

DRYDEN (1631-1700)

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Deg-III Hons, Paper-V, Lecture No-15

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John Dryden is regarded 'as the Father of English Criticism'. Before him, though there were occasional utterances on critical art, yet the regular critical writing was still not in practice. With Dryden begins a regular era of criticism, as in spite of the scattered nature of his criticism there is no literary problem confronting his age which escaped his attention. He not only showed the way how to write criticism, but very convincingly also defined what accounts for greatness in literature. 'An Essay of Dramatic Poesy' is the only formal critical treatise of Dryden. The rest of ~~the~~ his critical views are contained in the prefaces of his own poetical works or to those of others. Even in the scattered form, Dryden's criticism leaves us in no doubt as to what he thought of the nature and function of poetry, of its forms, of the business of criticism and of the great writers who interested him.

Dryden in his critical approach combined the merits of both the native tradition and the classical. His criticism is partly a restatement of the precepts of Aristotle, partly a plea for French neo-classicism and partly a deviation from both under the influence of Longinus and Evremond. From Aristotle he learnt a respect for rules, ^{French neo-classicism taught him to prefer} ~~and to Longinus and Evremond~~ ^{the epic to tragedy} ~~to~~ insist moral in it and many other things. To Longinus and Saint-Evremond he owed a respect for his own judgement. He is thus a liberal classicist who would adjust the rules of the ancients to the genius of the age, to which a poet writes. With his likeness for classical learning

Dryden upholds Aristotle's definition of poetry as a process of imitation. It imitates what was or is (facts past or present), what is said or thought to be (popular beliefs and superstitions), and what ought to be (things in their ideal form). The general accepted view of poetry in his day was that it kept close to facts past and present and the critic looked in it for verisimilitude. Dryden therefore takes pains to emphasise the other two forms of imitation. On the basis of this he defends Shakespeare's use of the supernatural, founded on popular beliefs, as it was a form of imitation. Though the same was criticised by some ^{critics} people as fancy. Dryden gives his own explanation of why imitation pleases. 'As Truth', he says 'is the end of all our speculations, so the discovery of it is the pleasure of them; and since a true knowledge of Nature gives us pleasure, a lively imitation of it, either in poetry or painting ... produce a much greater' delight.

As regards to the function of poetry Dryden had his own individual approach to it. Among the great classical ^{critics} thinkers Plato wanted poetry to instruct, Aristotle to delight, Horace to do both, and Longinus to transport. Dryden was familiar with them all and had his own considerable experience as a reader and writer. All this led him to conclude that the final end of poetry was ~~not~~ delight and transport rather than instruction and, to realise it, it did not merely imitate life but offered its own version of it — 'a beautiful resemblance of the whole'. But he also ~~admits~~ agrees that instruction can be admitted as an objective of poetry but only ^{in the second place} after delight. According to Dryden a poet "is neither a teacher nor