Classical Episteme: or "Le vrai peut quelquefois n'être pas vraisemblable"

by
Selma A. Zebouni

According to the *Petit Robert*, Episteme is the "Ensemble des connaissances réglées (conceptions du monde, sciences, philosophies...) propres à un groupe social, à une époque." "Classical Episteme," therefore, is an overwhelming subject to address, because the seventeenth century, from the epistemological standpoint, may be the most complex, ambiguous and fruitful period in the history of Western thought.

Precisely because I am a "classicist," I have had to address the problem of the epistemological grounding of the conceptual framework of classicism, since I understand that classicism is founded on a theory of Art based on the notion of *mimesis*, that is, representation/simulation of nature/reality. This notion of *mimesis*, along with the emphasis on the didactic dimension of Art (Horace's *utile dulci*) implies a theory of knowledge, and its corollary, an epistemological stance.

It is this epistemological stance which is problematized by the distinction, current in the classical period, between the notions of "vrai" and "vraisemblable." *Le vrai* or truth, whatever its nature (Platonic, Aristotelian, Epicurian,...) always implies the objective, the a priori, the given *before*-meaning. *Le vraisemblable*, on the other hand, grounds the episteme in a cultural event, an "appearing" or "seeming" to an audience inscribed within its own historicity. Most discussions on these two basic notions of French classicism have been more or less successful attempts at reconciling their contradictory nature, often by occulting either one or the other. Limitations preclude any attempt at a fair survey of these discussions. It might be enough to illustrate two of the extreme positions taken by critics: from the totally idealistic definition of *le vraisemblable* to the purely theoretical.

In the seventeenth century Rapin offers a "Platonic" definition of "vraisemblance" and opposes it favorably to truth or "vérité": "La vérité est toujours défectueuse par le mélange des conditions singulières qui la composent"

(emphasis mine). In this context, truth is therefore, for Rapin, equated with reality as the particular, grounded in existence. He then argues that "Il faut chercher des originaux et des modèles dans la vraisemblance" which he defines as "les principes universels des choses où il n'entre rien de matériel et de singulier qui les corrompe." Therefore "vraisemblance" for Rapin is the world of "Ideas", of "Forms", of essences. In this century, Antoine Adam, following Rapin's idealistic lead, speaks of "une imitation de la nature qui, par-delà le réel, atteint ce que le siècle appelle le vraisemblable et qu'il serait plus juste d'appeler la vérité idéale." (Adam 135)[1] More recently, on the other hand, Gérard Genette, in a well-known essay, equates what he calls "la servilité du vraisemblable" with "un corps de maximes et de préjugés qui constitue tout à la fois une vision du monde et un système de valeurs." (Genette, 71-92)

So, on the one hand verisimilitude is even more true ("vérité idéale") than truth ("la vérité"), and on the other it is servile conformity to vulgar opinion ("prejudices"). These opposite interpretations are useful to the extent that they draw attention to the contradictory epistemological stance involved in the opposition between "vrai" and "vraisemblable." Which brings us face to face with our problem: can the classical theory of art as imitation of nature/truth/reality subscribe to both truth and verisimilitude?

I would like to clarify the issue by stressing that my concern here is the theoretical conceptual framework of classicism. I believe that as an "ideology," this conceptual framework is based on the notion of *mimesis*, which makes it, in my opinion, Aristotelian. Mimesis is a difficult and important notion, which might lead to confusion. An esteemed colleague of mine, commenting on my interpretation of Classicism, remarked that "mimesis...does not always have the same sense in Plato, Aristotle or Horace, and the differences are significant not only in themselves but also for their impact on Renaissance and 17th-century theoreticians." He added that "...following Borgerhoff...there are numerous 17th century classicisms."[2]

I could not agree more with both statements. There is no denying the multiple nature of the classical "production." One can certainly transpose Arthur

Lovejoy's famous pronouncement on Romanticism in his "On the Discrimination of Romanticisms," (PMLA, XXXIX (1924) 229-253) and affirm that there is not one Classicism but many "Classicisms". But Arthur Lovejoy notwithstanding, the very use of the suffix *ism* implies a common denominator, a categorical identity, which makes for the use of one label, in this instance the word "classical," as opposed to any other that could come to mind. Furthermore, Classicism possesses what Romanticism doesn't, namely, after René Bray, a "doctrine." (Bray) Antoine Adam argues that:

