CHAPTER 4

Cyrano of the Camargue: “The Bull That Thought”

During a motoring tour of southern France in the spring of 1914, Rudyard Kipling met and had lunch with a wealthy French winemaker named Viollet. More than likely that meeting figured in the writing of “The Bull That Thought,” for a person at least superficially like Monsieur Viollet—a rich wine merchant—appears in the work as the central character, André Voiron. Kipling composed the story in May 1924, soon after another automobile tour of France that included the town of Voiron, and published it in magazine form in December of that year. It was the product of an unusual burst of creative energy that in a relatively short period resulted in other such complex and profound stories, such as “A Madonna of the Trenches,” “The Wish House,” and “The Eye of Allah.” Commenting on this highly productive period of writing and on the stories that emerged from it, he wrote Brander Matthews, an American professor and literary critic, that all of these works (which would include “The Bull That Thought”) “came by themselves,” his way of saying that they were inspired, that his “Daemon” was in charge.

Despite Kipling’s own intriguing appraisal of “The Bull That Thought,” for the first forty years after its initial publication, critics were mostly silent on the story as if they judged it as a fairly simple tale of but secondary importance. It was C. A. Bodelsen who found “esoteric meaning” in it, and his extended analysis, published in 1964, greatly changed the general attitude toward the story. It became known as one of the most important sources of insight into Kipling’s thoughts on the subjects of writing (or “art”) and the writer (“the artist”), and it was deemed indispensable to an understanding of how Kipling viewed his later stories and the public’s response to them. “The Bull That Thought,” Bodelsen argued, is “perhaps Kipling’s most remarkable disquisition on the theme of the Artist.” His opinion was that the
story is “an allegory on art and the artist.” In this allegory, the bullfight stands for “the way in which the artist reduces the chaos of reality to an ordered pattern in his work of art.” The bullfight also stands for the First World War, which “inspired Kipling ... to do his best work.” The mediocre bullfighter turned hero, Chisto, is “the genuine artist.” The bull Apis represents, among other things, “the principle of art” as well as “the artist.”

Just how “The Bull That Thought” could be both a “disquisition” and an “allegory” Bodelsen never makes entirely clear, but at any rate he finds the work highly autobiographical. He states that Kipling poured himself into the second-rate bullfighter Chisto: “Kipling identifies himself with the middle-aged bullfighter who is overshadowed by a younger and more popular rival.” In other words, “Kipling is trying to tell us, in his usual cryptic language,” continues Bodelsen, “something about his own situation, his pride in the stories of his late period, and his reaction to their unfavourable reception.”

With the publication of Bodelsen’s study, a hitherto neglected story about which critics had simply felt there was not much to say suddenly became Kipling’s definitive statement about art, the artist, and himself. In his much briefer commentary on the story, which was published just three years after the appearance of Bodelsen’s study, Bonamy Dobrée followed closely Bodelsen’s interpretation except that he substituted the term “fable” for Bodelsen’s “allegory.” He writes that “The Bull That Thought” is “Kipling’s great triumph in the genre of the concealed fable, about art, the artist, and the public.” The bullfighting story thus was not only being taken seriously; it was being repositioned in the Kipling canon to a place of eminence.

Greatly influential in this undertaking was Elliot L. Gilbert, whose book followed Bodelsen’s by six years and Dobrée’s by three. His argument is fundamentally the same as Bodelsen’s though he seems to have arrived at his conclusions independently. He sounds very much like Bodelsen: “There can be no doubt that the author intended his tale to be a study of art and the artist.” Perhaps anticipating that it may seem strange to claim that a bull represents “the artist” when that animal is a brutal killer (“murderer,” it is called in the story), Gilbert ingeniously argues that violence is not alien to artistic creativity but an essential element of it, thus solving the problem of how a murderous bull with a love for ambushing and disemboweling could be Kipling’s ideal “artist.” In Gilbert’s view, this particular story, among “the hundreds of stories that Kipling wrote, [is] the one which most fully explores the
relationship of brutality to art.” He writes that the “actions of the bull permit the author to make the point that at the heart of even the most delicate creative act is a brutal, primal energy, and to emphasize the extent to which creativity is a function of that violent, often destructive force.” Gilbert notes that Apis cleans its horns after killing, and since in his opinion the bull represents the highest form of artistic achievement, he concludes that this act signifies “the narcissistic self-absorption of the artist, his preoccupation with his tools and techniques at the expense of personal relations.”

