'éblouissement. Et pourtant, il est difficile de renoncer aux plaisirs de la lumière: quelle joie d'être illuminé par la beauté! quelle joie plus grande encore d'être source de lumière! D'où la singulière ambivalence de tous les personnages cornéliens à l'égard de l'éblouissement. Ils veulent être fascinés et s'en défendent; ils veulent admirer, et ils déclament contre le 'faux éclat':

Et les dehors trompeurs (...)
N'ont que trop ébloui mon oeil mal éclairé
(Toison d'Or, V, 2) ¹

Ils veulent se protéger, préserver leur indépendance, comme si l'éblouissement risquait de la consumer. Mais ils sont invincible­ment attirés par l'éclat de la beauté ou de la gloire; ils ne peuvent renoncer à adorer ce qui resplendit. Alors ils y mettront certaines conditions: il faudra faire en sorte que l'éclat ne puisse plus être suspecté d'être 'faux,' il faudra trouver des gages suffisants qui permettent d'accepter les dehors sans redouter qu'ils soient trompeurs. Il faudra lier la vérité à l'éblouissement" (Starobinski, op. cit., p. 36).

In this extremely acute passage several things remain unex­plained. Why is it a joie to be illuminated by beauty? In fact it is a joie only in so far as this illumination distinguishes the lover from all his rivals. And this also explains why to be illuminated is also a source of anguish and why the greatest joy is in fact to illuminate. As long as he is not himself the source of light, the lover is de­pendent on the caprices and whims of the beloved; he must con-

¹ Aaete to Hypsipyle in La Toison d'Or, V, 2, 1904–5.
stantly seek to please her in order to attract to himself that light that marks him out from all his rivals. His insecurity and dependence are such, however, that he lives in perpetual dread of losing or not having the light, of being deceived and thus reduced to total obscurity and nothingness. He is always ready to believe what he fears most: that the light has been withdrawn from him. In his anguish he will often turn against the beloved herself, the cause of all his suffering, or so he imagines. He will lend a willing ear to those who defame and denigrate her or charge her with imposture. As it is not, however, the beloved herself whom he really desires but the superiority over others which he acquires when her light is shed on him, he will not cease to worship her in his heart, whatever appearance of indifference he may assume, as long as others—his rivals—recognize her magic power. For in herself the beloved has no real power. The power she possesses is that which is invested in her by the admiration of the universe; she herself is not the cause of his anguish, since she does nothing to arouse it. The cause of his anguish, which he places in her, is in fact in himself. Unable to ground the autonomous being he lays claim to in himself, dependent on the recognition of it by others in order to recognize and experience it himself, he is torn between desire to win this recognition and refusal to admit, even to himself, that he needs it.

Corneille himself makes it clear that rejection and defamation of the idol is mere resentment. Suspicion and calumny are the servile characteristics of valets and weaklings. A truly noble soul having nothing to fear never suspects imposture around him. But this is the case only among equals. Thus Chimène’s father recognizes immediately the nobility and generosity of Rodrigue. The moment there is inequality, however, the moment the greatness in the other reduces the self to the status of an inferior, this recognition is withheld and the greatness of the other put in doubt, for the inferior will not avow his inferiority. The refusal to recognize greatness or superiority thus becomes itself the mark of inferiority, of bassesse d’âme. The ultimate triumph in Corneille is the triumph of gener-
osity, of a generosity that recognizes the superiority of the other, beloved or prince; and paradoxically this act of generosity restores the admirer to equality with the object of admiration, the lover to equality with the beloved. "La 'reconnaissance' qui survient au dénouement est le résultat d'une désillusion, d'un désabusement. Où donc était l'illusion? Non pas dans l'éblouissement initial, mais dans les soupçons suscités par le rival malveillant . . . la désillusion cornélienne n'est jamais la destruction d'un éclat, elle est l'abolition de l'ombre jetée par la calomnie sur cet éclat; elle est passage à un éclat supérieur" (Starobinski, op. cit., p. 41).

The political significance of this victory of generosity will be apparent. As long as the hierarchies among men were founded in the mists of antiquity and heredity, as long as each could feel that his place and his dignity were secure and unquestioned, as long as no one felt himself the rival either of his superiors or of his inferiors, the recognition of greatness in another was natural and easy and it implied no derogation for the admirer. The collapse of this traditionally and, as most thought, divinely structured world amid the struggles of individual ambition and acquisitiveness provided the occasion for the substitution of a new structure. The monarch stepped into the chaos and imposed a new order, of which he himself was the summit and the foundation, no longer primus inter pares but absolute master and supreme architect of his own universe. Confronted by the dazzling light of this new apparition men could question it, cry imposture, revolt against the absoluteness that reduced them to utter dependency and that seemed to have the power to annihilate them completely. But in the end they did not really want to destroy their idol-rival, for in their struggle with each other he constituted a necessary umpire, a judge capable of distinguishing them by his favors from their rivals. The anarchy of their own passions, their covetousness and greed secured the monarch on his throne and their vanity invested him with absolute power over them. Since they could not accept a fixed place, since each of them coveted the place of his neighbor and contested every
superiority, all became equally courtiers, wooers of kings, seekers of favors.

Corneille saw clearly that those nobles who refused to recognize the monarch, who accused him of imposture and fraud and who revolted against him, were simply resentful of a superiority which they in fact recognized by the very fury of their hatred. Cimna’s attitude to Auguste is a curious mixture of awe and of resentment. What Corneille did not perceive—or could not perceive—however, was the objective rightness of an accusation that was grounded in the basest of emotions. Corneille does not admit either in the early or in the later plays that the idol, beloved or prince, is nothing in himself, that his prestige rests on the vanity of his idolators and that his supposed absoluteness is itself a myth which he can sustain in his own consciousness only by reading it in the eyes of his subjects, and which he can sustain in the consciousness of his subjects only by carefully and cunningly manipulating their vanity and rivalry. It is because he did not see this that Corneille’s comedies remain comedies of intrigue, courtly exercises, while his “tragedies” are never more than heroic dramas. When the idol himself becomes false, the situation that forms the groundwork of Corneille’s plays becomes the vast comedy that it is in Molière or the tragedy of wasted and self-consuming passions that it is in Racine.

Corneille constantly maintained, as Starobinski rightly insists, the inherent value of his idols. “L’aveuglement, chez les personnages de Corneille, n’est pas un égarement total, mais une connaissance provisoirement obscurcie, qui retrouvera toute sa clarté dans une illumination instantanée ( . . . ) L’illusion laisse le monde intact ( . . . ) Toujours la pièce évolue vers ce moment où les personnages sont vus dans leur vérité, et voient la vérité ( . . . ) Alors il n’y a que des regards éblouis. Cet éblouissement final est tout différent de l’éblouissement initial ( . . . ) De l’illumination première à l’illumination dernière, une action a été parcourue: c’est le chemin qui va de la séduction à la vérité, du saisissement instantané à la gloire immortelle” (Starobinski, op. cit., pp. 43–44). For Cor-
neille there are genuinely superior beings, sources of light for all those around them, deriving their luminosity from no source other than their own inherent grandeur. More and more Corneille's characters will aspire to be one of these beings. They will not be content to be dazzled, they will seek to dazzle; they will strive to be no longer the spectators of a blinding light, but themselves the source of blinding light and spectators of their own glory. "L'éclat," writes Starobinski (op. cit., p. 56), "ne sera plus le privilège inexplicable qui s'attache à la beauté d'un être, mais la lumière qui environne les actes et les décisions." The Cornelian hero comes to assume many of the characteristics associated with an important current of the Baroque. With respect to the early plays, his éclat will lose some of its mystery. It will cease to be gratuitous and unexplained, it will be motivated rationally, having its source in the acts of the hero's own consciousness. At the same time it will preserve a quality of magic in that these acts of consciousness will emerge suddenly upon the world transforming it from top to bottom. And instead of acting directly on the world and on others, this magic power will be only indirectly concerned with others, by refraction, as it were. Praising the glory of the monarch in his palace of Versailles, Corneille compares him to God who

( . . . ) jouit dans le ciel de sa gloire et de soi,
Tandis que sur la terre il remplit tout d'effroi.
("Vers présentés au Roi sur sa campagne
de 1676," Oeuvres complètes, ed. cit.,
Vol. X, p. 305, ll. 23–24)

The quasi-divine figure of the monarch is completely independent of and indifferent to the effect of his glory on others, nor does he seek to create any effect. On the contrary his absoluteness is such that he is his own judge and his own spectator. If his glory fills the universe with awe, this is merely an indirect by-product of an ac-
tivity that is completely self-contained, self-determined, and self-directed. The monarch-God exults in his own glory and in his own self *tandis que*—quite incidentally and without his even being aware of it, so absorbed is he in the contemplation of his own glory—the mass of trembling mortals looks up in awe. Those heroes whom we have come to regard as typically Cornelian are their own creations, absolute and autonomous products of their own will, having neither father nor mother nor image in which they are formed. They are what they want to be:

Voilà quelle je suis, et quelle je veux être,

says Sophonisbe to Massinissa (*Sophonisbe*, II, 4, 695).

Je suis maître de moi comme de l'univers,


Cornelle’s portrait of the monarch can be compared with Bernini’s St. Teresa group in the Cornaro Chapel in the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. While the ecstasy of St. Teresa has an audience in the eight members of the Cornaro family whose busts appear behind priedieus arranged along the side walls of the chapel, the ecstasy itself is set on a kind of stage which is *partly protected* by the marble columns supporting the framing aedicula. “When standing on the central axis opposite the group of St. Teresa,” writes Rudolf Wittkower (Gian Lorenzo Bernini, London, 1955, p. 29), “it becomes apparent that the chapel is too shallow for the members of the Cornaro family to see the miracle on the altar. For that reason Bernini has shown them arguing, reading and pondering, certainly about what they know is happening on the altar, but which is hidden from their eyes.” Professor Wittkower emphasizes the relevance of this architectural arrangement, which he considers characteristic of Bernini’s work, to the Christian notion of the “mystic hierarchy of things”—man, Saint, and Godhead. “The connection across space between praying figures and the altar,” he writes (p. 32), “had (. . .) a specific and intensely religious meaning, and even the counterfeiting of priedieus had originally nothing in common with theater boxes.” Bernini’s idea, it seems to me, must have been not, indeed, to create a simple theatrical effect, but to avoid creating one, to preserve the St. Teresa group from theatricality. If the saint’s ecstasy is being “acted” for our benefit, it cannot be real and authentic. It must therefore be only “incidentally” or “accidentally” visible to the spectator. It is tempting to discern a parallel here between this architectural form and the myth by which the great, while absorbed in their own activity and self-contemplation, are yet “accidentally” the object of the admiration and awe of the universe.
And yet there is a crack in the superbly confident absolutism of these supermen and super-women. They do expect recognition from others and they do expect to arouse fear and respect in others. Their name, the very image of their power, is presented to the world, and it is in the act of presenting it that the supposedly indifferent and self-sufficient hero seeks the confirmation in the eyes of others of the absolution to which he lays claim:

_Le Comte_
Sais-tu bien qui je suis?

_Don Rodrigue_
Oui; tout autre que moi
Au seul bruit de ton nom pourroit trembler d'effroi.

_(Le Cid, II, 2, 411–12)_

Likewise Cornélie will advance toward her interlocutor, bearing her name before her like a flaming shield by which all must be blinded:

_Souviens-toi seulement que je suis Cornélie._
_(Mort de Pompée, III, 4, 1026)_

Without the recognition accorded to his name the Cornelian hero is nothing; his absolution fades into utter contingency and the plenitude of being he claims for himself shrinks to a terrifying absence of being. _L'infiniment grand_ becomes suddenly _infiniment petit_. There are lines in _Suréna_ which open up frightening abysses of nothingness:

_Quel tout meure avec moi, Madame: que m'importe_
Qui foule après ma mort la terre qui me porte?
_Sentiront-ils percer par un éclat nouveau,_
_Ces illustres aieux, la nuit de leur tombeau?_

_Quand nous avons perdu le jour qui nous éclaire,_
_Cette sorte de vie est bien imaginaire,
Commenting on these lines Starobinski writes: “Ce qui triomphe maintenant, c’est l’envers de la gloire; la nuit (…) Tout se passe alors comme si la vérité dernière n’appartenait pas à l’éblouissement, mais au fond nocturne sur lequel l’éblouissement avait choisi d’apparaître. Quand se taisent l’artifice et la fiction, quand l’imaginaire est dénoncé, quand la volonté n’invente plus ses décrets absolus, seule demeure cette obscurité confuse: un froid mortel se produit. Qui veut vivre doit produire de grands actes, et leur donner force de vérité. C’est-à-dire ne jamais cesser de faire la guerre au vide nocturne (…) la muer en lumière éclatante. Encore faut-il que cet éclat soit accueilli et soutenu par le regard complice des peuples et des générations prises à témoin. L’individu a beau déployer la plus surprenante énergie, il n’est rien sans l’écho que lui renvoie l’admiration universelle. Que l’assentiment extérieur lui soit refusé, que le secours du spectateur ébloui vient à manquer—reste alors une ombre qui s’agit vaineusement sur un tréteau ou seule la mort est certaine” (op. cit., p. 68). In the end the Cornelian hero is as dependent on his admirers as they are dependent on him. The other is the unavowed condition of the hero’s “absolutism,” just as God is the unavowed condition of Descartes’ absolute ego. When Descartes went on to deduce from the imperfection of his being the existence of a perfect being, he was merely making explicit an assumption that in fact underlay the initial and supposedly autonomous affirmation of his own being. No man can lay claim to absoluteness without falling into an imposture that appears grotesque as soon as it is perceived. If nowadays we find the solemnity with which Don Diègue or Comélie brandish their names a trifle ridiculous, it is because we perceive the weakness behind the apparent power, the petty feudal reality behind the Baroque mask. These superb heroes reveal the chasm of nothingness behind them each time they ask “Sais-tu bien qui je suis?” We
need only take the question literally in order to prick the bubble. The flaming shield of the name becomes a piece of limp cardboard; "Cornélie" turns out to be no better than "Mamamouchi."

Descartes and Corneille seek to stave off the void that threatens to engulf them by proudly and confidently asserting their autonomous existence. The strained quality of the self-assertion itself betrays the inward terror that provokes it. Yet there is a significant difference between these two affirmations of self. While neither the philosopher nor the dramatist openly admits the dependence of the self, the unavowed guarantor is different in each case. For Descartes it is God himself; for Corneille it is other men. In his ethical writings Descartes does take account of others, and quite a few articles in the *Traité des passions de l'âme* concern the effect of our behavior on others and the manner in which we can construct a certain appearance of ourselves (e.g., articles 180–81). On the whole, however, Descartes distinguishes carefully between the judgment of others and actions that are right and good in themselves. He himself warns against confusing *orgueil* and *générosité*, *gloire* and the *satisfaction intérieure* of having acted rightly (157–58). The soul finds true peace, he insists, only if its resolutions are founded on the knowledge of truth (49). Though it is not easy to acquire certainty in moral matters, we do our duty if we act as best we can in any given circumstance. There is no sign in Descartes of any need of grace to accomplish the good, no sign of any awareness of original sin; a man can feel confident in judging his own actions and his own self. His own approval is tantamount to divine approval, and he finds peace and security in the consciousness that he has acted for the best. Once again in Descartes, consciousness is assumed to be the impartial spectator and judge of its own acts; once again, however, this judgment can acquire objective validity only if we grant the co-presence alongside and in some manner within the individual consciousness of the divine mind. Just as the ego cannot found itself objectively without an axiom that in itself rests on God, so the moral life can be given no objec-
tive validity, even though Descartes does not avow this openly, without the final judgment of God.