> "De 1620 à 1680 les théoriciens et les critiques sont à peu près unanimes autout d'un corps d'idées littéraires, que nous appelons la doctrine classique. Boileau ne l'a point inventée. Il l'a reçue déjà constituée de ses devanciers...Elle était aussi nette avant lui que chez lui."(Adam 134)

This is not to claim that classicism *is* as René Bray or Antoine Adam describe it but simply to point out that it lends itself to a coherent, comprehensive interpretation. Such an interpretation is impossible without a dominant conceptual framework to support it. And however one interprets classicism, that interpretation can be grounded on *one* conceptual framework only. Given the essential epistemological differences between them, one simply cannot state that classicism can be Platonic *and* Aristotelian *and* Epicurian, and so on. We have to choose. And if we cannot, then we must work to reconcile the differences in order to warrant the use of the common label "classicism." My colleague notwithstanding, the concept of *mimesis* which the "doctrine" implies cannot be therefore both Aristotelian and Platonic. It can only be either/or.

In his "Platonisme et Classicisme," Jules Brody argues convincingly for a strong Platonic basis for Classicism:

> "L'on entend par classicisme, non pas un mouvement littéraire, ce qu'il ne fut jamais, mais une mentalité particulière, une façon de voir, une manière de se représenter la nature essentielle de la vérité, qu'elle soit morale, esthétique, ou intellectuelle, et, ce qui est plus important, la nature du rapport qui existe, ou qu'on croit devoir exister, entre cette vérité et l'esprit humain auquel

> il incombe de l'appréhender et de la connaître."(202-203)

But, in my opinion, his description of the classical process is closer to the Aristotelian model than to the Platonic one. The confusion is, to some extent, understandable since Aristotle, as student of Plato, was formed by the Platonic-Socratic philosophy of life, namely: immortality of the soul, the right order of the soul, the true being of the Idea, the order of reality through *methexis*, through participation in the Idea,...and so on. Therefore his thought has much in common with Platonic thought. The problems he worked on were problems raised by Platonic assumptions.

In the specific domain which interests us here, i.e., the problem of *mimesis*, both Plato and Aristotle are in agreement on the presence of Form: Idea, essence (Rapin's "les principes universels des choses"), in empirical reality. But for Plato the origin of *realized* form is in a realm of *separate* forms, of a transcendental reality. For Aristotle on the other hand essences do not enter becoming from a transcendental realm of being. The form is perceived *as such* in reality, through a function of the mind, through *noesis*. And there are no essential beings except the essences which are *discerned* as such in reality.[3]

Which makes for a clear opposition between Platonic transcendentalism and idealism on the one hand and Aristotelian immanentism and realism on the other, an opposition directly reflected in the well-known opposite value both ascribe to mimesis. In *The Republic*, Plato's condemnation of poets because of the mimetic character of their work is unequivocal, and this in spite of his love and reverence for what he calls Homer's "mighty spell." Since for Plato the object of the search for truth is the original Idea, reality as imitation is obviously not the original. Furthermore art as imitation of an imitation is a reality "at the third remove." What's more, the mimetic artist, in his desire to please his audience, might want to represent not the truth but only those appearances that will please.

Aristotle on the other hand, does away with the distinction between the two separate realms. Truth being immanent in nature makes nature the normative matrix of truth, and art as imitation of the "Ideal form" or truth, is

therefore the supreme teacher, since it is a kind of mimetic knowledge.

Consequently, given this contradictory valuation of *mimesis* by Plato and Aristotle, and unless in the 17th century art is *not*, on the whole, predicated on an imitation/representation of Nature/Reality/Truth, then Boileau's paradigmatic "Imitez la nature" and "Seule la nature est vraie" seem to me to constitute an obvious Aristotelian premise for Classicism.[4]

So much for Aristotle and Plato, which of course does not solve the problem. On the contrary, the Aristotelian conceptual premise based on mimesis is predicated on the reliability of sense data: things can be known in themselves because sense experience is reliable. The world as Nature/Truth/Reality is intelligible through the senses and through reason which is, to quote Aristotle, "the principle alike in works of Art and in works of Nature." Which is why, if we go back to Rapin's definition he can affirm the coincidence of a truth that can transcend reality, and "l'opinion du public," a public perfectly capable of *discerning* the ideal behind the particulars of the given. Rapin does not doubt either his senses or his reason.