Obviously swayed by Gilbert’s view of “The Bull That Thought,” Philip Mason followed his lead in 1975 by declaring that Kipling was saying in the story that “the artist must be ruthless, that he may have to be cruel, that he is born but must perfect his technique by labour, that he must have passion and inspiration.” In his biography of Kipling, which was completed in draft much earlier but not published until 1978, Lord Birkenhead cautioned that insofar as Kipling’s later stories are concerned, “we must beware of being carried away by speculation, and reading into [the story] … meanings that were never in Kipling’s mind.” After that caveat, however, he assures us that in “The Bull That Thought,” the author’s “intentions now seem clear. He means by this that the story is “a perfect example of the subtle conceived fable in which he [Kipling] was now interested—in this case about art, the artist and the public, with particular reference to himself.

More recent critics and biographers have by and large assumed that this is the correct reading of the story, that the work is Kipling’s theoretical treatment of art and of the artist. Danielle Schaub, for example, writes: “The motions of the bull stand for the writer’s selecting and organizing his materials in his creative process.” Sandra Kemp seems to have been particularly influenced by Gilbert. In her brief analysis of “The Bull That Thought,” she posits that the bull Apis “becomes the instinctual artist who can play with all his passions and moods.” She adds: “Kipling was fascinated by the cruel, even murderous aspect of the creative imagination.” Although these various interpretations differ somewhat in details, they agree in broad outline that “The Bull That Thought” primarily explores Kipling’s theories about art and the artist.

To be sure, Bodelsen and those agreeing with the basic points of his interpretation (though differing in details) have performed a great service to Kipling studies. They rescued “The Bull That Thought” from obscurity by rightly claiming for it a significant place in the author’s
writings, but the basis for their claim of importance is shaky. Despite its widespread acceptance, the now long-established reading of the story presents several problems that appear to have escaped critical attention. First and foremost, it presupposes that “The Bull That Thought” is a certain kind of story that it is not, the kind that is composed for the express reason of stating ideas that are of importance to the author, who uses his characters strictly for that limited purpose. “The Bull That Thought” does not lend itself to this genre, which is that of allegory. In fact, Bodelsen himself attributes so many different meanings to the bull that it is difficult to see how “allegory” could be the appropriate term to describe the work. Nor is it a “fable” (Dobrée) or a “parable” (Gilbert) insofar as the raison d’être of those two forms of writing is the expressing of a moral. “The Bull That Thought” is not didactic in nature; it is essentially a character study, not a sermon about writing. It is the kind of story that was written for the purpose of complex character development with truths and themes emerging from that delineation.

Neither is the work, strictly speaking, a “frame story,” as is usually claimed. Bodelsen writes: “the story is enclosed in a frame consisting of an introduction and a conclusion,” saying that “the conclusion is exceptionally short, and takes up only a few lines.” Bodelsen seems to have invented this “conclusion” that supposedly completes the frame, for in reality there is none. The story begins with a narrator, presumably Kipling, telling of how he met André Voiron and of a bet the Frenchman had with the narrator’s automobile driver. Then after some preliminary comments, Voiron talks of Camargue cattle, Camargue wine, and a very special Camargue bull called Apis. The work ends on his words about the bull, not those of the speaker we hear in the beginning. If the frame had been completed—if the original speaker had come back to take command of the narrative and had commented on the story of Apis that he heard from Voiron—Kipling’s intentions about the work’s meaning would probably have been much clearer, for the Englishman seems to be Kipling himself. That he did not include such a conclusion suggests that in this instance he did not wish cut-and-dried clarity. If ending the story where he did should lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretations, so be it. Kipling’s conviction about the power of what was not stated remained steadfast, especially in the writing of such late stories as “The Bull That Thought.”