In Corneille's case there is obviously no room for any real distinction between gloire and sentiment intérieur or between orgueil and générosité. The unavowed presence which gives objective value to the hero's contemplation of his own triumphant being is no other than the world itself. Even a supremely wicked and evil person, provided he commands the admiration and awe of the universe, can experience a divine plenitude of being which raises him beyond all judgments of a moral nature. Many of Corneille's heroes are in fact of this sort; he himself even took the trouble to justify theoretically the irrelevance of moral judgments to heroic greatness.

It is clear from our brief analysis of Descartes and Corneille, however, that individual man is never absolute and autonomous, whatever he may claim for himself. He must constantly seek to ground his being objectively in something beyond himself, and he cannot find in his own self-transcendence the objectivity he requires, for consciousness of self transcends itself as consciousness of consciousness of self, and so on in an infinite spiral. In despair the individual consciousness attempts to appropriate the alien consciousness which alone has the power to assure its objectivity, believing that through the possession of this alien consciousness it will avoid both the Scylla of skeptical solipsism and the Charybdis of utter dependence on others, and so resolve the contradiction of objectivity and autonomy that is so intolerable to it. Thus Descartes injects into consciousness the axiom by which alone the cogito becomes not an experiential truth but a rational and objectively necessary one. In fact, however, as we argued earlier, the validity of the axiom rests on the nature of a God independent of and distinct from the self-conscious self. Likewise the Cornelian hero is often presented to us as exulting in the spectacle of his own glory. "Sa grande âme s'ouvroit à ses propres clartés," Corneille will write of Louis XIV ("Vers présentés au Roi sur sa campagne
de 1676,” Oeuvres, ed. cit., X, p. 306, l. 40). This pure self-sufficiency is a myth, however, for the universal audience before which the hero stands and which he seems to subsume in his own self-contemplation is in fact the unavowed and independent ground of this self-contemplation.

The autonomous, quasi-divine self of Descartes and of Corneille is an imposture, for it rests on a fundamental contradiction. Self-awareness has an empirical but not an ontological priority. In so far as Descartes can be said to "find" God in himself, God ceases to be the transcendence in which alone the self discovers its objective ground, and in so far as he finds himself in God he loses the absolute autonomy of existence to which he lays claim. The attempt to appropriate others into the self is equally futile. Once appropriated, the consciousness of the other loses its power to ground my being, which it had when it was free and which was the very power I wished to appropriate. If I am to find a foundation for my being, I must allow the independence and absoluteness of other consciousnesses, so that I may see myself reflected in them; thereby, however, I cease to be absolute and autonomous myself and I fall into dependence upon them.

If the non-autonomous nature of the self be admitted, it becomes folly to ground my own existence on other selves, since they are as dependent and contingent as I am. Many of those who took this position in the seventeenth century envisaged God rather as their contemporaries envisaged the King. Like the courtier who longs for and is elated by a sign of recognition from the monarch, the Jansenists of Port Royal longed for and were elated by tangible evidence of God's favor (miracle de la sainte épine, etc.); and as the courtier lives in constant fear of not being noticed by the King, so Pascal is terrified by "le silence de ces espaces infinis." In the God of Pascal and the Jansenists, power and will have completely overshadowed love. This God is unmistakably Baroque. To be ignored by Him is to be in dis-grace and to sink, abandoned to oneself, into utter nothingness. The significance of the Jansenist attack on the Thomist doctrine of sufficient grace as well as of Arnauld’s at-
tack on frequent communion becomes apparent. "Turn ye unto me, saith the Lord of hosts, and I will turn unto you" (Zechariah, 1:3). The Pascalian and Jansenist position reduces me to nothing before the Lord. I may turn to Him and He may not turn to me. I may look and there will be only emptiness, I may hearken and there will be only silence. Vere tu es Deus absconditus. The awareness of himself as derelict, abandoned of God, is the deepest and most anguished experience of seventeenth-century man. The silence of God, that God on whom alone all his being rests, is the condition of seventeenth-century tragedy.

The comic equivalent of the silence of God is the indifference of the world. In the universe of comedy it is not God whose recognition of us has to be elicited and whose non-recognition of us reduces us to anguish and fear of being swallowed up in nothingness. The other becomes the God in whom all power is invested.

Corneille sous le masque de Molière is the title of a recent work that takes up once again Pierre Louys's attempt to show that Corneille was the author of Molière's comedies. More accurately we might argue that Molière's comedies are an unmasking of Corneille. The exploding of the Cornelian myth of the autonomous and proud hero leads directly to the comedy of Molière, on the one


7 Cf. on this topic J. D. Hubert, "L'Ecole des Femmes, tragédie burlesque," *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, 97, 1960, pp. 41-52; and P. H. Nurse, "The Role of Chrysalde in L'Ecole des Femmes," *Modern Language Review*, 51, 1961, pp. 167-71. Nurse points out that "even Chrysalde's long stoic-inspired discourse in Act IV on the importance of controlling the will can be justified for its esthetic impact in heightening the comedy, for it emphasises the basic comic incongruity between Arnolphe's assumed persona of a masterful mind, shaping his own destiny, and his real impotence in the face of adversity. It is highly significant in this respect that Molière puts into Arnolphe's mouth, at the end of Act II, a line taken from Corneille's play *Sertorius*:

*C'est assez.

Je suis maître, je parle: allez, obéissez.

Arnolphe is comic precisely because his 'Cornelian' postures are unmasked as false; the authoritarian masquerade collapses whenever it is put to the test, and he who preaches to Agnès an ascetic morale based on the repression of instinct can only grimace with helpless rage when Chrysalde later turns the argument of rational self-discipline against him."
hand, and to the tragedy of Racine, on the other, though of course it is not suggested that either Molière or even Racine deliberately set out to "debunk" Corneille.⁸

The order and harmony of the French classical universe is constantly being threatened by the tensions of unresolved conflict. The supreme art of the period rests on an infinitely subtle tension between form and content, and within the form itself, among its different elements. The finely molded Alexandrines of Racine express terrifying forces of passion and willfulness which constantly threaten but are always contained by the structure that at once conceals and manifests them. The brutal willfulness of Pyrrhus, the sadistic sexuality of Nero, the scheming and desperate power mania of Agrippine are concealed and at the same time revealed by the noble Alexandrines in which they find expression. The ceremonial of the verse, like the courtly ceremonial introduced into France by Louis XIV, conceals and reveals a secret world of anguish and violence. Even the wild cries of Hermione, the dark despair of Phèdre, the nihilistic voluntarism of Athalie do not break the formal pattern of the verse. Yet within this formal pattern, betraying what at first sight seems so well hidden, what movement and disturbance there is, what swellings and retractions, what swift rises and falls from overwhelming passion to constrained and icy

⁸On the contrary, Molière's predilection for Corneille is well known. It might in fact be appropriate to insist here that the discussion of Descartes and of Corneille (particularly of the latter) in the preceding pages was in no way intended to be exhaustive of those writers. Certain elements that are only implicit in the work of Corneille, for instance, were emphasized because of their relevance to the situations that I believe to be fundamental to Molière's comedy. A very serious distortion of Corneille's work as it is in itself inevitably results, however, from emphasizing elements in it that are significant above all retrospectively and in the light of subsequent developments. We should never overlook, for example, the historical interval between Corneille and Racine. Corneille in his time saw that the rebelliousness of the nobility was a mark of its weakness and inferiority as well of a certain heroism, and he enjoined on it the generosity of recognizing the monarch in whom the hope and the future greatness of France lay, while at the same time enjoining on the monarch that he show magnanimity toward his brave and rebellious subjects. The artist's vision, it seems to me, was correct. Corneille's royalism
politeness! The universe of Racine is the universe of the seventeenth-century Baroque, but it is a revelation as well as an expression of this universe, of the violence and imposture on which it is built. The quasi-divine mask of the great is removed and no illusions are left. Nero replaces Caesar Augustus as the type of the superior hero. No longer “masters of themselves as of the universe,” no longer presented as indifferent to and incommensurably superior to the universe that surrounds them, the heroes of Racine must extract by violence from their “subjects” the recognition of that power and absoluteness which they desire but do not possess. The Racinian passion is invariably the desire to obtain the recognition and submission of the other. This passion arises out of the indifference of the other and feeds on it. The celebrated ladder structure of *Andromaque* reveals this with striking clarity. Every one of the characters, with the exception of Andromaque who is at the top of the ladder, turned to her dead husband, seeks to attract the recognition of a being who ignores him. “Me cherchez vous, Madame,” asks Pyrrhus as Andromaque walks by without deigning to notice his presence. In the midst of an anguished confession, Hermione suddenly sees that Pyrrhus is not even listening to her, that his attention is elsewhere:

expresses the highest truth of his time: his presentation of the sovereign is not a lie, not at least in the earlier dramas. Indeed it is a mark of Corneille’s great honesty that he does reveal the ambiguity of motivation of a hero such as Auguste. (Does Auguste pardon out of inward générosité of soul or out of concern for his appearance and public image? The text itself is not clear on this score.) By Racine’s time the experience of absolutism and of courtly society was sufficient to make a deeper understanding of the nature of the monarch-idol and his relation to his worshipers possible. Racine would have fallen short of truthfulness if he had continued along the lines of Corneille. We cannot expect an author to have an experience and understanding of the world that the historical limitations of his existence inevitably place beyond his reach. We can expect him only to strive toward the greatest possible understanding of his world and its problems within the historical conditions of his experience. I am keenly aware that without the corrective of this historical perspective my own pages on Corneille might well give the impression that this great artist was in some sense more obtuse than his successors. This, I would like to emphasize, was not my intention.
Vous ne répondez point? Perfidie, je le voi,  
Tu comptes les moments que tu perds avec moi  
Ton coeur, impatient de revoir ta Troyenne,  
Ne souffre qu'à regret qu'un autre t'entretienne.  
Tu lui parles du coeur, tu la cherches des yeux.  

(Andromaque, IV, 5, 1375-79)

The “désir curieux” of the emperor Nero for the captive Junie is likewise excited by the latter’s indifference to him:

Quoi, Narcisse? tandis qu'il n'est point de Romaine  
Que mon amour n'honore et ne rende plus vaine,  
Qui dès qu'à ses regards elle ose se fier,  
Sur le coeur de César ne les vienne essayer:  
Seule dans son palais, la modeste Junie  
Regarde leurs honneurs comme une ignominie,  
Fuit, et ne daigne pas peut-être s'informer  
Si César est aimable, ou bien s'il sait aimer?  

(Britannicus, II, 2, 419-26)

She too passes by without noticing the emperor, full of thoughts other than the thought of him, while he, fascinated by this indifference to him, watches for her:

Cette nuit je l'ai vue arriver en ces lieux,  
Triste, levant au ciel des yeux mouillés de larmes...  

(Britannicus, II, 2, 386-87)

We are far from Corneille’s hero, lost in rapt contemplation of his own glory while the world looks on in irrelevant admiration. On the contrary, it is the hero who is here obsessed by the world and the world that is indifferent to him. Nero retires to his room, but he is haunted by the image of this girl who is hardly aware of his existence:

*As Andromaque looks up to Hector, ignoring Pyrrhus, Junie looks up to heaven, ignoring Nero.
Je l’ai laissé passer dans son appartement.
J’ai passé dans le mien. C’est là que, solitaire,
De son image en vain j’ai voulu me distraire.

(Britannicus, II, 2)

The humiliation of the hero is intensified when he finds himself the rival of his “inferior.” “Xipharès mon rival?” exclaims Mithridate (Mithridate, III, 4, 1009), as he ruminates on the relations of his wife and his son. “Dis-moi: Britannicus l’aime-t-il? (. . . ) Que dis-tu? Sur son cœur il aurait quelque empire?” Nero inquires (Britannicus, II, 2, 427, 435) and discovers himself the rival of his weak and despised half-brother. Hermione is the rival of a foreign slave, that Troyenne for whom, daughter of Helen and princess of Greece, she has such contempt.

The hero’s attempt to extract the other’s recognition of him fails to the very degree that it succeeds and reveals his utter impotence in the measure that it manifests his power. The lover finds himself recognized in the tears and anguish which he provokes in the beloved. Pyrrhus sees Andromaque seek him out and fall finally at his feet, but he cannot escape the fact that in recognizing him she at the same time affirms her withdrawal from him, for it is Astyanax-Hector, and not Pyrrhus himself who has provoked this recognition. “Ah! je n’en doute point: c’est votre époux, madame, / C’est Hector qui produit ce miracle en votre âme,” Céphise exclaims on learning of Andromaque’s decision to accept Pyrrhus’ terms (IV, 1). In Act II, scene 6 of Britannicus, Junie has to reject coldly the young man she loves in order to save his life. Nero’s blackmail of Junie repeats Pyrrhus’ blackmail of Andromaque. Nero watches the scene secretly: he can observe in the tortured eyes of Junie that constant presence of himself to her, even in physical absence, that marks her final recognition of him. At the same time, however, as the tears and suffering of Junie satisfy him at last that he exists for her, they also mark her rejection of him, a rejection that is now irrevocable. The victim recognizes her torturer
only to reject him, and the torturer must continue his torture in order to enjoy his recognition by his victim. Nero is not present in absence to Junie as Hector is present in absence to Andromaque. He has to watch her through a crack in the curtains and force the awareness of his presence on her. The furthest extreme of a passion that expresses itself in sadistic violence is murder, the annihilation of the beloved whose existence is a constant denial of the lover’s autonomy and absoluteness. In desperation Hermione plans the assassination of Pyrrhus, but her rapid volte-faces confirm the contradictoriness we mentioned earlier. The success of her enterprise must also be its failure, the exercise of her power must also be the avowal of her impotence. While violence and sadism, contradictory as they are, sustain the lover in a constant agony of frustration, death marks not only the annihilation of the beloved but the annihilation of the lover. Humiliated by the beloved’s refusal of him, the lover can still find himself reflected in the tears which he causes to flow from the eyes of the beloved. But once he has destroyed the beloved, the beloved has escaped him for ever. The lover finds himself reduced to nothing, unrecognized, bereft even of his anguish and frustration. Hermione expresses this absolute emptiness of all her being in the short, dying phrases of her final lines to Orestes:

Adieu. Tu peux partir. Je demeure en Epire:
Je renonce à la Grece, à Sparte, à son empire,
A toute ma famille;
(Andromaque, V, 4, 1561–63)

Hermione’s physical suicide simply incarnates the metaphysical suicide she had already committed when she had Pyrrhus assassinated. Filled with what Malraux calls the volonté de déité, the characters of these early tragedies of Racine transfer the divinity they desire for themselves to whoever, by resisting or ignoring them, proves his superiority to them. This “superior” being becomes
thereby the source of their own being. By killing Pyrrhus Hermione at the same time destroys herself. The independent and autonomous hero of Corneille is unmasked completely in this Racinian vision, for we are all seen to be dependent on others. The hero, the “superior being,” is himself never absolutely and objectively superior. Hermione herself invests Pyrrhus with his superiority. Objectively he is enslaved to Andromaque. The autonomy of the Cornelian hero and the admiration, of which he is for Corneille the just object, peter out in the plays of Racine in the impotent sadism of a Nero, the humiliating jealousy of a Roxane or a Mithridate, the pathetic despair of an Hermione. We may feel compassion for these victims of human vainglory; we cannot think of them as quasi-divine.