But the 17th century is recognized today, especially, through the work of Michel Foucault, as a period of epistemological change, even of rupture, although I personally reject the latter notion. Among other factors, the remarkable surge of skepticism, from Montaigne to the libertine philosophy to Bayle, affects one way or another the whole century; I shall leave to another study the manner in which the century is affected by skeptcism. But in regard to the particular problem addressed here, we can immediately see the paradox, the contradiction: on the one hand a theory of Art predicated on the reliability of sense data to discern truth (in order to imitate it), on the other a generalized problematization of the possibility of attaining truth through the senses or otherwise. Or to reverse somewhat Boileau's famous aphorism "le vraisemblable peut-il être vrai?"

I would like to argue that the century did, to some extent, resolve the contradiction by evolving the discourse of science, and that this discourse can be seen as informing as well the discourse of classicism. Indeed, it is in the

seventeenth century that philosophy as search for truth, and science as the acquisition of knowledge, came to a parting of the ways. Following Michel Foucault's description of the preceding medieval and Renaissance episteme, (Foucault 32-59) we can conclude that its thrust was a search for truth, for an Ur-text, a word of the origins to be found in a hierarchy of correspondences structured by resemblance. As Walter Benjamin puts it: "tirelessly the process of thinking makes new beginnings returning in a roundabout way to its original object" (28). This discourse was posited on an uninterrupted circularity between Man and the World and on the inseparability of the Name and the Thing. The discourse of science, or knowledge, on the other hand, is posited on the radical separation of the knowing subject from the object of knowledge, the World as Other. The model for this radical separation is obviously Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum*, in which knowledge is a reasoning practice upon the world. Foucault's description of classical episteme as informed by "representation" (opposed to the "ressemblance" that precedes it) is by now a standard accepted interpretation (Foucault 60-91), although its reductionism, inherent in all structuralist approaches, has been exposed and qualified, among others, by Louis Marin (*La Critique du discours*) for instance, and Timothy Reiss in *The Discourse of Modernism*. Reiss disproves effectively the notion of epistemic rupture which Foucault's "archeology" posits, when he traces the gradual emergence of modern discourse, which he calls "analytico-referential," from the preceding discourse of "patterning" (his own term).

What the discourse of science does is impose "the discursive *I* upon the world outside it" (Reiss). The mind perceives the object and then by an ordering activity conceives it. The result is that the intellect (reason) imposes its structure upon the world as matter. In this process the mind perceives, measures, calculates, and interprets; an interpretation or conception which relies on the statistical reliability of the accumulation of particulars. A statistical reliability verified by experimentation *on* the world. In this manner the mind possesses the world, and to quote Walter Benjamin again - this possession is what qualifies knowledge as opposed to truth. "Truth bodies forth in the dance of represented ideas, resists being projected, by whatever means, into the realm of

knowledge. Knowledge is possession. Its very object is determined by the fact that it must be taken possession of." (29)

It should be evident by now that this knowledge as possession is the knowledge of phenomena and not of truth or essences.

> "Knowledge is open to question but truth is not. Knowledge is concerned with individual phenomena, but not directly with their unity. The unity of knowledge--if indeed it exists--would consist rather in a coherence which can be established [in the consciousness] only on the basis of individual insights..." (30)

To come back finally to Classicism we might want to draw the parallel that truth is to "vrai" what knowledge is to "vraisemblance." "L'opinion du public" then can be interpreted neither as Genette would have it, a servile catering to arbitrary and prejudiced taste, nor as "la vérité idéale" of Adam, but knowledge derived from the *experience* of reality. And it is this knowledge which would constitute "vraisemblance."