The most serious flaw in the accepted reading of “The Bull That Thought,” however, is its assumption that the story is mainly about
Kipling’s theories on the subject of writing and the writer. If “The Bull That Thought” is not, as Gilbert so eloquently argued, primarily “a study of art and the artist,” then why are there several references in the story to art and the artist? And when these terms occur, do they not in context describe some of Kipling’s own theories about writing? For example, what could be more Kiplingesque than the statement that “no true artist will tolerate” the public’s demand “to repeat himself”? This sentence and two or three others dealing with the nature of art and the artist have been instrumental in convincing critics that the story is, indeed, about writing. In addition to statements that appear to offer insights into the author’s concepts about his craft, several allusions to great writers in the work seem to undergird the notion that writing is what was on Kipling’s mind. The bull is “Rabelaisian”; he is a veritable “Cyrano of the Camargue”; even “Molière himself” could not compete with the artistry of Apis, who reacted on one occasion as would have “the elder Dumas.” That the bull is referred to as “the supreme artist” appears to indicate that Kipling connected violence in some way with the creative act. If not, why would he have used a brutal animal to be the manifestation of high artistry?

One possible response goes a long way toward answering all these questions: Kipling’s spokesman in the story (the narrator whose words we first hear) makes none of the generalized statements about art or the artist, refers to no great writers, does not call the bull or any person in the work an artist. All statements on all these subjects come from André Voiron, not from the narrator, and his comparisons of the bull with art and the artist, with named writers, and with heroes of war and of physical prowess (such as Marshal Foch and the champion boxer Carpentier) obviously reflect a subjective response rather than fact.

That Voiron talks this way, uses these particular terms of reference especially in his subjective response to Apis, simply indicates that he is a person of literary background and interest. He obviously has a keen knowledge of the great French authors. He is also possessed of a combative and hero-worshipping spirit—as his reference to Marshal Foch reveals. That he knows a good deal about bullfighting and finds the ritual appealing supports the idea that his concept of art extends to the arena. He speaks of the bullring in the small Catalan town in Spain where Apis fights and of the ceremonies there with understanding and appreciation:

Their bull-ring dates from the middle of the seventeenth century. It is full of feeling. The ceremonial too—when the horsemen enter and ask the Mayor in
his box to throw down the keys of the bull-ring—that was exquisitely conceived. You know, if the keys are caught in the horseman’s hat, it is considered a good omen. They were perfectly caught.\textsuperscript{21} 

He goes on to speak as would an aficionado of how the first two bulls were killed and of how matadors tend to be highly jealous of each other. Such a man would not hesitate to use the term “artist” for a capable bullfighter or the term “artistry” for what he performs. If one were well grounded in the great literature of France and highly familiar with bullfighting, therefore, there would be nothing unusual about his using terms like “art” and “the artist” (together with the names of authors) when attempting to describe what happened at a bullfight. That Voiron reflects some of Kipling’s own attitudes about the nature and rewards of the creative life does not make him Kipling, and it does not make the story a “disquisition on the theme of the Artist,” to quote Bodelsen again. 

It is unusual, however, that someone familiar with and appreciative of bullfighting would refer to the bull (rather than the matador) as a “supreme artist” and would become so emotional over the bull’s behavior in the arena as to weep openly.\textsuperscript{22} One would have to conclude that such a person has become so involved emotionally with the bull that something is going on in his mind that makes him an unreliable narrator of the events he is recounting. That is, what he sees and says is pronouncedly subjective rather than objective truth. 

The usual reading of “The Bull That Thought” does not distinguish between these two forms of truth in the story. The narrator, however, does appear to. On two occasions he questions—gently and casually, to be sure—his host’s objectivity. After hearing Voiron argue that the cattle of the Camargue have the ability to think, the narrator asks: “Are they so clever as all that?”\textsuperscript{23} Then early in Voiron’s account of the bull Apis, his listener evidently makes a remark—probably the word unbelievable—for the Frenchman stops at this point and exclaims, “Unbelievable?” He then quickly adds: “I saw it.”\textsuperscript{24} What he is relating is clearly his interpretation of what he saw, not a strictly objective account. 

One cannot gauge the truth of what Voiron says about Apis by the same standard that a driver can determine the truth of how fast an automobile will go on a level, straight road. Kipling begins his story with such a road to make that precise point. The automobile “Esmeralda” will reach a speed of ninety kilometers. It is tested early in the story. What speed it reaches is empirical truth. After emphasizing demon-
strable truth in the opening section, where there is a clear sunset followed by a brilliant moonlit evening revealing “every rounded pebble” on the “mathematically straight,” “barometrically level” road, Kipling moves his two major characters to a different setting for the revelation of a different kind of truth, subjective truth. From the clear outdoors, the characters move indoors to a dimly lit table. The light of verifiable truth is more elusive here. As eleven o’clock approaches, the atmosphere around them is more that of sleep than waking, more suggestive of dreams than of fact: “Doors locked and shutters banged throughout the establishment. Some last servant yawned on his way to bed.” Sleep seems to be all around them: “One could almost hear the town of Chambres breathing in its first sleep.”