Goldmann has pointed out that in both Andromaque and Britannicus the tragic character is peripheral. He does not consider the worldly characters who occupy by far the greater part of these two early plays to be tragic. For reasons which will shortly become clear, I think Goldmann is right. The tragic character occupies the center of the Racinian stage for the first time with Bérénice and achieves fullest expression only in Phèdre. What we observe in the early plays is the unmasking of the heroic imposture. Racine moves only gradually toward the tragic catastrophe, which he realizes most successfully with Phèdre. The tragic character in Racine knows that all worldly desire is corrupt. He rejects the world in which the Neros and the Hermiones pursue their goals of desire and destruction. This world hardly even figures in Bérénice, for instance. It does not constitute a temptation for the tragic hero. What may tempt him is the achievement of value in the world. Desiring to fulfill their love in marriage, Titus and Bérénice are pursuing a goal which is a value in itself. Likewise, Phèdre chooses in Hippolyte a being who by his purity seems to her to offer the possibility of a true relation in the world. If Phèdre’s interest in

10 Lucien Goldmann’s brilliant study of Pascal and Racine, Le Dieu caché (Paris, 1955), will be alluded to frequently in the following pages.
him had been no more than a desire to overcome a resistance, as “love” is for the characters of the early plays and as it might, at first sight, appear to be for her, the discovery of a rival would have excited her passion still further. Instead, Phèdre’s discovery of Hippolyte’s love for Aricie dashes her hopes and reveals to her the enormity of her error and illusion. After an initial outburst of rage and jealousy, she immediately returns to consider herself:

Que fais-je? Où ma raison se va-t-elle égarer?
Moi jalouse! Et Thésée est celui que j’implore!

Misérable! et je vis? et je soutiens la vue
De ce sacré soleil dont je suis descendue!

(Phèdre, IV, 6, 1264–65, 1273–74)

Filled with horror at her faute, she sees herself condemned without hope of pardon:

Où me cacher? Fuyons dans la nuit infernale.
Mais que dis-je? Mon père y tient l’urne fatale;
Le sort, dit-on, l’a mise en ses sévères mains:
Minos juge aux enfers tous les pâles humains.
Ah! combien frémira son ombre épouvantée,
Lorsqu’il verra sa fille à ses yeux présentée,
Contrainte d’avouer tant de forfaits divers,
Et des crimes peut-être inconnus aux enfers!
Que diras-tu, mon père, à ce spectacle horrible?
Je crois voir de ta main tomber l’urne terrible;
Je crois te voir, cherchant un supplice nouveau,
Toi-même de ton sang devenir le bourreau.

(Phèdre, IV, 6, 1277–88)

Unlike the Cornelian hero, the Racinian hero is anything but master of himself and of the universe. He is weak, seeking at best the right and the just, listening for the voice of God, but not always
hearing it distinctly, nor sure that he will have the inward strength to execute what he takes to be God's will. Titus continually asks himself whether it is truly the will of the gods and of the people that he send Bérénice away:

Je viens percer un coeur qui m'adore, qui m'aime.
Et pourquoi le percer? Qui l'ordonne? Moi-même.
Car enfin Rome a-t-elle expliqué ses souhaits?
L'entendons-nous crier autour de ce palais?
Vois-je l'Etat penchant au bord du précipice?
Ne le puis-je sauver que par ce sacrifice?
Tout se tait; et moi seul, trop prompt à me troubler,
J'avance des malheurs que je puis reculer.
Et qui sait si, sensible aux vertus de la Reine,
Rome ne voudra point l'avouer pour Romaine?
Rome peut par son choix justifier le mien.

(Bérénice, IV, 4, 999–1009)

In Bérénice the word of the gods does come through clearly. Titus does not distort the signs he has received in an effort to bend them to his own will. The sacrifice of their happiness by Titus and Bérénice is not, however, as it is in Corneille, a triumph of human will over human passion, a drawing together of the entire personality in an act of will, an affirmation of self. On the contrary, it is a victory of divine will over human will, of piety over love. Far from affirming the unity of the personality, this victory tears it asunder in bitter anguish. For these two lovers there is no home and no repose apart from each other.

Depuis cinq ans entiers chaque jour le la vois,
Et crois toujours la voir pour la première fois,

says Titus simply (II, 2, 545–46). Stunned by the very thought of separation from her lover, Bérénice stretches out her hands toward him and asks:
Dans un mois, dans un an, comment souffrirons-nous,
Seigneur, que tant de mers me séparent de vous?
Que le jour recommence, et que le jour finisse,
Sans que jamais Titus puisse voir Bérénice,
Sans que de tout le jour je puisse voir Titus?

(IV, 5, 1115-18)

Bérénice ends with a victory, but a victory that is one of understanding, renunciation, and suffering, that shows the hero not in the light of regal glory and majesty, but in the heaviness and solitude of his heart.

To Phèdre the voice of God speaks as clearly. She bears from the beginning the full weight of the knowledge of her guilt. Even before she appears on the stage we learn from Théramène that she is

( . . . ) atteinte d’un mal qu’elle s’obstine à taire,
Lasse enfin d’elle-même et du jour qui l’éclaire

(Phèdre, I, 1, 45-46)

and her own first words are an avowal of her weakness and dereliction:

Je ne me soutiens plus: ma force m’abandonne.
Mes yeux sont éblouis du jour que je revoi,
Et mes genoux tremblants se dérobent sous moi.

(I, 3, 154-56)

With great delicacy of insight Goldmann draws attention to the stage direction that follows: “Elle s’assied.” Weary, sick at heart, oppressed with guilt and shame, Phèdre is the very opposite of the proud heroes of Corneille. Where they seek the full light of day and the admiring gaze of the universe, Phèdre cannot bear the light:

Dieux! que ne suis-je assise à l’ombre des forêts!

(I, 3, 176).
The report of Thésée’s death seems, however, to indicate that the gods do not frown on Phèdre’s love for her step-son. Titus in his weakness could speculate on the will of the gods, but there was nothing at all except the voice of his own desire to still the voice of conscience. With the report of Thésée’s death, the silence of the gods becomes terrifying. How to interpret this news? Does it mean that Phèdre can declare herself to Hippolyte, that she can legitimately seek to realize in the world the pure love for which she longs? The voice of Oenone, of convenience and everyday common-sense, the voice of a world ignorant of all piety and value provides an interpretation that seems to justify Phèdre’s love:

Vivez; vous n’avez plus de reproche à vous faire:
Votre flamme devient une flamme ordinaire.11
(I, 4, 350)

Phèdre weakens and succumbs to the temptation of Oenone. Constantly, however, she is reminded of her guilt, even though she is now embarked on a journey from which there is no going back. The humiliation she experiences at Hippolyte’s indifference to her is in itself a sign of her guilt:

J’ai dit ce que jamais on ne devoit entendre.
(III, 1, 742)

The awareness of guilt in these words overshadows the shame of pride.

The moment she allows the hope that she can reconcile justice and piety with her own desire to enter her heart, Phèdre finds herself surrounded by enigmatic silence. The gods no longer speak. All the signs become subject to endless interpretation, sources of innumerable errors. But this silence is one only for the heart that

11 Note the subtle and cruel irony of “flamme ordinaire.” The moment she tries to realize the pure love she envisages with Hippolyte, this love becomes impure and Phèdre’s “flamme” becomes a “flamme ordinaire.”
will not hear. In her innermost soul Phèdre knows that if she cannot read the signs or hear the word of the gods it is because she is listening to the voice of her own desire. In the great speech at the end of Act IV she asks her father's forgiveness for her sin. At the same time she ponders on the mystery of her fate. Why, she asks, was she abandoned by the gods? Why did they refuse her their clear guidance and the strength to resist the temptations of her own desire?

Pardonne. Un Dieu cruel a perdu ta famille;  
Reconnois sa vengeance aux fureurs de ta fille.  
Hélas! du crime affreux dont la honte me suit  
Jamais mon triste coeur n'a recueilli le fruit.  
Jusqu'au dernier soupir de malheurs poursuivie,  
Je rends dans les tourments une pénible vie.  

(IV, 6, 1289–94)

The end of every tragedy is a mystery. The tragic hero is at once the most sublime and the most wretched of men, chosen by the gods yet abandoned by them, constantly searching the heavens for a sign from them, and constantly confronted with blank silence. He cannot justify his sin; nor, however, can the world condemn it. Phèdre's repentance and Thésée's banal condemnation of her are separated by an abyss. No one can know what Phèdre's ultimate sentence will be. Certainly it is not for the world to pronounce it. Will she, having lost her life, find it again, and having gone to the end of the night, will she again come out into the light of the sun—that sun which never ceased to haunt her throughout her dark journey? Or will the gods execute the terrible sentence she foresaw with horror in the first act? Why are we so forsaken in our hour of need? Tragedy does not give the answers. It only raises the questions. All or nothing—for the tragic hero this is the only possible choice, and to choose otherwise is to deny his being. He cannot ask the question of the meaning and value of human life in terms of the inessential and the contingent. He can ask it only in the
most radical and absolute terms. Whatever the final answer for Phèdre, she alone in the play, wretched as she is, experiences the real mystery of existence, she alone lives the problem of man's fate. As Goldmann wrote at the end of his short essay on this play: “Pour les yeux essentiels de la divinité, le cadavre n’est pas derrière la scène, là où se trouve le corps de Phèdre, mais sur le devant, dans la personne du roi qui va régner et gouverner l’Etat” (Goldmann, op. cit., p. 440).

What lies behind the heroic self-sufficiency of the Cornelian supermen is revealed in those slaves of passion who inhabit Racine's earlier plays. In Phèdre we have his ultimate vision of the tragic plight even of the just and well-meaning man. Against Auguste's “Je suis maître de moi comme de l'univers,” we can set Phèdre's pitiful moan:

Moi régner! Moi ranger un Etat sous ma loi,
Quand ma foible raison ne règne plus sur moi!
(III, 1, 759–60)

It seemed to us that Goldmann was right to regard as tragic figures in Racine only those characters who are aware of a world of value and being beyond this world, who found their existence in a transcendence that is truly objective, even if invisible, and to exclude from the tragic universe those characters who spend their lives pursuing their own being in another whom they themselves have invested with absoluteness and divinity. The lives and passions of the latter dissolve in the futility of illusion, wasted effort, and pride, but the destiny of the tragic character is never futile. It raises the question of being and value, it does not deny being and value. No one feels that the passion of Oedipus or Lear or Phèdre is futile.

The silence of God, in which we find the foundation of the tragic consciousness of the seventeenth century, is precisely that which encloses the question of being and value. We have seen how this
silence of God is at the heart of Phèdre. Let us now examine how the indifference of the world is, as we argued earlier, the foundation of seventeenth-century comedy.

We tend, occasionally, to think that some of Molière’s comedies are gay and light-hearted, whereas others are more somber and ambiguous. A Jourdain or a Magdelon presents audiences with no problems, but an Alceste leaves them perplexed and uncertain. Jourdain and Magdelon are figures of unalloyed fun, according to this view, pure fools as anyone can easily discern; Alceste, on the other hand, does not seem very funny and to some he even seems almost tragic. Oddly enough, Molière’s contemporaries do not seem to have entertained these uncertainties. We hear, of course, of opposition to Dom Juan and to Tartuffe, but we know that there was also opposition to Les Précieuses ridicules and to L’Ecole des femmes. Most people appear to have laughed at all the comedies. As for ambiguity, there is, as we shall see, a good deal of it in Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme. A very sentimental reader might find Monsieur Jourdain almost as pathetic and as misunderstood as Alceste. Romantic interpretations of Le Misanthrope can easily be extended to all the plays. While it must be recognized that there is a difference between two types of comedy in Molière, between the comedies of the Bourgeois Gentilhomme type and the comedies of the Misanthrope type, if we may make a loose initial distinction, this difference cannot be perfunctorily attributed to the fact that one group is funnier than the other or less mysterious and ambiguous. We should rather try to elucidate it by examining the more or less complex form of the comic hero’s relation to the world.

The final judge and the transcendence to which the tragic hero

12 In Pirandello’s Henry IV, Molière’s Jourdain does indeed appear in a new and deliberately tragi-comic guise.
of Racine looks for the ground of his being and the value of his existence is God. The comic hero, on the other hand, looks to others to give him his value and his being. The sign of recognition that Phèdre expects from God, the Jourdains, the Cathoses, and the Alcestes expect from the world. Whereas one group of Molière’s characters make no attempt to conceal their idolatry, however, another group of characters affect to despise the idols whose recognition they desire, postulating instead their own superiority and setting themselves up as idols for others to worship.

With the notable exceptions of Dom Juan and Jupiter, the majority of Molière’s best known characters are bourgeois of one degree or another. Within this bourgeoisie it is nevertheless possible to distinguish an upper and a lower range. While Alceste obviously belongs to a social class very close to the nobility, perhaps even to a long established family of noblesse de robe, Jourdain is a very ordinary, if rather well-off, merchant, the son of a draper. Corresponding to this hierarchy of ranks, there is the hierarchy of Paris and the provinces. While it is not possible, as it would doubtless be in the work of later writers like Balzac or Stendhal, to identify absolutely attitudes and modes of being in Molière with social class, it is broadly speaking true to say that the “open” comic heroes, those who recognize their models and superiors without shame, are characters of the lower bourgeoisie and the provinces. The “closed” comic heroes, those whose resentment of their idols, precisely for being idols, leads them to deny their recognition of them, belong rather to the upper bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, to those groups that are close to social equality or who have social equality with their idols. The vanities and illusions of the first group, being openly avowed, have a quality of naïveté that makes comedies like Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme or Les Précieuses ridicules hilariously funny. It is not hard for us to discern and transcend the folly of Jourdain. The vanities and illusions of the second group are less easily discerned as comic, for they resemble those we ourselves conceal, those of “in-groups,” courtiers, artists, professional
people—“tous ces métiers dont le principal instrument est l’opinion que l’on a de soi-même, et dont la matière première est l’opinion que les autres ont de vous,” as Valéry describes them (Teste, “Lettre d’un ami,” ed. cit., p. 82).

In the first case the desire to be distinguished is a desire to be distinguished from one group by being recognized as a member of a superior group, the superiority of which the aspirant necessarily recognizes. “Mon Dieu! ma chère,” exclaims Cathos, “que ton père a la forme enfoncée dans la matière! que son intelligence est épaisse, et qu’il fait sombre dans son âme!” “Que veux-tu, ma chère,” Cathos answers contritely. “J’en suis en confusion pour lui. J’ai peine à me persuader que je puisse véritablement être sa fille, et je crois que quelque illustre aventure, un jour, me viendra développer une naissance plus illustre” (Précieuses, sc. 5). “Lorsque je hante la noblesse, je fais paraître mon jugement,” says Jourdain to his wife, “et cela est plus beau que de hanter votre bourgeoisie” (BG, III, 3). A little later he accuses his good wife of having “les sentiments d’un petit esprit, de vouloir demeurer toujours dans la bassesse” (BG, III, 12). There is nothing secret about the reverence these characters have for their idols, and they seek quite openly to elicit from their silent or masked or absent divinity the sign of recognition that for them is a sign of salvation. “Pour moi,” says Mascarille ironically, “je tiens que hors de Paris, il n’y a point de salut pour les honnêtes gens.” “C’est une vérité incontestable,” answers Cathos (Précieuses, sc. 9). “Est-ce que les gens de qualité apprennent aussi la musique?” asks Jourdain. “Oui, Monsieur,” says the Maître de Musique. “Je l’apprendrai donc,” Jourdain rejoins without hesitation (BG, I, 2).