In this manner, many if not all of the inner tensions and contradictions of the so-called classical doctrine could be, if not resolved, at least made irrelevant: the confusion in and between the notions of Truth, Reality, Nature, "Vraisemblance"; the opposition of Nature as truth, and Taste as culture; the insistence on the need for, yet distrust of, public approval; the pre-eminence of decorum of "bienséances" in a theory of art committed to imitation of reality as a given, and so on. Bernard Tocanne's impressive *L'Idée de nature en France dans la seconde moitié du XVIIème siècle*, praiseworthy for its erudition and analyses, fails nevertheless to reach a conclusion that would dispel the confusion between Nature, Truth and Reality as is evident in the following:

> "L'art dégage de la confusion de la réalité empirique une sorte de forme intelligible qui est le vrai de l'art, et répond à la perception confuse qu'en a tout homme. La nature n'est pas la réalité empirique, elle en est plus exactement sa forme intelligible, l'universalité de l'art dans la

> communauté du vrai où les hommes peuvent se reconnaître." (Tocanne 304)

The equation between "réalité empirique," "Nature," "forme intelligible," "vrai de l'art," "communauté du vrai"..., may be valid; however, none of these notions, however, is given a clear epistemological basis, and the confusion remains.

In final analysis, the validity of any theory lies in its application in practice. I believe the classical "production," on the whole, supports the interpretation of Nature/Truth/Reality as a gathering and ordering of phenomena. Limitations of space precluding this being treated here, I can only point toward various areas. One is the general contention with which we are all familiar that Classicism's thrust is not philosophical (search for truth) but psychological (the description of human behavior). Another is the pre-eminence of the theatre as the locus for the imitation of life as action, and motives as deduced from behavior. When we turn to the moralists we find that their vision of Man, derived from observation, is of one caught in a set of relationships or laws which condition his being: "La raison du plus fort est toujours la meilleure," "les vertus se perdent dans l'interêt comme les fleuves dans la mer." *La Princesse de Clèves* can be (and has been) viewed as an experiment conducted "en vase clos," of a maxim (defined as a psychological law or notion) devised in one of the *salons*.

To conclude I would like to quote, in order to stress its difference from mine, Erica Harth's interpretation of Boileau's famous "Il n'est point de serpent ni de monstre odieux/Qui par l'art imité ne puisse plaire aux yeux." She holds that "Boileau would accept any "monstre odieux" on the stage as long as it was rendered "aimable," inoffensive, in keeping with the "bienséances." (Harth. "Exorcizing teh Beast..." 23) And more recently referring to the same lines: "Art transforms the monstrous into the pleasurable and in so doing calls attention to itself as mediation." (Harth. "Classical Science..." 26) I agree with the emphasis on Art both as illusion and as mediation, but we must not forget that Boileau continues with the emphasis at the rhyme on "pleurs"-"douleurs", "alarmes"-"larmes":

> Ainsi pour nous charmer, la tragédie en pleurs
> D'Oedipe tout sanglant fit parler les douleurs,

D'Oreste parricide exprima les alarmes,
Et, pour nous divertir, nous arracha des larmes.

Oedipus and Orestes are monsters. But their "douleurs" and their "alarmes" are not. "Douleurs" and "alarmes" are the common ground of experience shared by both the characters on the stage and the spectators in the audience.

Louisiana State University

Notes

[1]He also cites Rapin.

[2]Since these remarks were made in a private communication, I do not feel free to divulge my source. I simply consider this quote as representative of an attitude which I disagree with and feel needs rebuttal.

[3]For this whole discussion on the comparison between Plato and Aristotle, see Eric Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle* (Baton Rouge, 1957), pp. 131-134 and 271-292.

[4]When Brody notes that the 17th century reconciled Plato's condemnation of poets and a notion of art based on imitation he is, in fact, describing the Aristotelian process: "A vrai dire, il n'était guère difficile de réintégrer l'art dans le schème platonicien. Quoi de plus simple après tout que de dire que ce n'est nullement la réalité concrète de tous les jours que l'artiste va chercher à reproduire; que c'est, au contraire, l'Idée même, cette réalité essentielle et pure que, dorénavant, les poètes et les peintres vont prétendre imiter? Donc, tout en retenant la métaphysique platonicienne, et en même temps en supprimant ou, plutôt, en négligeant quelques-unes de ses conséquences gênantes, les défenseurs de l'art surent remettre le peintre et le poète sur un pied d'égalité avec le philosophe." (191).

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