It is at this point that the two men hear a “noise in the air,” signifying that the story is about to take a new direction, a direction that has been prepared for by the sleepy, dreamlike atmosphere created in the previous lines. The sound breaking through the stillness is that of Camargue cattle being moved outside, and the moment is thus right for André Voiron to begin his story, his highly subjective account of a bull named Apis.

What he says is undoubtedly true to him, but it is not straight-level-road truth. No such road exists on which to test it. There is no doubt that the narrator’s automobile will do ninety kilometers; there is doubt that Apis could actually “study” the “psychology” of the local boys, that it could “meditate,” that it could exercise intelligent forethought, that it could pretend awkwardness for ulterior motives, and so on. These and other claims by Voiron (that Apis is a “genius,” a “supreme artist,” a “farceur”) are subjective terms of praise evoked by something in him akin to religious enthusiasm. The converted are wont to claim a great deal about God that is unverifiable by facts; such is the leap of faith. Apis, whose name is that of a bull god worshipped by ancient Egyptians, has become a kind of god to André Voiron, who makes the sort of claims for it that some people make for God—namely, that He is magnificent and transcendent in both roles of angry destroyer and tender savior. That is the reason, Voiron believes, that the holy water, which the chief herdsman Christophe applies to Apis after he has killed another bull and then cleaned his horns, has no effect: Apis does not need to be made holy—he is already holy. Voiron also hints that Apis is omniscient, inasmuch as he has nothing to learn even from “Devils,” whom he at one point in the bullfight seems to interrogate.
The pattern of religious references in the story may be misleading, however, for there is no convincing evidence that Kipling actually means for the bull to represent God and for André Voiron to be seen as a convert to, say, Christianity or any other identifiable sect. That the time in which the bullfight in the small Spanish town takes place is “a little before Easter Sunday,” the celebration of which commemorates the resurrection of Jesus and the hope of all Christians for resurrection, signifies nothing more than that Kipling is using, as he often did, the terms and symbols of Christianity for his own purposes. On occasion he would create a cluster of references to Christian conversion, as he did in Captains Courageous, as a way of suggesting that what is happening to a character who sees the light and is greatly changed by accepting a new worldview is like religious conversion. Captains Courageous, however, is not a religious novel, and “The Bull That Thought” is not a religious short story but a story of rejuvenation, of renewal, which in effect resembles the Christian idea of being born again. In the case of André Voiron, the vision, the ideals, and something of the psychic energy of his youth are restored to him through the agency of the bull that he comes to stand in awe of.

That note of rejuvenation is sounded early in “The Bull That Thought” when the narrator describes the wine that André Voiron offers him as “being composed of the whispers of angels’ wings” and having the “pulse of Youth renewed.” One of a number of references in the story to youth and, in particular, restored youth, this sentence sets the stage for the drama of Voiron’s revitalization. The partaking of the special wine is one of the most important happenings in “The Bull That Thought”; it is a kind of communion ritual in which Voiron, as he drinks more and more, becomes imbued anew with the youth-restoring memory of Apis. And he does, indeed, drink more and more. His extended narration about the bull is punctuated by interruptions as he refills his own “generous glass” and that of his listener. Commentary on “The Bull That Thought” has overlooked the fact that there is a great deal of drinking going on in the story. Monsieur Voiron produces “a bottle beyond most known sizes,” and he seems determined to drain it as the night progresses. Periodically, the narrator breaks into his host’s tale of Apis with a comment such as this: “Monsieur Voiron replenished our glasses with the great wine that went better at each descent.” Later, “Monsieur Voiron refilled the glasses and allowed himself a cigarette”; still later, “The memory sent Monsieur Voiron again to the champagne, and I accompanied him.” At the end of the story, Voiron
proposes still another round—“to Her,” as he puts it.\(^\text{32}\) The amount that Voiron drinks furnishes a realistic basis for the changes that take place in him as he speaks: he becomes more emotional, more eloquent, and certainly more congenial to his listener. Of greater significance, however, is the thematic basis: as he relives, under the influence of the wine, the excitement and wonder that he experienced when he witnessed the actions of Apis, those enlivening emotions deepen, humanize, and energize him anew.