More complex and less immediately comic in their desire to achieve distinction are those who will not share it with anybody, who refuse the models that everyone else accepts and who, far from recognizing their idols, go to great lengths to conceal their mediation by others. They make a point of loudly scorning the ways of the world, those very ways that a Jourdain and a Cathos revere so
unquestioningly. Madame Pernelle in *Tartuffe* refuses the courtesies of her daughter-in-law: “Ce sont (...) façons dont je n'ai pas besoin” (I, 1, 4). Harpagon likewise condemns the manners of the world. He reproaches his son with the very imitation that is the butt of Molière’s satire in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*: “Je vous l'ai dit cent fois, mon fils, toutes vos manières me déplaisent fort: vous donnez furieusement dans le marquis (...) Je voudrois bien savoir, sans parler du reste, à quoi servent tous ces rubans dont vous voilà lardé depuis les pieds jusqu'à la tête, et si une demi-douzaine d'aiguillettes ne suffit pas pour attacher un haut-de-chausses? Il est bien nécessaire d'employer de l'argent à des perruques, lorsque l'on peut porter des cheveux de son cru, qui ne coûtent rien” (*L’Avare*, I, 4). Arnolphe has his own taste in women and it is not that of everyone else:

Moi, j'irois me charger d'une spirituelle  
Qui ne parleroit rien que cercle et que ruelle,  
Qui de prose et de vers feroit de doux écrits,  
Et que visiteroient marquis et beaux esprits!  
(Ec. *femmes*, I, 1, 87–90)

Sganarelle, like Harpagon, refuses the fashions of his contemporaries. His brother, he complains, would have him *ape the manners* of the “jeunes muguets.” But he will have none of

(...) ces petits chapeaux  
Qui laissent éventer leurs débiles cerveaux,  
Et de ces blonds cheveux, de qui la vaste enflure  
Des visages humains offusque la figure.  
De ces petits pourpoints sous les bras se perdants,  
Et de ces grands collets, jusqu'au nombril pendants.  
De ces manches qu'à table on voit tâter les sauces,  
Et de ces cotillons appelés hauts-de-chausses.  
De ces souliers mignons, de rubans revêtus,  
Qui vous font ressembler à des pigeons pattus ... etc., etc.  
No, Sganarelle will follow his own fashion in complete indifference to everyone else—"Et qui me trouve mal, n'a qu'à fermer les yeux" (ibid., 74).

The rejection of society is not, clearly, confined to articles of clothing and a few superficial customs. It is the entire way of life of everybody else that these characters ostensibly reject. People enjoy company, entertainment, balls, receptions, conversations? Madame Pernelle will have none of them. On the contrary she will make a virtue of solitude, abstention, and even brusqueness. Money is spent on carriages, fine clothes, amusements? Harpagon will not spend it at all. Instead he will treasure and revere it for itself. Everybody wants an entertaining, witty, and sociable wife? Arnolphe and Sganarelle will choose a "bête," and they will value precisely that in her which nobody else seems to admire, her ignorance and simplicity. The world is full of flattery and soft with compromise? Alceste will be brusque, frank, and scrupulously uncompromising. Society observes certain codes of behavior, of decency, and of propriety? Dom Juan will flout them and will be blatantly indecent and immoral. These characters—Harpagon, Arnolphe, Sganarelle, Alceste, Dom Juan, Madame Pernelle, Orgon—refuse to recognize that they are mediated by others; the almost childlike guilelessness of Jourdain's fascination with the nobility gives way in them to a subtle concealment by the character of his true desires, and of their source. Far from recognizing their mediators, these characters pretend they have none. Several of them appear to be in thrall to idols; Orgon and Madame Pernelle to Tartuffe, Philaminte and her daughter to their Trissotin, Harpagon to his "casette." The last example reveals these idolatries for what they are, however. As we pointed out in our chapter on Tartuffe, Orgon is bent on using Tartuffe as much as Tartuffe is bent on using him. The femmes savantes, like the dévot, see in their idols an instrument for asserting their superiority to the world around them, and it is on this world that their eyes are really turned. "Nul n'aura de l'esprit hors nous et nos amis" declares Armande: "Nous chercherons partout
Likewise Organ sets himself up against society as the only true Christian in it. The function of Tartuffe is to guarantee Orgon’s superiority to everybody else. In the case of Harpagon the idolatry of the instrument has reached its climax in total alienation and fetishism. In all three plays the idol is used to assert an opposition to society, a distinction from it and a superiority to it. Philaminte and her daughters do not really care about science, Tartuffe and his mother do not really care about religion (both texts illustrate this amply), and Harpagon does not really care about wealth—on the contrary, his wealth is used to keep him poor. What these characters want above all is to be distinguished, but they refuse to adopt the usual method of social advancement and privilege, since this method offers only a relative superiority to others, whereas the superiority they desire is absolute. They are comic not only because there is a constant contradiction between what they are and what they affect to be, but because their attempt to transcend all social superiorities and to reach an absolute superiority misfires. La Cour et la ville will not be convinced that stringent devoutness or erudition are more desirable than social advantage and worldly success. They are no more envious of the spiritual insights of Orgon and the telescopes of Philaminte than they are of Harpagon’s beloved “cassette.” Philaminte, Orgon, and Harpagon do not see this of course. Harpagon imagines that everyone is after his cassette, that there is a vast plot to deprive him of this mark of his superiority. Likewise Orgon imagines that his whole family is plotting to remove Tartuffe out of jealousy. Arnolphe and Sganarelle, convinced that the eyes of the entire universe are upon them and that everybody desires to corrupt the virtuous young persons, in the possession of whom they find the mark of their superiority, shut them up and guard them as jealously as Harpagon guards his cassette.13 While

13 In the same way Rousseau believed, rightly or wrongly, that all his friends were trying to seduce Thérèse.
choosing to be different from everybody else, while turning away from what they castigate as the vain ambitions of the world in order to devote themselves to “authentic” values, these characters nevertheless have to believe that they are envied by everybody else. Thus while Orgon raves that the world in its corruption does not appreciate the saintliness of his Tartuffe, he also imagines that everyone is jealous of his special relation with Tartuffe; while Arnolphe prefers une bête, who will interest no one, to an elegant society girl who would be the object of everybody’s attention, he still imagines that the entire universe is pursuing his Agnès.

Underlying the apparent indifference of the Arnolphes and the Orgons there is in reality the same fascination with others that we find among the Jourdains or the Cathoses. Orgon could after all practice his devotions quietly, without ostentation. Arnolphe and Sganarelle could avoid being made cuckold by remaining bachelors. But they never entertain this notion. The true object of their craving is not a faithful wife—or in Orgon’s case salvation through Christ—but the recognition by others of their superiority. The goals which they choose to pursue are not after all pursued for themselves, nor do they themselves select them as they imagine they do. They are determined for them by their very opposition to society. Arnolphe and Sganarelle are not content to do without a wife; on the contrary; but she must be the opposite of all other wives. Orgon is not content to withdraw inwardly from public life; on the contrary, he continues to live a remarkably public life, but one which is the opposite of the life everyone else leads. Harpagon is not content to renounce material riches; he continues to pursue them but he gives them a meaning and a value absolutely opposed to the meaning and value they have for everyone else. All the posing of the Orgons and the Arnolphes and the Harpagons—though in this last instance it must be admitted that the pose has become truly the only reality of the man; Harpagon has so completely alienated himself that he can even run after his own body (cf. L’Avare, IV, 7)—cannot conceal that they are as
dependent on others and as mediated by them, whatever claims to independence they may make, as simple fools like Jourdain and Cathos or Magdelon. Their basic folly is the same and all their cleverness is used not to eradicate it, but to disguise it from themselves and others. This becomes particularly clear in La Comtesse d’Escarbagnas. At the end of this play the Countess, having failed to distinguish herself in her little provincial society by aping the noble ladies of the Court, decides to distinguish herself by inverting this imitation, by seeming to reject it in favor of a superiority all her own. She marries Monsieur Tibaudier just to prove her absolute superiority to everyone. “Oui, Monsieur Tibaudier,” she says, “Je vous épouse pour faire enrager tout le monde” (sc. 9). Unable to attract the gaze of the world by acting with it, the Countess resolves in desperation to attract the attention she craves by acting against it. The world and not Monsieur Tibaudier remains, however, the object of her fascination.

In fact, of course, the world is not the least bit enragé. The play closes with the Viscount’s ironical: “Souffrez, Madame, qu’en enragéant, nous puissions voir ici le reste du spectacle” (italics added). The countess has failed absolutely to fix the world’s attention on herself in the way she wanted. On the contrary, it has watched her as it would watch a comedy—which the Countess’ behavior in fact is—and it is now off to watch another comedy, another stage play. The truth is that it is not the comic heroes who are indifferent to the world, it is the world that is indifferent to them. It is not they who fascinate the world; they are fascinated by it.

The world, indeed, has to be forced by the hero to give him its attention. It is only when Harpagon tries to impose the rules of his crazy universe on others that they begin to be seriously concerned with him. It is only because Philaminte, Armande, and Béline are not content to be “blue-stockings” quietly on their own, but insist on organizing the lives of Chrysale and Henriette around their own obsessions that father and daughter find themselves
forced to take note of them. If Arnolphe had not forcibly em­
broiled Agnès in his plans, Horace and everyone else would simply
have regarded him as an eccentric mysogenist and would not have
given him a second thought. This seemingly inevitably imposition
of themselves on others is a revealing characteristic of the comic
heroes of Molière. It confirms that their professed indifference
to others is a sham. Far from seeking to live the good life himself,
Alceste is concerned only to impress on others that they are not
living it and that they do not have his superior moral vision. As
we pointed out in our chapter on Le Misanthrope, the hero’s
withdrawal to his desert at the end of the play is itself a spectacular
gesture, and it is for this reason one that will constantly have to
be renewed and revived. It is by no means final. Dom Juan is not
simply indifferent to the world: he has to arouse its wrath—and
thereby its attention—by perpetually flouting its rules, seducing
its virgins and wives, blaspheming against its God. The sadism of
Orgon has already been alluded to; it is in no way exceptional
in the work of Molière. Orgon’s relation to Mariane has its
counterpart in the relation of Harpagon to Elise or Cléante, of
Argan to Angélique or little Louison, of Monsieur Jourdain to
Lucile.

In the comedies of Molière the hero’s transcendence is the
world of others. The silence of this world is intolerable to him,
but he is obliged to force it to speak and recognize his existence.
In the early tragedies of Racine, as we have already suggested,
the hero’s transcendence is also the world of others and he too has
to resort to violence in order to have himself recognized. It is not
surprising, therefore, that sadism is a characteristic shared by
comic and tragic heroes alike. This parallel of the early Racinian
heroes and of the comic heroes of Molière can be pursued in some
detail.
Almost all Molière's comedies oppose ruse to ruse, hypocrisy to hypocrisy, violence to violence: how are we to choose between Jupiter and Amphitryon, Alceste and the two marquis. Orgon and Tartuffe, Dandin and Angélique, Argan and Béline? Likewise how are we to choose between Pyrrhus and Hermione or between Hermione and Orestes or between Nero and Agrippine? That salvation and purity are impossible in the world forms part of the tragic vision of Racine. In Molière also participation involves compromise. In a world in which fathers brutalize their children, mothers are jealous of their sons, guardians stultify their wards, no one who participates can be innocent. The only weapon against violence and blackmail is ruse and hypocrisy. "La sincérité souffre un peu au métier que je fais," Valère admits; "mais quand on a besoin des hommes il faut bien s’ajuster à eux; et puisqu’on ne saurait les gagner que par là, ce n’est pas la faute de ceux qui flattent mais de ceux qui veulent être flattés" (L’Avare, I, 1). Lamenting the fact that sons have to get into debt on account of “la maudite avarice des pères,” Cléante protests: “et on s’étonne après cela que les fils souhaitent qu’ils meurent” (L’Avare, II, 1). Covielle in Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme mocks his master for the naïve honesty of his dealings with Jourdain: “Ne voyez-vous pas qu’il est fou? et vous coûtait-il quelque chose de vous accommoder à ses chimères?” (BG, III, 13). In a world in which the only law is willfulness and the only authority is tyranny, no one can remain pure without becoming a victim. Elmire, Horace, and Valère do not seek out ruse and hypocrisy, but they cannot escape them either, for these are the instruments of survival. Even little Louison in Le Malade Imaginaire has to learn how to deal with her father’s tyranny and violence by cunning and deceit. Those who remain pure and innocent risk becoming victims, like Mariane in Tartuffe or Angélique in Le Malade Imaginaire, and if they escape this fate it is only because someone more energetic and less scrupulous has intervened in their behalf. Sometimes they do indeed become victims, as Alcmène does, and sometimes they
preserve their innocence through an enigmatic absence or abnegation of desire which places them outside the world, like Eliante in *Le Misanthrope* or Elvire in *Dom Juan*, after her conversion. These characters are as peripheral in Molière’s comedies as Racine’s Junie, whom Goldmann adjudges the sole tragic character in *Britannicus*. Goldmann saw—rightly it seems to me—that the *innocent stratagème* by which Andromaque hoped to foil Pyrrhus’ attempt at blackmail seriously compromises her tragic stature. A similar problem was encountered by Molière in *L’Ecole des femmes*, where Agnès has to be at the same time desiring, active, and innocent. If we look closely at the text, we find that Agnès never *consciously* disobeys Arnolphe. Both her desire for Horace and her active participation in the plot against Arnolphe are conceived entirely on the level of instinct. Only in this way could Molière preserve the innocence of his heroine, while at the same time allowing her to act in pursuit of her own desires.¹⁴

In both Molière’s comedies and Racine’s early tragedies the main characters are moved primarily by their desire to force the world to recognize them. In both, the instruments of this desire are imposture and sadism. In both, the heroes fail to make the world break its silence. Racine’s characters find themselves refused in the very suffering they inflict on those whose recognition they demand. The comic hero’s victims defend themselves against his tyranny by ruse and hypocrisy, and he thereby becomes for them not the transcendent subject of his intention but an object to be tricked and manipulated. The mock-recognition of Jourdain at the end of *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* or of Argan at the end of *Le Malade Imaginaire* has its counterpart in the mock recognition of Oreste by Hermione in *Andromaque* or in the scenes between Nero and Agrippine in *Britannicus*. If we look up the scale in *Andromaque* from Oreste to Andromaque herself we find that

¹⁴ This aspect of Agnès’ behavior was pointed out to me by Mr. Eugenio Donato in a paper he prepared for one of my graduate seminars. I am very happy to acknowledge my debt to him.
for every character the character above is a transcendent subject who is adored and yet at the same time resented precisely on account of this transcendence, which negates the transcendence that the idolator desires and claims for himself. If we look down the scale, we discover that for every character the character below is an object to be manipulated and used. The refusal of the “upper” character to recognize the “lower” one confirms the “lower” character in his adoration and at the same time intensifies his desire to reverse the positions. The same pattern is found in the comedies of Molière, though in less schematic form. The verbal battles that make up almost the whole of Andromaque have their counterpart in innumerable scenes in Molière’s comedies.