What signals dramatically (that is, as in a play) these alterations in him is the change he makes in addressing the Englishman. At first, Voiron refers to him somewhat formally as “Monsieur.”\(^\text{33}\) As the wine arouses his spirit and quiets his reticence, he calls the story’s narrator “my friend.”\(^\text{34}\) Then he begins to address the Englishman as “my dear friend.”\(^\text{35}\) At the end of his account of the bull, he adds an intensifier to this designation. His “dear friend” becomes his “very dear friend”: “My friend, my very dear friend, to whom I have opened my heart.”\(^\text{36}\) These are among the most crucial words in the story, for that is precisely what he has done—opened his heart. The way that he tells of the bull, then, is nothing less than a drama of self-revelation acted out before us, a marvelous authorial feat the appreciation of which has not found its way into previous interpretations of the story.

Jesus commanded his disciples to drink the communion wine “in remembrance of me” (1 Corinthians 11:25), and by the repetition of that ritual, those who have been converted keep Jesus alive in their hearts. So it is with André Voiron: he has had an experience of magnitude, which has greatly changed his thinking, and he participates in a kind of ritual retelling of his experience for the purpose of retaining what that experience gave him. When he encounters the Englishman with a car named “Esmeralda,” he singles him out to hear his testimony. His story is not mere drinking conversation indulged in by a sophisticated, rich Frenchman, not just an unusual and entertaining yarn, but an account of supreme importance to the man who relates it. He feels compelled to relate it, for retelling it is remembering while he drinks the communion wine, and remembering is essential to keeping Apis alive in his heart.

This distinguished Frenchman, then, is the center of the story, not the bull as has been customarily argued. It is he that Kipling is most interested in, not discoursing on theories about writing. To understand “The Bull That Thought” it is necessary to reject the widespread assumption that it is apparently an “account of the life and performance of a bull that was granted the power and privilege of thought.”\(^\text{37}\) Kipling
is not writing about a bull that actually thought; he is writing about a man who tells a story to another man about a bull he believed could think. Failure to grasp that essential distinction lies at the heart of misinterpretations of the story. What Kipling has created in “The Bull That Thought” is an unfolding, complex psychological portrait of a man who has had a life-changing experience and feels the need—perhaps the compulsion—to tell of it, even if to—or especially to—a stranger. It thus fits into a time-honored tradition in literature.

By way of exploring what constitutes that experience, it is necessary to recount what the narrator of the story says about Monsieur Voiron since he is actually the center of the story. The narrator furnishes only a few details in the opening section, but they are crucial to understanding the kind of man who later is delineated through his own words as his running account of the bull progresses. Of fundamental importance is that he is “elderly.” He is French, and he owns a French automobile, a “talkative Citroën.” An insignia is apparent on his clothing, “the rosette of by no means the lowest grade of the Legion of Honour.” He has “spent much of his life in the French Colonial Service in Annam and Tonquin.” He says little about why he went abroad at an early age except that “it became necessary that I should go to our Colonies.” It was perhaps his youthful spirit of adventure that motivated him, for he probably foresaw rich opportunities in exotic surroundings for excitement and for proving himself. He tells the narrator: “That is a good time in youth, Monsieur, when one does these things which shock our parents.” That “good time in youth” slipped away, however, and when the Great War came, he was barred from serving in “the front line” because he was too old. So he was assigned to supervise “Chinese woodcutters” as they chopped trees for trench-props. Since the war, he has headed up his family’s business, which involves among other things dealings in “chemical manures,” “agricultural implements,” and “produce.”

These details are not offered merely to point up that this is a colorful old French gentleman of means but to establish the outline of a portrait that Voiron himself will fill in by what he says. They suggest by indirection that Monsieur André Voiron of the Camargue, France, has gone through a period of his life after his youth in which he became a disappointed, perhaps somewhat disillusioned man—up to the time that he discovered a certain unusual bull. To be sure, he is proud of his service to France, which earned him a Legion of Honour rosette. When the war came and he probably yearned to take part in combat
defending his beloved France (his love of France and especially his home region is everywhere apparent), he was denied that opportunity because of “his years,” as he puts it, and he was assigned to the most pedestrian of jobs—heading up a crew of Chinese woodcutters well away from the action of the war. He must have endured years of ennui administrating, supervising foreign workmen, and then overseeing the production of such products as chemical manure. Head of a sizable company, he still must have felt that his later life was being measured out in coffee spoons.

One of his early comments to the narrator suggests that the Great War may have left him, as it did many others, bereft of something to believe in. “Everything inconceivable has happened,” he says, “but still we learn nothing and we believe nothing.” 40 Then, evidently immersed in boredom, his youth gone as has his idealism, something happens that is to rejuvenate him, something akin to a religious experience. “Yes!” he exclaims, “it was after the War that this happened.” “This” refers to his momentous involvement with Apis, a bull calf among “many of ours” that “was indistinguishable from his companions.” Because it was sick, it was taken “into the big farmyard at home with us.” There, he says, “I observed him often.” 41 From his herdsman, Christophe, Voiron hears that the young bull even from the first would side-kick, apparently a rarity among bulls, and that he refused to be played by the boys pretending to be matadors but actually went directly for them rather than for the jackets they used as capes. Whether Christophe planted the notion into Voiron’s head that the bull could think or he reached that conclusion on his own is not clear, but he does become convinced of it, and that is the most significant single detail in the story. 42 Everything in his involvement with Apis, and thus everything that Voiron says about him in the story, follows from this one belief, that Apis could think. For Voiron it was like an epiphany from God, the revelation of a miraculous truth. What happened to him is somewhat akin to the situation of an atheist who suddenly becomes absolutely convinced, contrary to all his previous beliefs, that God in all his power and glory does exist. In the instance of André Voiron, the new conviction is the result of his need, perhaps an almost desperate need, of something to believe in, something extraordinary and youth renewing. In a burst of utmost sincerity (with just a touch of piteous plea) he asks the narrator also to believe: “Will you believe me if I tell you what a beast who thinks can achieve?” 43 If one does not believe that Apis could actually think as does a human (or superhuman) being, then all that Voiron is going to
tell will be considered sheer fantasy. The absolute prerequisite for accepting Voiron’s version of the bull’s behavior is that his listener believe, as he does, that Apis could think. That belief established, a world of inspirational meaning then emerges from the bull’s actions. That belief not established, a world of meaning emerges from Voiron’s conviction that the bull could think (when in actuality it could not). In the former instance, we learn a great deal about the bull; in the latter, we learn a great deal about the man.

Having become convinced that he owns a thinking bull, Voiron observes Apis more and more. He is increasingly drawn to him as he would be to a magnetic and special being, and he gradually becomes certain that the bull is also drawn to him. He is therefore seriously disappointed when Apis attacks him from behind while he is out riding on horseback. Angered and his feelings hurt, he strikes back at the bull with his whip and exclaims: “It was unworthy of thee, between us two.”

That remark poignantly indicates his growing sense of involvement, of intimacy, with the young bull. In Arles his special feeling for Apis is soon reestablished as he cheers for the bull (not the young bullfighters) during the French-style contests in which the animal is never killed. After a short period when he uncharacteristically refuses to act his age, when he acts under the influence of Apis like a youth in shirtsleeves, he returns to his dull routine as an elderly man: “I am no longer a scandalous old ‘sportif’ in shirtsleeves howling encouragement to the yellow son of a cow. I revert to Voiron Frères—wines, chemical manures, et cetera.”

What happens to Voiron, then, is that he becomes increasingly caught up in the mystique of the bull not because of what is inherent in the bull, though Apis is admittedly an unusually clever and brutal animal, but because of a great need within him to feel young and alive again. By the time Apis appeared in his life, Voiron had largely lost faith in the ideals he held as a youth. Whatever dreams he had for himself, whatever he most cherished, had been obscured and diminished by time and circumstances. His contemplation of Apis brings back into the foreground of his mind and imagination those qualities, which he once held high, most notably the artistry of great warriors and the artistry of great writers.