If we examine some of the structural elements of Andromaque and Britannicus in particular, it is impossible not to see in them the ingredients of comedy. The celebrated ladder structure of Andromaque, to which we have already alluded, is in fact a characteristically and traditionally comic one from Shakespeare to Marivaux. In As You Like It, the folly and illusion of love-vanity is emphasized by the travesties: Silvius loves Phebe who

35 In an interesting paper, “Tragische und komische Elemente in Racines ‘Andromaque’: eine Interpretation,” Forschungen zur romanischen Philologie, Heft 3, 1958, Harald Weinrich traces the history of the Liebeskette theme and shows that it is traditionally a comic one. Racine, however, “sucht die Tragödie. Trotz der latenten Komik des Handlungsschemas” (p. 13). Weinrich goes on to examine how Racine succeeded, in his view, in shaping this latently comic material into a tragedy. According to Weinrich, the latent comedy in the situation serves to heighten the tragic effect. I quote from p. 16 of his paper, where he discusses the character of Hermione in particular: “Die stolze Helenatochter, ( . . . ) von einem Verschmahten verschmaht, stürzt in einem Abgrund der Schmach. Selbst bei Orest, den sie ihrerseits verschmäht, muss sie ein schadenfrohes Lachen befürchten:

Quelle honte pour moi, quel triomphe pour lui
De voir mon infortune égaler son ennui!
Est-ce là, dira-t-il, cette fière Hermione?
Elle me dédaignait; un autre l’abandonnait (II, 1)

Hier ist wieder eine Stelle, an der die Liebeskette deutlich sichtbar wird. Die Liebeskette mit ihrer immanenten Komik. Denn in dieser Szene ist das Komische in der Form der Lächerlichkeit, ja der Schmach für Hermione gegenwärtig. Alle Komik der Liebeskette stürzt als Schmach auf sie ein. So
loves Rosalind—Ganymede who loves "no woman," but Orlando. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the illusory prestige of the beloved idol is delightfully exposed by means of the spell which inverts all the previous relations while maintaining and even intensifying the passions that inform them. Helena loves Demetrius who loves Hermia who loves and is loved by Lysander. Under the spell the situation alters: Hermia loves Lysander who loves Helena who loves and is loved by Demetrius. The meaning of the comedy is revealed by the infatuation of Titania, the Queen of the Fairies, for Bottom, the weaver, in his ass's costume. The same structure appears again, much later, in Proust: Saint-Loup loves Rachel who loves the polo player who loves André. (Note

steht sie nun im Zentrum der Tragik, einer Tragik als Schmach. Sie ruft Pyrrhus zu:

*Vous veniez de mon front observer la pâleur,*
*Pour aller dans ses bras rire de ma douleur.* (IV, 5)

Diese Worte stehen in dem berühmten *couplet d'ironie*, dem tragischen Höhepunkt des Stückes. Hier ist nicht nur das Schicksal einer Unglücklichen, hier wird die Tragik potenziert durch den ungehemmten Ausbruch der Komik der Liebeskette in Gestalt der Schmach für Hermione, nicht nur verschmäht, sondern auch noch verlacht zu werden. Auf dieses Ridikulum antwortet Hermione dann nur noch mit einem abgrundtiefen Hass gegen alle, von denen sie sich verlacht wähnt, gegen Andromache, Orest und den lebenden Pyrrhus.” Weinrich concludes that Racine had to struggle to avoid the comic implications of his material (“die drohende Komik zurückzudrängen”) but that he succeeded on the whole in doing this and that one of the means he employed was indeed the utilization of the comic material for the purposes of tragedy. “Die 'Andromaque' ist keine Tragikomödie, sondern eine Tragödie. Und sie ist so tragisch, weil sie so leicht komisch hätte werden können” (p. 18).

Weinrich's argument is extraordinarily interesting and suggestive. One might well wonder, however, whether *Tragik als Schmach* leaves tragedy with any real or objective meaning. What, in fact, has objectively changed to transform a comic situation into a tragic one? Surely it is only that the subjective anguish of the character or characters has been taken seriously and invested by the author with a dignity that it does not have in comedy, since the comic writer takes great care to point out the grotesque discrepancy between objective reality and subjective thoughts and emotions. (It is unlikely, in fact, that Pyrrhus in the arms of Andromaque would give Hermione a thought, not even to laugh at her). The *peur du ridicule* is indeed a highly serious matter and a cause of grave concern—to the courtier. Since his entire existence is a social one and all his being is at the mercy of his worldly judges, the fear of ridicule can be truly the most terrible and powerful emotion he feels.
how the travesty element in Shakespeare is taken up again by Proust in the last of these relations. The meaning of all the infatuations is revealed by the homosexual relation that crowns them just as the key to all the infatuations in A Midsummer Night's Dream lies in Titania's love for an ass, and not even a real one at that!) Without making his situation blatantly comic, Proust does emphasize the sameness of these enslavements. They constitute a tiresome ronde of futility and illusion. If we do not laugh, we can at least smile at the stupidity and blindness of these characters as they pursue the will o' the wisps that they have themselves invested with reality. Oreste loves Hermione, who ignores him and loves Pyrrhus, who ignores her and loves Andromaque, who ignores him and remains faithful to her dead husband. The situation is strikingly similar to those we find in Shakespeare or Proust, and Goldmann has rightly underlined the utter futility and inauthenticity of all these characters:

Avec Hermione, Oreste, Pyrrhus, nous sommes dans le monde de la fausse conscience, du bavardage. Les paroles ne signifient jamais ce qu’elles disent; ce ne sont pas des moyens d’exprimer l’essence intérieure et authentique de celui qui les prononce, mais des instruments qu’il emploie pour tromper les autres et se tromper lui-même. C’est le monde faux et sauvage de la non-essentialité, de la différence entre l’essence et l’apparence (op. cit., p. 356).

Now this world is precisely the world of the comedies of Molière, a world of vain words and names and appearances, a world in which the characters pursue empty titles and hollow forms.

Instead of bringing out the sameness of the passions in Andromaque, Racine expends all his talent on particularizing them, on giving a highly individual and particular physiognomy to his characters. To the extent that he succeeds, he saves his play from degenerating into a ridiculous and empty ballet. Certain criticisms of the sameness of the characters suggest, however, that he did not succeed fully. Despite all Racine’s talent, Oreste, Hermione,
and Pyrrhus remain as much the same basic character as Monsieur Jourdain, Cathos, Philaminte, or Argan. Their infatuations, their constant \textit{volte-faces}, their interminable play-acting for themselves as well as for others are profoundly ignoble. Only the passion and solemnity of the verse saves them, but at some cost to the play, for the contrast between the noble lines and the ignoble and inauthentic thoughts and feelings they express sometimes brings the play itself to the brink of ridicule. (Stage performances reveal this more clearly than a reading of the text.) The imperfection of this play must be attributed to a lack of vision on the part of Racine himself. It was certainly not technical or poetic talent that he stood in need of. He simply did not see that the situation he was trying to present as tragic was in its deepest nature not tragic, for there is no tragedy of vanity.

The \textit{coquetterie vertueuse} of Andromaque substantiates our judgment of this play. Lemaitre was quite right to raise the issue of Andromaque's relation to Pyrrhus and of her \textit{innocent stratagème}.\textsuperscript{16} Let us, however, disregard the rather wild theory according to which Andromaque is actually attracted to Pyrrhus. If we were to entertain it, the comic structure of the play would be complete and the entire work would be irremediably frivolous.\textsuperscript{17} Let us rather consider Andromaque's behavior in the way Goldmann and most critics suggest, as an attempt to beat the world at its own game and so preserve both her son and her fidelity to her husband. Goldmann argues, once again I think quite rightly, that the \textit{stratagème} of Andromaque seriously weakens her tragic stature, transforming her rather into the heroine of a \textit{drama}. "Si Andromaque devait rester une tragédie," he writes, "il fallait, à

\textsuperscript{16} Cf. also Voltaire's comment that Racine's tragedy is "un peu affaiblie par quelques scènes de coquetterie et d'amour, plus dignes de Térence que de Sophocle" ("Remarques sur le troisième discours du poème dramatique" (of Corneille), \textit{Oeuvres}, ed. Beuchot, 36, p. 520).

\textsuperscript{17} It is well known that Racine's audience laughed when Pyrrhus uttered the lines

\textit{Crois-tu, si je l'épouse,  
Qu'Andromaque en son cœur n'en sera pas jalouse?}
partir de la scène 4, la traiter en coupable qui finit comme Phèdre par reconnaître sa faute” (op. cit., p. 358). The use of ruse against the world of ruse is characteristic, as we have seen, of the world of Molière’s comedy. The dissociation of ends and means is a comic and dramatic motif, however, never a tragic one.

The structure of Britannicus recalls in many respects that of Amphitryon. The great hero, the proud and mighty monarch-God, is fascinated by the slip of a subject who ignores him and prefers a mere mortal. In the agony of his vanity he becomes the slave of his subject and finds himself obliged to descend from his lofty superiority in order to trick and confound—or murder—his humble rival. In Britannicus, as in Andromaque, the tragic character—or rather the only character who has any authenticity at all and is susceptible of tragic treatment—is peripheral. Nero, Agrippine, and Narcisse occupy the center of the play, just as Jupiter and Amphitryon occupy the center of Molière’s comedy. Junie is only their victim, as Alcmène is the victim of the protagonists of the comedy.

We might well wonder how a structure which in the work of Molière is comic acquires a tragic meaning in the work of Racine. Even if we argue that these early plays of Racine are not truly tragic, we must at least recognize that they are dramas, and the question remains: Why are they not comedies? The answer may be sought, partly at least, in the relation of each of the two authors to the society in which he lived.

Racine was born into a typical family of robins. His grandfather was comptroller of the grenier à sel at La Ferté-Milon, his father was greffier du grenier à sel and procureur au bailliage in the same town. On his mother’s side, the family held similar positions in the towns of Picardy—Soissons, Crépy-en-Valois, Château-Thierry. Both families were completely won over to Port-

38 The problem of Andromaque has been recognized by most academic critics. Mornet judges it “encore une pièce romantique” (D. Mornet, Jean Racine [Paris, 1943], p. 108).
Royal and the Jansenists. It was in the home of the Vitarts,
relations of the Racines, that Lancelot and later Singlin found
refuge from the persecutions of which Port-Royal was inter­
mittently the object. The family seems to have fallen on hard
times, for there was no fortune and no situation for the young
Racine. He had to make his own way. He first tried to do so
without success through his maternal uncle Antoine Sconin,
prior of the chanoines réformés of the cathedral church of Uzès.
While Mornet leads one to believe that Racine knocked at his
uncle’s door on the instigation of his family, Goldmann suggests
that this attempt to make his fortune in the church by drawing
on the influence and patronage of his uncle represented a serious
betrayal by Racine of one of the cardinal points of Jansenist
doctrine, a betrayal which may well have caused him considerable
anxiety, especially when it failed to produce any results. “La
réaction la plus naturelle à cet état de choses,” writes Goldmann,
“était un ensemble de sentiments ambivalents, aussi bien à
l’égard de Port-Royal qu’à l’égard du ‘monde’” (op. cit., p. 448).
The failure of the Uzès venture, however he regarded it, did not
cause Racine to withdraw from the world. On the contrary, it
propelled him further into it. He sought to win his way more
directly by acquiring a reputation for wit and by flattering the
monarch (La Nymphe de la Seine, 1660; Ode sur la convalescence
du roi, Renommée aux Muses, 1663). This time he succeeded.
He received money from the King’s chests and by 1663 he was
being admitted to the lever du roi. The first plays—La Thébaïde
(1664) and Alexandre (1665)—marked a complete breach with
his Jansenist family background and education, and a total ad­
herence to the world and the values of the Court. His family and
his teachers were horrified. His aunt Agnès de Saint-Thècle Racine
wrote in 1663 conjuring her cher neveu “d’avoir pitié de votre
âme, et de rentrer dans votre coeur, pour y considérer sérieusement
dans quel abîme vous vous êtes jeté (….) Vous ne devez penser
à nous venir voir,” she adds; “car vous savez bien que je ne
pourrois pas vous parler, vous sachant dans une état si déplorable et si contraire au christianisme” (Oeuvres de Racine, Les Grands Ecrivains de France, Vol. VI, pp. 521-23). Racine did not give up the court. Saint-Simon and Dangeau wrote of him as an assiduous and successful courtier. Spanheim said that the King liked him to read to him at his bedside. He was permitted to have the armorial bearings to which the family laid claim—the cygne (cyne), minus the rat!—painted on his carriage. When the King suffered from insomnia, he asked that Monsieur Racine sleep in his bedroom. He was involved in the biggest scandal of Louis XIV’s court, the affaire des poisons and la Voisin, in her deposition, accused him of having poisoned Mademoiselle Du Parc. Racine remained a courtier all his life.

At the same time there is no reason to doubt that Racine had a “bad conscience,” as Goldmann puts it, about Port-Royal and the Jansenists. Even Mornet who is unfavorable to the idea of a Jansenist Racine admits that “il resta lié d’une étroite affection avec ses amis jansénistes et (. . .) il mit un réel courage à les aider, à les défendre dans les persécutions qui les poursuivaient avec un acharnement sans cesse plus impitoyable” (Mornet, op. cit., p. 204). His final disgrace seems to have been provoked by some act in which he defended Port-Royal and criticized the monarchy.

The case of Racine is not untypical. The Jansenism of his family is fairly characteristic of many families of roblins at the time, as Goldmann has abundantly demonstrated. Goldmann cites several cases of the dissatisfaction of the roblins at the progressive diminution of their rights and privileges in favor of the royal officers. Even a non-Jansenist like Omer Talon seems to sympathize with the reaction of a Premier Président du Parlement at a lit de justice where the King, contrary to all precedent, took the votes of the presidents of the Parlement after those of the princes and cardinals: “M. le Premier Président . . . avoit été si fort surpris . . . qu’il fut sur le point de supplier le Roi de le décharger de sa charge, et lui permettre de se retirer” (quoted by
Goldmann's findings are by no means isolated. Individual studies of particular provinces, such as Burgundy, furnish similar evidence of the dissatisfaction of the *robins*, of their resentment and their impotent criticism of the monarchy, on which, despite all their discontents, they knew that they depended utterly (cf. G. Roupnel, *La Ville et la campagne au XVII siècle; étude sur les populations du pays dijonnais* [Paris, 1955]). “L’État monarchique dont ils (les robins) s’éloignaient progressivement sur le plan idéologique et politique,” writes Goldmann, “constituait néanmoins le fondement économique de leur existence en tant qu’officiers, et membres des Cours souveraines. D’où cette situation paradoxale par excellence (…) d’un mécontentement et d’un éloignement par rapport à une forme d’État—la monarchie absolue—dont on ne peut en aucun cas vouloir la disparition ou même la transformation radicale. Situation paradoxale qui s’est trouvée encore renforcée par une mesure géniale de Henri IV, la Paulette qui, d’une part, renforçait la situation sociale et économique des officiers en augmentant considérablement la valeur de leurs offices qu’elle transformait en biens patrimoniaux, et d’autre part rendait les officiers bien plus dépendants d’une monarchie qui agitait en permanence le spectre du refus de renouveler le droit de l’annuel” (p. 133).

It is in this situation that Goldmann sees the “infrastructure” of Pascal’s *Penseées* and of *Phèdre*.

The position of Racine was even more acutely contradictory than that of the *robins* who continued to hold office in the provincial cities or who, in the only gesture of revolt that was open to them, retired to Port-Royal. Racine had to bear all the burden of an ambiguous existence in the very heart of the Court itself. By birth, by education, by religious conviction, he was deeply opposed to the life he was leading; but he was ambitious and he wanted to make his way. He must often have thought in the midst of his flatteries and intrigues of the lessons he had learned in his youth from his aunt, from his grandmother, and from his Jansenist
teachers. He must have been deeply conscious of his own degradation. And at the same time he was so intimately involved in the life of the Court that he must have experienced intensely all the anguish of fear and vanity that the Jansenist in him condemned and recognized as sinful. In his life Racine never gave up the world of the Court, but his work is a growing rejection of it. He presents the strange picture of a consummate courtier whose literary production is a progressive revelation of the willfulness, the vanity, the cruelty, and the futility of Court life.

Racine's own involvement in the life of the Court, his own experience of pride and vanity, his own desire to conquer, and his own fear of being rejected undoubtedly led him to give to the intrigues of the Court and to the anguish of the courtier a prestige and a dignity which they would not have had for him had he been able to distance himself from the Court and from himself. It was not only the lords and ladies of Louis XIV's Court who saw themselves reflected in an Hermione or an Oreste, it was Racine himself. Even while one part of him condemned and rejected the entire mode of existence represented by characters of this kind, his own experience of it was too intense and real, and the importance he himself attached to the recognition of the Court was too great for him to see the futility of the fears, desires, and pretenses of his princes and princesses. For this reason his early plays present the strange combination, to which we have already drawn attention, of a comic structure and a tragic content. This comic structure is the structure of the Court, from which Racine was able to free himself only slowly and painfully. The Court in Andromaque and Britannicus occupies the center of the stage while the characters we defined as tragic stand on the periphery. In the course of Racine's literary development, however, as has been pointed out, the Court came to occupy a more and more peripheral position, to assume more and more the character of inessentiality, while the tragic character moved more and more toward the center. With Phèdre this process has been completed.
The long silence that followed *Phèdre* is not an accident. Having written it, Racine had achieved both his own personal liberation and the most perfect expression of his tragic vision.

The development of Racine’s theatre gives us a clue to the real meaning of his earlier plays. In fact they do not deal with the same material as the comedies of Molière. The Court is rarely at the center of Molière’s work. The comedies almost always deal with what is below it or anterior to it. Usually Molière’s perspective—that of honnêteté—is equated with that of the Court. The Court is mirrored in the comedies only to the degree that it failed to live up to its own theoretical ideal of honnêteté.

The difference between Racine’s treatment of the theme of rivalry and Molière’s treatment of it illustrates that while Racine’s early “tragedies” are discoveries of the actual futility of the Court, Molière’s comedies are mockeries of that which no one in the society of *la Cour et la Ville* could take seriously any more—the pretensions of provincial noblemen, the excesses of learned ladies, the vanity of wealthy merchants. In *Amphitryon* and in *Dom Juan* the hero’s desire is inspired by a rival who is his inferior. Jupiter desires Alemène because he wants to win her from Amphitryon; Dom Juan desires the young woman of whom he tells Sganarelle because he is jealous of her innocuous and quite ordinary lover. In both cases the “superior” character is recognized as dependent on the “inferior” one, and in this way his claim to superiority is exposed and laughed out of court. In Racine the rivalry situation is less clear. Racine had to discover weaknesses which were not generally recognized. The strong and well-established thus discover that they have rivals in the weak and dispossessed, and the audience shares in this discovery. Thus Hermione is confronted with the rivalry of the despised and captive “Troyenne”; Nero finds out that Britannicus is his rival for Junie’s favors; Mithridate learns that his rival is his son Xipharès.

The obvious fascination that the Court exercised on the robin and even, one suspects, on many Jansenists, makes their rejection
of it suspect. The dissatisfaction of the robins cannot be the cause, it can only be the condition of a tragic vision of the world. What this dissatisfaction causes is resentment, and the resentful robin, while rejecting the Court, is constantly obsessed by it. Alceste, not Phèdre, incarnates this figure. Racine's own development as a dramatist of truly tragic calibre required that he transcend a vision of the world caused by his experience of pride and humiliation and that he attain a superior vision, of which this experience was no doubt the condition, but in which it had been understood and overcome. Before Bérénice this has not happened. The opposition of Andromaque or of Junie and the world in Andromaque and Britannicus is too stark, too violent to be truly tragic; and the predominant role played by the world in these early plays, as well as the strange prestige with which it is invested, demonstrates amply that the author himself was still far more deeply concerned with the world of men than with the world of God. Junie may raise her eyes to heaven, but Racine himself, one feels, saw rather with the eyes of Narcisse than with those of the heroine.

Of the life of Molière we know little. The traditional biography includes many details which modern scholars like Michaut have doubted or rejected as patently false. We do know, however, that Molière's father, Jean Poquelin, purchased the charge of tapissier ordinaire du roi from his brother Nicolas in 1631 (cf. Eudoxe Soulé, Recherches sur Molière [Paris, 1863], p. 13). Jean Poquelin, of whose marriage with Marie Cressé, the daughter of a marchand tapisser, bourgeois de Paris, Molière was the first child, had been apprenticed by his father, Jean Poquelin, to a certain Dominique Trubert, maître tapisser à Paris, "demeurant rue Saint Denis" (v. Elizabeth Maxfield Miller, "A document of April 12, 1672, signed by Molière," Romanic Review, 47, 1956, pp. 166-73). Molière's family background is thus one of successful and well-to-do artisan-merchants. The list of witnesses of the marriage of Molière's father to Marie Cressé gives a good idea of the kind of milieu from which the playwright emerged. The contract, re-
produced in full by Soulé, mentions among others “Daniel Crespy, marchand plumassier, bourgeois de Paris, oncle maternel; Toussaint Perier, marchand linger à Paris, beau-frère à cause de sa femme; honorable homme Marin Gamard, maître tailleur d’habit à Paris, aussi beau-frère à cause de sa femme; ( . . . ) Claude le Vasseur, veuve de feu Jean Mazuel, vivant violon ordinaire du Roi; ( . . . ) honorable homme Jean Autissier, juré du Roi en œuvres de maçonnerie, oncle maternel à cause de sa femme; Noel Mestayer, marchand bonnetier à Paris . . .” Molière’s brother Jean, associated in business with his father, shared the title of tapissier du roi with him on Molière’s abandoning it in 1643. On the death of his brother in 1660, Molière again took over the title, which he retained after the death of his father in 1669. Jal recounts that on the playwright’s own death his bier was “couverte du poelle des tapisseurs.” Jal also explains briefly what the functions and privileges of the tapisseurs du roi were: “Ils faisaient les meubles du Roi, avaient soin du mobilier et faisaient le lit de Sa Maj. au pied, quand le valet de chambre ordinaire le faisait à la tête. Leurs gages étaient de 300 livres auxquelles se joignaient 37 l. 10 s. de récompense. A cela s’ajoutaient tous les privilèges accordés aux commensaux de la maison du Roi. Les valets de chambre tapisseries et autres avaient le titre d’Ecuyer.” In addition to their connection with the royal household, of course, the Poquelins continued to conduct their own business affairs. In 1633, two years after purchasing the charge of tapissier du Roi from his brother, Jean Poquelin the elder bought a house situated “sous les piliers des halles, devant le pilori” (Soulé, p. 148). The family business was conducted from this house. Auguste Baluffe (Autour de Molière [Paris, 1889]) claims that the clientele of Jean Poquelin included several of the most noble families in France. There is still some doubt as to the relations, personal and financial, of Molière and his father. Soulé believed that Poquelin senior quareled with his son over his theatrical career and refused him all financial aid. Auguste
Baluffe took quite the opposite point of view, claiming on the basis of the *Elomire Hypocondre*, which shows the entire Poquelin family present at the early performances of the Illustre-Théâtre, that Poquelin senior did not object to his son’s theatrical ventures and that he constantly provided him with financial support. Most recently Miss Miller has found a document substantiating what Soulé had already argued, namely that far from Poquelin senior’s helping his son financially, the boot was on the other foot. According to Miss Miller, Poquelin’s business activities must have suffered a set-back, for his son was making him loans in the 60’s, using his friend the physicist and mathematician Rohault as a blind, in order to spare his father’s feelings. Loiselet (*De quoi vivait Molière* [Paris, 1950], p. 79) supports this view. If it is correct, it suggests that Poquelin senior had criticized his son and had not approved of his choice of career—hence the delicacy with which Molière helped his father—though it also indicates that the relations of father and son were by no means as bad as some of Molière’s more Romantic biographers have believed.

The many problems and obscurities in Molière’s biography need not detain us here. It is enough for us to have established what his family background was. There is nothing in it that resembles the pinched moralism, resentment, and pride that we find in Racine’s. There were doubtless occasions when the Poquelins experienced something of Dimanche’s exasperation at the charming and condescending evasiveness of noble clients who would not pay their bills, but there is no reason to suppose that they entertained any resentment of the King himself. As respected and respectable artisans and merchants they had none of the courtier’s stifled jealousy of the monarch on whom he is dependent for every advancement and distinction, and whose superiority he at once recognizes and denies. The Poquelin family’s relations with the royal household were helpful to them both financially and socially. (Molière’s daughter Madeleine was to marry an impoverished gentleman, Claude de Rachel de Montalan, and it is interesting
to compare the witnesses to this marriage contract, all highly placed or noble persons, with the witnesses to the marriage contract of Poquelin senior and Marie Cressé—cf. Soulié, pp. 327-30.) They had no cause to deny their indebtedness or to resent it.

Molière’s own relation to King and Court was as different from Racine’s as that of the social groups from which they emerged. Racine felt very intensely that his renown as an author—the very means he had used to launch himself on a courtly career—was a handicap to him as a man of the world. “Croyez-moi,” he admonished his son Jean-Baptiste in 1694, “quand vous saurez parler de comédies et de romans, vous n’en serez guère plus avancé pour le monde et ce ne sera pas par cet endroit-là que vous serez le plus estime” (Oeuvres de Racine, ed. cit. Vol. VII, p. 142). Racine’s literary productions, especially in the earlier period of his career at Court, thus express an ambiguous attitude to the Court: desire and rejection, admiration and resentment, awe and condemnation. Like Racine, Molière cut his links with his social and family background. But unlike Racine he had no courtly aspirations. To the end of his life he bore the title tapissier du roi, and it was as an actor and playwright that he sought the favor of the King. He was an actor-author, not a courtier-author. He did not leave one world in order to seek entry into another; on the contrary, he chose to belong to no world, to be an outsider, as possibly all actors must be and as the seventeenth century regarded them officially. Certainly he had to please people and make them laugh; and not only his livelihood but the very possibility of having his works performed depended on his pleasing the great and the powerful. Like Shakespeare’s jesters or like the servants in his own comedies, he maintained, as a person, a degree of freedom from his patrons that the courtier does not easily have, but he was as subject as Shakespeare’s jesters and his own servants to the caprices and susceptibilities of a powerful and imperious public. “Et pensez-vous que ce soit une petite affaire que d’exposer quelque chose de comique devant une assemblée comme celle-ci,
que d'entreprendre de faire rire des personnes qui nous impriment le respect et ne rient que quand ils veulent?” he cries in \textit{L'Impromptu de Versailles} (sc. 1). Molière did run into a great deal of trouble with influential groups at Court: this story is too well known to bear retelling. One can imagine that he often felt bitterly resentful of his dependence on favors which could be withdrawn at any moment as the result of the pressure and the intrigues of men of lesser intellect but higher station than he. He must first have heard in his own heart many of the lines spoken by his servants or by disgruntled heroes like Alceste and Arnolphe. But Molière transcended even his own resentment. For as an actor Molière had constantly to stand back from himself, to transcend every part and every pose. It was his very business to see himself as well as others, to be aware of himself as an actor, and to recognize the determining role and importance of the public, of the world of others.

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The comedy of a situation is always perceived from a vantage point that is superior to that situation. Comedy always implies transcendence. It is from the point of view of \textit{la Cour et la Ville} that most of Molière's comedies must, in the first instance at least, be evaluated. From this vantage point the vanity and folly of all that is below can be easily perceived, the subtle posing of an Alceste as well as the more straightforward imposture of a Monsieur Jourdain. All who turn away from King and Court are seen to be ridiculous. Argan fawning on his doctors, Dandin aspiring to the dizzy heights of Sotenville, Orgon worshipping his Tartuffe, Philaminte enthusing over her Vadius, have each and every one chosen a false exemplar, the only true exemplars being the King, the Court, and the \textit{honnêtes gens}. Likewise the Sotenvilles or the Countess d'Escarbagnas are ridiculous because they turn their gaze downward instead of upward, seeking recognition by their
inferiors rather than by their superiors and thus putting themselves on the same level as their inferiors. None of Molière’s comic characters escapes some form of vanity, all seek to be recognized by someone. The universe of comedy is distinguished by its peculiarity, its self-sufficiency. Dandin and the Sotenvilles, Argan and his doctors, Jourdain and his teachers, Chrysale’s womenfolk and their scholars and poets all constitute worlds on their own in which the play of vanity and folly is obvious because it is apprehended by the audience from beyond and above. There is a certain real sense in the implication at the end of Tartuffe that the King perceives all imposture and unmasks all fraudulence, for indeed it is from the vantage point of superiority that the petty strutting and posturing of those who do not recognize their own reality can be discerned. From an inferior position this is not possible. Thus Clitandre can see the folly and vanity of the Sotenvilles as well as the folly and vanity of Dandin, but Dandin himself is no more able to distinguish the hollowness of his idols than Jourdain can see that of his Grand Turc. In so far as a reader or an audience is unable to rise above the comic hero—which is what happened to the précieuses, the femmes savantes, and the dévots of Molière’s own time, which is what happened also to Rousseau and to many modern audiences with respect to Alceste—his deeply comic nature will not be apprehended and only superficially comic elements will be appreciated. There will likewise be uncertainty if the audience is so unsure of its own social coherence that it can adopt the superior vantage point only intermittently, sympathizing at other times with the hero against society. The ambiguity that is attributed to the comedies in these circumstances I would characterize as Romantic ambiguity. Molière was himself deeply familiar with it, but his comedy is achieved precisely in the transcendence of it. The real ambiguity in Molière does not stem from uncertainty as to whether the social or the individual vantage point should be adopted, but from the problematic relation of the ideal of honnêteté to the world of the
Court. In those comedies that deal with provincials or petty noblemen the point of view of *la Cour et la Ville* serves as the point of view of the *honnête homme*. As we saw in the chapter on *Le Misanthrope*, however, the ideal of *honnêteté* was not always identical with the real life of *la Cour et la Ville*. From the point of view of the *honnête homme*, *la Cour et la Ville* could themselves be discerned as full of vanity to the degree that their reality did not correspond to the standards they professed in theory. The two levels on which the comedy is played out are not therefore the social and the individual—which is an inferior one with respect to the social—but the social and what for want of a better term we might call the universal or divine, which is superior to the social. Court and Town laugh—and rightly—at the antics of the Jourdains and the Dandins, but are they themselves really different? Are not they too, viewed from a perspective that transcends the Court and the Town, just as funny as the Jourdains? From one point of view the laugh is on the Jourdains, but from another point of view the laugh is on those who imagine that the laugh is on the Jourdains. The second perspective does not invalidate the first; it complements it. The imposture of Jourdain, in short, puts the “real” nobles themselves and all our ideas about nobility in question. Do not the “real” nobles carry on the same masquerades as Jourdain? What, in fine, is the difference between the ecstasy of a Jourdain when he receives the title of *Mamamouchi* and the ecstasy of a “real” nobleman when he receives the title of *premier gentilhomme de la chambre du roi*, between the eagerness of Jourdain to be accepted into the society of a *marquise* and the eagerness of a “real” courtier to be admitted to the *lever du roi*? In his desire to acquire the appearance of distinction and superiority to others, Jourdain accepts without question the authenticity of the power that accords this superiority. But the *Grand Turc* is only the valet Covielle in disguise. The audience laughs at Jourdain’s folly and the imposture of which he is the dupe. The audience that laughs, however, has its own *Grand*
Turc, and, as Saint-Simon's Mémoires make abundantly clear, the Grand Turc of late seventeenth-century France was the King himself. When at the end of Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme everyone pretends to enter Jourdain's world and recognizes its validity, the good bourgeois, now Mamamouchi, cries out "Ah, voilà tout le monde raisonnable." The irony here is double-edged. Jourdain confuses an obvious and ridiculous convention with the raisonnable, but is the "truly" raisonnable—the perspective from which we perceive the folly of Jourdain—not itself a convention? Almost the reverse of Jourdain's words are those of Amphitryon, the great nobleman whose identity has been put in doubt by the imposture of the god: "Tout le monde perd-il aujourd'hui la raison?" The true nobleman, like the false one, appeals to reason, and reason turns out in the end to be nothing more than the set of conventions which condition our performance on the stage of social life. Virtually everyone, in the end, is an actor before others, and when Molière spoke in L'Impromptu de Versailles of acting the parts of actors he was referring to nothing unusual, but to the ordinary business of his work as a professional actor. Similarly when he observed of actors in rival troupes that their performance is never so perfect that one cannot discern the actor behind his role, he was alluding indirectly to those worldly actors to whom in his plays he gave the names Alceste, Dom Juan, Jupiter, Cathos, Philaminte, Madame Pernelle, as much as to the professional actors who copy their roles on the stage. There are very few in the world, however high, however low, he says, "qu'on ne pût attraper, (...) si je les avois bien étudiés" (Impromptu, sc. 1). The field of the playwright's research is consequently infinite. "Molière aura toujours plus de sujets qu'il n'en voudra," we are told; "et tout ce qu'il a touché jusqu'ici n'est que bagatelle au prix de ce qui reste" (ibid., sc. 4).