In Voiron’s mind these two different manifestations of artistry merge in Apis, and that is why at an especially crucial moment in his description of the bull’s performance in the Spanish town he refers to him as the “Cyrano of the Camargue.” The figure that Voiron alludes to is
probably not the actual author-soldier but the romantic hero portrayed in Edmond Rostand’s play *Cyrano de Bergerac*, which was first produced in Paris in 1897. The play enjoyed immediate and widespread popularity, and by the time “The Bull That Thought” was written, the protagonist, Cyrano, had become the prototypical romantic warrior-poet, indomitable in combat because of the unique artistry of his swordplay in combination with the self-abandoned fierceness of his bravery and unparalleled in poetry because of the striking artistry of his language in combination with the rare depth of his soul. In Voiron’s scenario, Apis is Cyrano in both roles, combative hero and author of poetic drama. But he is also an actor in the play that he is in the process of composing. Nearing the conclusion of the drama, it “remained only for Apis to clear his stage of the subordinate characters.” It was a moment of great intensity, for Apis “had now involved himself in a stupendous drama of which he only could supply the third act.” The audience viewing the play remains “on the razor-edge of emotion.” How was the great poet-dramatist-hero to end this extraordinary play? Even “Molière himself … might have been at a loss.”47 This Cyrano of the Camargue, as Voiron views him, does pull it off, however, and in such a manner as to increase greatly the reverence of his adoring disciple.

It must have been something of a challenge at first for Voiron to explain to himself one extremely important aspect of the bullfight that he was witnessing in Spain. How was it that the less-than-eminent matador Chisto made Apis, indomitable as he had proven to be, conform to him when the animal easily vanquished and embarrassed the more skillful bullfighter Villamarti? Voiron answers this question by determining that the happy outcome in the arena was the result of two factors: Chisto was actually more skillful than he had previously shown, and Apis nobly allowed himself to be humbled—the situation, again, resembles that in Christianity where Jesus humbles himself in a saving sacrifice—for the sake of saving a second-rate matador from mediocrity and self-disgust. This interpretation of Voiron’s was especially appropriate inasmuch as it fit so neatly with his reading of his own situation, and that, precisely, is why he came up with this particular explanation.

Voiron describes Chisto as he would describe himself, and he interprets what happens to the bullfighter in accord with his interpretation of what happens to him, thanks to Apis. The elderly Voiron could easily be speaking of himself before his experience with Apis when he calls the veteran bullfighter “Chisto, the eldest, and … the least inspired of all; mediocrity itself.”48 Apis changes the life of Chisto, in Voiron’s
thinking, as the bull changes his own life. Apis “saves” both of them. They are both, in a sense, reborn through his agency.

To “save” in this context means to restore, to bring back something precious that has been lost. Of course, Apis is not able literally to turn back the years in the lives of Chisto and Voiron; they are not actually any younger after their experiences with the bull. What Apis does is to make them remember what it feels like to be young, to have sliced away the layers of disenchantment and cynicism that have accumulated over the years and to see life from a more youthful perspective. “He inspired Chisto too,” Voiron says. “My God! His youth returned to that meritorious beef-sticker—the desire, the grace, and the beauty of his early dreams. One could almost see that girl of the past for whom he was rising, rising to these present heights of skill and daring. It was his hour too—a miraculous hour of dawn returned to gild the sunset.”

As he sees Chisto’s situation as joyful, so does André Voiron see his own: “a miraculous hour of dawn,” that is, a brief time of youth, has “returned to gild the sunset” of his life. He has developed an interest in automobiles, bets with strangers on the speed of them, and indulges in late-night conversation about the bull that saved him from self-conceived mediocrity and boredom, the bull that he, in turn, saved from oblivion by telling about him. Among Voiron’s closing remarks about Chisto and Apis are these: “Apis knew that he had saved Chisto, so Chisto would save him. Life is sweet to us all; to the artist who lives many lives in one, sweetest. Chisto did not fail him.” Voiron lives many lives now, one of which, the sweetest of all of which, is that of narrator of a wonderful story. He tells it with the deep feeling of conviction and with rare eloquence, for he is an artist himself, an artist “at heart—and it is the heart that conquers always.” He has not failed Apis but has taken the bull to dwell within him as a religious convert takes within the Holy Spirit of God to guide, to enliven, and to make life more abundant. In this sense, then, André Voiron and Apis have become one. He is not only the head of “Voiron Frères—wines, chemical manures, et cetera,” but he is also “this ‘Cyrano of the Camargue.’”