Molière's comedy ranges high and low. It can reach the king on his throne as well as the bourgeois in his parlor, for hardly anyone can flatter himself that he is not an actor in some way or another.
The comedy of Amphitryon, for instance, mocks the rich and powerful nobles, Louis XIV's erstwhile rivals, who after the collapse of the Fronde, could only sulk in impotent discontent. At the same time, however, the mockery of the seigneurs did not spare the monarch himself. Jupiter does not come off much better than Amphitryon. Indeed, as almost all Molière's heroes are tyrants and despots in one way or another, they have a double function. On the one hand their pose is seen through from the superior vantage point of the Court and the honnêtes gens; on the other they themselves bear many of the characteristic traits of King and Court. Just as Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme is at once the satire of the would-be gentleman and in a more subtle way the satire of the "real" one, so L'Avare, Le Tartuffe, or Le Misanthrope—each in its own way a satirical portrait of the proud and resentful individualist who sets himself above all others—can be applied to the King himself as well as to his jealous and embittered critics.19

19 The reader will have observed how close the interpretation of Molière we are presenting here stands to the irony which several critics have emphasized in Pascal's comments on society (cf. Blaise Pascal, L'homme et l'oeuvre, Cahiers de Royaumont [Paris, 1956], especially the remarks of Théodule Spoerri and Maurice de Gandillac in the discussion of Spoerri's paper "Les Pensées de derrière la tête de Pascal," and the contributions of MM. Goriely, de Gandillac, and Goldmann to the "discussion générale" at the end of the volume). Fragments 328-38 (ed. Brunschvicg) in particular—"tous le monde est dans l'illusion" etc.—are relevant to our present discussion of Molière. It is equally notable that Pascal's irony, like Molière's, seizes upon doctors, lawyers, courtiers. (If judges really dispensed justice, if doctors really dispensed cures, neither would have need of their robes, etc. Cf. Fr. 307.)

I quote from M. Goriely's remarks (Blaise Pascal, op. cit., pp. 441-42): "Quelles conclusions tirer de ces critiques? Est-ce que l'homme doit se résigner à tout ce que l'Etat représente? Au mal inhérent à cet Etat? Bien sûr, il le dit, mais il ne le dit pas toujours; il y a dans son ironie vis-à-vis de tout ce que représente la loi des hommes qui est l'oeuvre de la force mais non la loi, d'étranges degrés. Il y a de toute évidence des institutions qui l'amusent; tous les appareils dont s'affublent ceux qui représentent la loi, dont s'affuble le roi, dont s'affublent les juges, les médecins: l'ironie est plutôt gaie. Lorsqu'il dit: 'Il a quatre valets . . .', l'ironie est amère. Lorsqu'il dit: 'je dois lui céder le pas . . .', il est convaincu, 'parce qu'il me donnera les étrivieres' est un maigre argument. Là déjà nous sentons une part de sarcasme et de ricanement. Mais lorsqu'il parle de la guerre ( . . . ) il a un cri: 'Pourquoi me tuez-vous?' Il n'y répond pas. Il ne pouvait répondre à ce moment, il n'était pas
In the France of Louis XIV the violence that marked the earlier part of the century—the period of Cromwell or of Richelieu—was superseded by a more concealed and subtle form of dominion. The superiority of the sovereign was not made to rest on mere power, nor was it to be a glorious triumphant victory in the grand manner of the Baroque. To found superiority on violence and force is to admit that it can be questioned. The absolute superiority of the roi soleil was therefore to be grounded in the willing and eager submission of his subjects, bourgeois and nobles alike. The absolute superiority of the monarch with respect to the noblemen of the realm was sustained in mid and late seventeenth-century France by the vanities and rivalries of the noblemen among themselves, rather than by naked force, just as the position of Tartuffe in Molière's play is sustained by the vanity and hidden rivalry of Orgon and Madame Pernelle. Louis XIV's move to Versailles was

répondu: oui, si mon prince m'ordonne de tuer, je tuerai." These few sentences suggest some of the similarities and some of the differences, as well as the underlying unity of the two visions of Molière and Pascal. Both envisage problems in a strongly dialectical way. Pascal, however, cannot maintain his vision on the level of irony and humor. Reality overwhelms his irony, and this defeat of irony is a mark both of Pascal's great generosity and of his vanity and resentment. When Pascal's humor becomes "sarcasm," as Goriely puts it, it does so in response to an intolerable awareness of objective injustice and evil, to an outraged human conscience, but it does so also in response to a personally experienced humiliation that arises out of Pascal's own social position. (Goldmann has described this position brilliantly in Le Dieu caché.) The bitter despair with respect to social life which ultimately overwhelms Pascal and extinguishes his humor is inseparable from his inability to rise above his own situation and his marvelous capacity for conceiving it in the broadest and most universal terms. With Molière the tendency is the opposite one. To the degree that he constantly transcends his own bitterness toward the comic vision, his work tends in the end toward a vision of universal comedy from which those alone escape who become spectators of this comedy, in which as actors, as social persons, they themselves, indeed, also participate. (In the eighteenth century, and especially in the work of Voltaire, this tendency becomes even more marked, although the idea of comedy as a limited and corrective criticism has not yet entirely disappeared from Voltaire.) Neither Pascal nor Molière was able in the end to find a real solution to the problems that both experienced and formulated dialectically. For Pascal the "solution" was a tragic vision. M. Goriely—rightly, it seems to me—rejects a too rigorously Augustinian interpretation of Pascal. "En général," he
a stroke of genius. The virtual abandonment of Colbert’s plans for the reconstruction of the Louvre and the establishment of the King’s residence at some distance from the dwelling-places of his subjects mark the transformation of the monarch from a brutal house-tyrant into a remote and indifferent divinity, full of mysterious power and grace, concerned, again strangely like Tartuffe, not with the activities of mere mortals but with “higher” things. As bourgeois and nobles struggled for his favor and attention, Louis could look out calmly over the otherworldly order and serenity that Le Nôtre had imposed on the mundane world of nature. In this way bourgeois and noblemen were likewise held at arm’s length, and the bourgeois could experience some satisfaction at the relative humiliation of his aristocratic rival. Degraded and weakened, the nobleman could feel himself distinguished from the bourgeois and from other noblemen only by being admitted to the

observes, “pour rendre plausible l’interprétation de Pascal, on recourt à...”}

Equally unable to resolve his dialectic, Molière by-passes it at the limit by emptying it of all content, for the comic transformation of social life in its entirety ultimately involves a schematization of it. In the vast spectacle of human folly the reality and significance of human existence is conjured away. Comic schematizations—and it may well be that all comedy implies some degree of schematization—are indeed valid when they are limited, and when a
proximity of the monarch in the holy of holies at Versailles; the
closer he got to the monarch, indeed, the more distinguished he—
and everyone else—considered him to be. The rivalry of the nobles
among each other and with the King himself was thus transformed
into rivalry for the grace of the monarch. The old paternalism was
dead and gone, but the cement of the new order was not naked
violence.

Yet, just as in a situation where supremacy is based on force, the
ruler is constantly preoccupied with maintaining his power and
the ruled are constantly preoccupied with undermining it, so in a
situation where supremacy is based on vanity, both parties, ruler
and ruled, are obsessed by vanity. The ruled are constantly ab­sorbed in watching for signs of grace or disgrace from the ruler; the
ruler, however, while he must appear to be too far elevated above
his subjects to care what they think, must nevertheless constantly
observe them to make sure that they care what he thinks.

real mode of being can be opposed to them. Where this is no longer the
case, the comic resolution is a pseudo-resolution, a resolution of impotence
concealing the profoundest pessimism and despair. Molière constantly tried
to walk along the edge of this abyss without falling over. We have already
suggested that figures such as Eliante and Philinte are both real and unreal.
In so far as they can be considered real, they limit the field of the comedy,
and this is what Molière intended them to do. We suggested in the chapter
on Le Misanthrope, however, that their relative insubstantiality points to a
profound pessimism in the mind of Molière as to the possibility of any true
social relations or any true communication between people in the real world.
This question will be further elaborated later in our text. The purpose of this
note was simply to point out a striking relationship between Moliere's vision
of the world and Pascal's (along lines rather different from those followed
by Michaut in his Pascal, Molière, Musset [Paris, 1942]). The similarities are
immediately apparent; the differences (tragedy on the one hand, comedy on
the other) then seem overwhelming; but in the end the two lines, parallel as
they may be, are seen to converge, after all, at their extreme limit. Goldmann's
formulation of Pascal's position could equally well be applied to Molière's—
"qu'il faut se soumettre à la loi et aux ordres du prince, non pas parce qu'ils
sont bons ou valables, mais parce que nous n'avons aucun moyen de réaliser
une amélioration. Il y a là un antagonisme entre les conséquences rigoureuses
tirées par un grand penseur de ses positions idéologiques et sa répugnance
humaine et affective devant ces conséquences. La conclusion de Pascal?
Puisque tout Etat est mauvais et absurde ( . . . ) accepter sans aucune illusion
l'ordre social et politique existant."
The King's superiority is not in doubt: it is recognized by all because it is the source of all superiority among the ruled. The King does not seek the recognition of his inferiors. On the contrary, the face of the monarch is turned away from his subjects. Versailles, as Saint-Simon remarked, looks out over empty space and its back is turned to Paris. The disaffected subject, on the other hand, is ignored by others, since they all have their gaze uplifted toward the Court and the great Sun that shines in its firmament. He has to struggle frenetically and yet always unsuccessfully for recognition by others of the superiority he claims for himself. Thus Alceste, for all he disapproves of the vanity of others, spends his entire time acting and posturing before others. If we adopt Alceste's own perspective, as many audiences do, we fail to see the comic contradiction between what he claims to be and what he is. The comedy of Alceste is perceived only when we look at him from a vantage point external to his own dilemma. Acaste and Clitandre see through him without difficulty.

In a sense, however, Alceste is the inverted image of the King himself. He is the King dethroned, the King whose marble columns have come crashing down and who finds himself no longer on the balcony but with the crowd below. Alceste is not in a position to make others participate in his comedy; hence the flagrant contradiction between the superiority and independence he claims and his actual subservience to the opinion of others. The King succeeds in having his absolute superiority recognized by others because he has the means to nourish and sustain their vanity. But he too, in his own way, must constantly be on the watch for any derogation, while pretending of course to be totally unconcerned. The basic similarity of what are apparently opposites emerges most clearly in *Amphitryon*. The irruption of Jupiter into the world reduces Amphitryon to helpless impotence. His former pre-eminence is no longer recognized, and he has to present himself to others in order to wrest from them a recognition that he believes is owing to him in virtue of his own inherent qualities. Jupiter himself, however,
is likewise obliged to present himself in order to win from Alcmène the recognition she reserves for her husband. As long as he remains genuinely indifferent, as long as he really turns his back on mere humans, Jupiter is equally ignored by them, and all their veneration and respect are lavished on a mere mortal. The intervention of the god is thus inspired initially by envy, by his desire to win from his subjects that recognition which is supposed to be given him without his asking for it, as if by a law of nature, but which he does not get from them without effort. It is not an accident that Jupiter’s desire is excited by the spectacle of a recently wedded couple. The significance of the piquant eroticism which Mercury sees as the source of Jupiter’s interest in the newly-wed Alcmène can be discerned if we compare his situation with the strikingly similar one described by Dom Juan in Dom Juan, Act I, scene 2. The god is thus discovered to be in no way indifferent to the opinion of mere mortals. On the contrary, moved by jealousy of the devotion Alcmène has for her husband, he becomes the rival of a being who is ostensibly his inferior. Like Molière’s mortal tyrants and would-be tyrants Jupiter needs to have his absolute superiority recognized by others, and he will tolerate no derogation from the respect due to him alone. From his lofty Olympian indifference he is constantly watching out of the corner of his eye to make sure that he is never forgotten. Having found that one of his “inferiors” has usurped his place in a young woman’s heart, he swoops down on his rival mercilessly. So did Louis XIV crush Fouquet after the magnificently extravagant fête offered by the superintendent of finances at Vaux-le-Vicomte in 1661. As Tapié remarks: “Ce que Fouquet avait fait ne scandalisait Louis XIV que parce qu’il aurait voulu le faire à sa place. Le coup de foudre de l’affaire Fouquet (…) signifiait que la gloire des arts et de la richesse ne devait servir qu’à la réputation du roi” (V. L. Tapié, Baroque et Classicisme, French, p. 182).

Molière’s comedy is a constant unmasking of imposture, a con-

Cf. supra, pp. 42–43.
stant process of liberation from the slavery and fear of illusion and falsehood. Nothing is spared, not even the monarchy itself. Molière’s audiences could enjoy the satire of a Jourdain or an Alceste. They could laugh at the would-be gentleman’s fascination with empty names and titles and at the efforts of Alceste to conceal under an affectation of indifference his real fascination with the society he claimed to despise. But if the nobleman thought he was superior, as a nobleman, to these characters, he saw only the bones of the comedy and missed the marrow. Like the Sotenvilles who, in their anxiety to affirm their superiority to Dandin, fail to see themselves as others see them, the audience that feels smugly satisfied at its superiority to a Jourdain, that fails to see itself in the grotesque figure of the would-be gentleman, is trapped in the same circle of vanity and illusion, albeit at a slightly higher level, as Jourdain. The audience must indeed be above the particular form of vanity that possesses the hero in order to perceive it, but it must then inquire whether the vanity of the hero is not the image of its own.

It is well known that Molière found the material for many of his greatest comic creations—for Alceste, for Arnolphe, for Argan—in himself as well as in the world around him. In Le Malade Imaginaire he explicitly affirmed his own emancipation from the illusions of his hero. “Il sera encore plus sage que vos médecins,” Béralde says to Argan of Molière, “car il ne leur demandera point de secours” (III, 3). But if Molière transcended “ces belles imaginations, que nous venons à croire parce qu’elles nous flattent” (ibid.), it was because he knew what it was to have them. It was only because he himself had been and in a sense still was Argan—for what man can be sure of having overcome his weaknesses once and for all?—that Molière could create the comedy of Argan. The writing of the comedy was his liberation. Béralde is not exactly Molière’s
mouthpiece; nor, however, is he simply another point of view. In projecting himself into his work, Molière was obliged to individuate two aspects of himself which in his own being and consciousness were inseparably linked. Argan and Béralde, Arnolphe and Chrysalde are one in the consciousness of their creator: only in the comedy does their inward dialogue receive dramatic expression as a dialogue of two separate characters. By being thus simplified, the folly of the one is more clearly defined, objectified, and exorcised. The wisdom of the other is, however, also simplified. Here we touch on one of the most striking characteristics of Molière's raisonneurs. Béralde may well say of the marvelous achievements of medicine: “Quand vous en venez à la vérité et à l'expérience, vous ne trouvez rien de tout cela, et il en est comme de ces beaux songes qui ne vous laissent au réveil que le déplaisir de les avoir crus” (ibid.), there is and can be no indication in the play that he ever did or felt tempted to believe them. The same is true of many of the other raisonneurs. Cléante (Le Tartuffe), Philinte (Le Misanthrope), Ariste (L'Ecole des maris), and Chrysalde (L'Ecole des femmes) give the impression of never having been fools, of never having experienced or even been tempted by the passions and illusions they discourse so wordily about. This accounts for the somewhat abstract character of these armchair “philosophers.” They do represent the point of view of good sense and moderation, the point of view of the honnête homme, the highest vantage point that can be attained without the experience of oneself as comic. The understanding of the audience, if the comedy has been fully enjoyed, is higher, however, than that of the raisonneur, because it is the result of a genuine purgation in the course of which the audience has experienced, as the artist did, both terms of the dialogue. This is the position represented by the most modest and least bumptious of all the raisonneurs, the endearing Dorante of the Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes. “Quant au transport amoureux du cinquième acte,” he says, “qu'on accuse d'être trop outré et trop comique, je voudrais bien savoir si ce n'est pas faire la satire des
amants, et si les honnêtes gens mêmes et les plus sérieux, en de pareilles occasions, ne font pas des choses . . . ? ( . . . ) Enfin si nous nous regardions nous-mêmes, quand nous sommes bien amoureux . . . ?” (sc. 6).

Molière critics are divided among those who argue that the raisonneurs do express Molière’s own opinions (Brunetière, Michaut, etc.) and those who hold that their function is purely artistic or dramatic, a function of contrast and éclairage (Moore, Bray, etc.). There seems to me to be some truth in both these views, and yet I find both of them unsatisfactory. Those who see in the speeches of the raisonneurs a set of answers to the questions raised discount in large measure the comedy, transforming it into a kind of pièce à these. Those who deny any meaning function to the raisonneurs, on the other hand, seem to me to be shirking the issue. It is tempting to hide behind the wall of estheticism but I am not sure that we do justice to great literature by cutting its links with the concrete reality in which it has its source and to which it sends us back. On the whole, however, my own position is closer to that of the second group of critics than to that of the first group.

The entire wisdom of the raisonneurs can be summed up as “do as the honnêtes gens do.” The biggest folly is to attempt to be different from everybody else. Ariste gives a rather extreme expression of this position in L’Ecole des maris:

Mais je tiens qu’il est mal, sur quoi que l’on se fonde,
De fuir obstinément ce que suit tout le monde,
Et qu’il vaut mieux souffrir d’être au nombre des fous,
Que du sage parti se voir seul contre tous.

(I, 1, 51–54)

Not, apparently, a very elevating doctrine, as those who defend Molière the artist against Molière the “thinker” would be quick to point out. But there is more wisdom here than meets the eye. This wisdom is not, however, contained so much in the doctrines and
principles the *raisonneurs* enunciate, as in the dangers that they warn against. However well founded and deeply held your principles, says Ariste, do not loudly flout the ways of the world. For if you do, and this is what the comic heroes teach us, then your principles will be absorbed in your own inauthenticity. They will cease to be ends and will become means, they will become in short the very opposite of what you say they are. If you do hold to objective values, they must be ends in themselves, "terminal values" as the late Professor Lovejoy called them in his *Reflections on Human Nature* (Baltimore, 1961). They must not be merely a means of acquiring the recognition and esteem of others, for this is to make recognition and esteem your only real value. All your preaching thereby becomes a form of self-advertisement, an attempt to impose yourself on the world. The preaching of Alceste and of Orgon is nothing else.

"Adjectival values," however, as Lovejoy describes the ends of recognition and esteem, are vain and empty. Although the desire for recognition and esteem is *prima facie* a desire to invest one’s subjective view of oneself with a kind of objectivity, this objectivity is in reality spurious, for it is an objectivity without an object. Noblemen or superior persons have no objective existence in the world as noblemen or superior persons. Objectively they are men, and only in the minds and judgment of others are they noblemen or superior persons. Why, therefore, seek to acquire a recognition that has no objective value? Or at least why deceive oneself into thinking that such recognition has objective value? There is no point, for instance, in changing your title or your rank, for you merely substitute one empty form for another. Chrysalde is amused by Arnolphe’s change of name:

> Qui diable vous a fait aussi vous aviser,  
> À quarante et deux ans, de vous débaptiser,  
> Et d’un vieux tronc pourri de votre métairie  
> Vous faire dans le monde un nom de seigneurie?

(*Ec. femmes, I, 1, 169–72*)
Molière had none of the stuffy and stupid conservatism which has been attributed to him. He did not laugh at the bourgeois from the smug superiority of the courtier nor did he think that everyone should stay in his place because he espoused the snobberies of the nobles. On the contrary, it was because he saw through the vanity of the nobles and of the King and of all social signs and superiorities that he saw the folly of the ambitions of those below them. As we have already suggested, he was, if anything, more indulgent toward the naive vanity of the social climber than toward the inverted resentment of the courtier. It was not because he thought there was some inherent value in the existing social conventions that he mocked all attempt to "rise above one's station" or to overthrow the existing conventions, it was because to attempt to do either seemed to him to attribute value and meaning to what in its very nature has none.

Every one of the comedies is in this sense a salutary demystification. The dilemmas of the Alcestes, the Orgons, and the Dandins dissolve in laughter as we see through their deceptions and self-deceptions. Alcestes's concern with sincerity is shown to conceal the crassest egoism, his indifference to opinion turns out to be a disguised fascination with those he affects to disregard and his failure is comic because his striving has been revealed as utterly inauthentic. Dom Juan, the supposed libertine and pleasure-seeker, is seen to be incapable of any real pleasure and his apparent autonomy emerges as a base fascination with and dependence on his own servant. Orgon's religious fervor is exposed as mere resentment of and desire to dominate others, to be a little despot in his own home. The seemingly pathetic and persecuted Dandin is his own victim, not the victim of the world, for he is a slave only because he would be a tyrant.

Impostors to the marrow of their bones, these "heroes" find in imposture both the instrument by which they can fulfill their desires and the fulfillment of their desires. Dandin and Jourdain are willing to pay fortunes for a grotesque mimicry of nobility, and it
is their own fault if they are duped, for it is they who invest others with a prestige they do not possess, it is they who attribute real value and being to the conventional values and vain appearances of the world. The Countess d’Escarbagnas, who deems herself so superior to all the inhabitants of her village and complains that they do not treat her with sufficient reverence, is appeased by the grotesquely respectful attentions of a Monsieur Tibaudier, just as the Sotenvilles, petty monarchs of their provincial parish, seek the confirmation of their nobility in the submission and respect of a Dandin. If Philaminte in *Les Femmes savantes* is duped by Trissotin, or Magdelon and Cathos in *Les Précieuses* by Mascarille and Jodelet, their true qualities are revealed by the deceptions of which they are the dupes. The baseness of Trissotin reveals the truth about Philaminte, the degradation of the Sotenvilles reveals the truth about Dandin, the imposture of Tartuffe reveals the truth about Orgon. (Significantly enough, Magdelon and Cathos, Jourdain, and Argan are all duped by valets.) One imposture reveals another; the idol exposes the idolator. The truth is that all these characters exist exclusively on the level of appearance. Slaves to illusion, they aspire only to names and forms. The Countess d’Escarbagnas is vexed because she is not looked up to. Dandin and Jourdain want to be accepted as noblemen, Philaminte wants the reputation of a *femme savante*, Orgon desires to be considered a *dévot* by those around him, Argan wants to be attended by a doctor of eminent reputation. Philaminte is not primarily interested in learning, Argan is not really concerned about the sickness that he may in fact be suffering from, Orgon’s preoccupation is not the salvation of his soul. These characters desire only to appear and they achieve their ends with the help of names and signs. It is the reputation of Trissotin, of Purgon, of Tartuffe that counts, not what they really are. Jourdain refuses to learn *la morale*, because, as he says, “je veux me mettre en colère tout mon saoul, quand il me prend envie” (II, 4). He does not aspire to any *real* change, only to a change in appearances, and only what is necessary to achieve
this change in appearances has usefulness and value in his eyes. He will pay for music lessons and fencing lessons because music and fencing are *signs* of nobility. Likewise he will pay so much for being called “mon gentilhomme,” so much more for being called “Monseigneur,” and the entire contents of his purse for being called “Votre Grandeur” (II, 5). Jourdain knows of course that in a sense he is not any of these things and that no one makes such rapid progress from the one to the other. Since appearances and signs are for him the only reality, however, since no one is anything but what others recognize him for, to carry the sign is to be the thing itself. So long as he is treated as if he were *Votre Grandeur*, he is *Votre Grandeur*. It does not occur to him that he might not really be a *Mamamouchi*, that there might not be any such thing. Provided he is recognized by everyone as a *Mamamouchi* and provided everyone recognizes the existence of *Mamamouchis*, then he really is a *Mamamouchi*.

In so far as it is a *spectacle devant les hommes*, in Goldmann’s expression, human life, for Molière, was completely absorbed in the inessential. The comic figure is he who fails to realize this, who takes his acting seriously, who allows himself to be dazzled by the glitter of empty names and signs, who thereby becomes the idolator of others, since the glitter is reflected in the eyes of others. The *raisonneur* also presents himself to some degree, he too seeks the approbation of his fellows. We cannot live in the world and be completely independent of others and of others’ judgment of us. To imagine that we can is simply another vanity which the actual facts of our behavior will soon expose. The cardinal principle of the *raisonneur* is that the least inauthentic role is the role we are expected to play, since by playing it we do not ask that it be received otherwise than as a role. We know we are acting a part, but we also know that others know we are acting a part; we are not therefore lying or acting in the way of those who act as if they are not acting. This is the behavior that Philinte tries to make Alceste understand:
Social life is a game that must be played according to the rules, Molière's **raisonneurs** would say. What we really are is not the concern of the world, and it is foolish to ask the world to be concerned with it. For this is to attribute to the world a power that, if we are to be free, it should not be permitted to have, and that in any case it cannot have, since the world is made up only of men like ourselves. Those who attribute to others a quasi-divine power that they do not actually have and who try to have themselves judged by others are the very people who want to usurp this power for themselves and to become the tyrants and judges of everybody else. They become locked in a senseless struggle for an ever-vanishing prize which has no reality outside their own minds. Their entire being becomes absorbed in their being for others, and in their obsessive preoccupation with their image they lose whatever authenticity they might have had.

The most authentic characters in Molière are those who are either so naively ignorant of any distinction between appearance and reality that they never think they might mislead or be misled, or so completely resigned to the inevitability of the distinction that they limit their relations with others to the bare minimum required by life in society. The transparent innocence of Alcémène and the mask-like enigma of Elmire are the highest examples of these two modes of being.

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The profundity of Molière's comic vision is testified to not only by the continued popularity of his works but by their remarkable
prophetic quality. Alceste is the very type of the modern intellectual and in large measure of Western man in general, isolated, resentful, embittered, affecting to despise society, but in reality adoring it and suffering because it does not recognize his unique and immeasurable value. Orgon’s dangerous combination of impotence and pride foreshadows the witch-hunters and fanatics of our own time. Like Molière’s comic hero, they too await with open arms the impostor whose apparently noble ideology will provide them with the instrument of their revenge on all who have “dissuaded” (that is, failed to admire) them. And what is the modern search for “status symbols” if not a new and yet easily recognized form of Jourdainism? Even to-day the Jourdains are more naïve and frank in their simple adoration of the world than the Alcestes and the Orgons with their inverted love-hate of it. The American negro in his gleaming Cadillac convertible openly avows his mediation by his “superior” white models, whereas many more highly placed persons conceal behind a façade of scorn and derision a resentful fascination with a world that neglects to admire them sufficiently. What Molière saw three centuries ago and what Tocqueville pointed to a hundred years ago has become one of the most widespread phenomena of our age. Nearly all of us, from the highest to the lowest, suffer from the neuroses that afflicted the comic heroes of Molière.

The great themes of Molière’s comedies recur over and over again in the literature of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. (The very titles of his comedies are revealing: *Dom Juan*, the *Misanthrope*, the *Impostor*, the *Bourgeois Gentleman*, the *Learned Ladies*, etc.) To trace their history would be a gigantic task that would go far beyond the scope of the present study. Nevertheless some broad lines should be drawn, for, to my knowledge, no one has yet undertaken such a work. There is no question of “influences,” though in many cases it would be possible to detect a direct impact of Molière on his successors. In the main, however, the filiations we propose to study very briefly and grossly are not
"influences" and they are not subject to positivist methods of
analysis. In pointing them out we do not want to show that the
writers who came after Molière were borrowing from him, but that
he foresaw in his comedies many of the great themes of modern
literature. These themes are handled differently by the various
writers who take them up, according to their time and their under­
standing. The world does not stand still and the problems that
Molière could embrace in a three or five-act comedy could no
longer be handled with the same simplicity of means two hundred
years after him, for the situations themselves had become infinitely
more complex, so complex, in fact, that many writers of talent
failed to rise to the clarity of vision that distinguishes the seven­
teenth-century playwright.

The astonishing intellectual power and vision of Molière is not
to be looked for or found in the "ideas" of the raisonneurs—these
form only part of the total picture—but in his deep and prophetic
insight into certain crucial problems of modern social life and in
his unerring grasp of the true nature of these problems. Among
those who followed him and who took up the same themes as he
had already exploited, the greatest shared his profound apprehen­
sion of the comic. Those who failed to rise to this comic vision
became bogged down in myths and false pathos; they became vic­
tims of the very inauthenticity he warned against, play-actors them­
selves, and the first dupes of their own often unconscious duplicity.

The full significance of some of the esthetic problems encoun­
tered by Molière also becomes clearer in the light of subsequent
developments. The difference between the comedy of Le Bourgeois
Gentilhomme for instance and that of Le Misanthrope has pre­
occupied many commentators. While agreeing with de Visté's re­
mark that Le Misanthrope makes us laugh "dans l'âme," Gustave
Rudler wondered what kind of comedy this is that is so muted and
inward. We have tried to point out some of the thematic differ­
ences between these two works. There is no question, however,
that these thematic differences affect the nature of comedy itself.
In the following pages we shall touch on several problems which confront the modern comic author, and we shall see that Molière had already begun to run up against these problems when he wrote *Le Misanthrope*. Signs of the future can be discerned not only in the themes of Molière's plays but in the problems that he met with as a comic artist.