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Edward Pechter

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

Dryden's earliest critical essay was written in 1664, a dedicatory epistle of his first verse play, *The Rival Ladies*. From this date until his death in 1700 Dryden scarcely passed a year without writing a preface, an essay, a discourse, a literary biography – without writing some piece of criticism. If we wanted to include the letters and the prologues and epilogues which often serve a critical function in subordinate ways, the qualifying 'scarcely' would be unnecessary. What results from this long and steady devotion to criticism is a body of work that is, first of all, substantial in the simplest sense, that of quantity. Later critics, Samuel Johnson and Matthew Arnold for examples, built larger bodies of criticism. Moreover, we do not tend to think of Dryden as primarily a critic, as we do of Johnson and Arnold. This is quite proper because the critical endeavor for Dryden was not primary, being always subordinate to the writing of poetry; but if we turn our glance from what followed to what preceded Dryden, the scope of his criticism is singularly impressive. Nothing like it exists in English; and I speak now not only of its substantial size, but of its kind. Many English writers from Elyot to Bacon touch briefly on the place of literature and literary studies, but only as a part of the larger theme of man and his world. Sidney's *Apologie*, generally acknowledged to be the masterpiece of English criticism in the Renaissance, though concerned directly and completely with literature, relegates this concern consistently to the ultimate question of literature's location within a hierarchy of ethical values. As a synthesis of elements in continental and particularly Italian theory, Sidney's *Apologie*, while obviously a rich and vital statement of

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literary criticism, may be viewed, like the criticism of the writers I have already mentioned, as an aspect of Renaissance humanism. Another tradition of Renaissance criticism, represented by the rhetorical theorists (Wilson, Fraunce, Puttenham, for examples, but the tradition continues until Dryden's own time), is limited in the main to questions of style, and where not so limited, as in the first book of Puttenham's *Arte*, tends to wage its action on the same battlefield as Sidney.

Dryden – to change metaphors and, perhaps, to oversimplify – brought literary criticism out of the church and into the coffee house. In Dryden's criticism, it is possible very nearly for the first time to examine literary works and literary problems on their own terms, free from the felt need consistently to justify literature itself on grounds that are finally religious in nature. To be sure, the concerns of Renaissance criticism find their way into Dryden's criticism. As a serious thinker about literature, he was bound to explore its relation to the larger concerns of life, to locate it, as I have said of Renaissance critics, within a hierarchy of ethical values. But this location is much less explicitly, and certainly not primarily, Dryden's concern. Dryden writes about poems and poetry in specific, from Virgil to Cowley, from Sophocles to Etherege, from the sublime to the under-plot, and always with the inclusion of the works of Dryden himself. He wrote much more criticism than Sidney, but it is the difference in kind rather than in quantity that makes unimaginable the idea of a book on Sidney comparable to John Aden's dictionary, *The Critical Opinions of John Dryden*.¹

The closest precedent to Dryden in English criticism is Jonson's *Timber, or Discoveries*. As in other respects – his verse style, his dramaturgy – Dryden in his criticism looked back to Jonson. Old and new evolutionary theories both describe accurately the relation between Dryden and Jonson in the history of English criticism. Primarily the new holds; they have common ancestors, Horace especially, in classical antiquity. At the same time Jonson's effort to bring classical ideas and modes of thought into the English tradition justifies his being called a link between Dryden and the classics. However, from *Timber* to Dryden's criticism is still a quantum jump. Though Jonson, in deflecting criticism from its metaphysical concerns, brought it closer to conversation and specificity, he only suggested possi-

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bilities which, the exchange between Davenant and Hobbes notwithstanding, were not realized until Dryden. Dryden organized these possibilities into a fully working assumption, a new assumption, that the intelligent discussion and evaluation of literature based upon an understanding of its internal proprieties – ‘the rules’, if you wish – was a pursuit justifiable in its own terms, that a proper study of mankind was books, not as a means to grace, but as a means to enjoyment. Dryden is, as Johnson called him in a slightly different context, ‘the father of English criticism’.²

As practitioners of English criticism we have a vested interest in assessing our patrimony, and the essay that follows is an attempt at such an assessment. Only a partial assessment, however; this book is not an ‘overview’, not an attempt to provide a ‘full-scale account’ of Dryden’s criticism. I am quoting from Robert D. Hume’s recent study, *Dryden’s Criticism*,³ which fulfills these ends with such comprehensive sophistication as to leave – I make extravagant use of Dryden’s extravagantly admiring comment about Shakespeare – ‘no praise for any who come after him’. The following chapters are considerably more limited in scope, and these limitations may be defined with reference to R. S. Crane’s influential article, ‘On Writing the History of Criticism in England, 1650–1800’. In this article, Crane describes ‘the three determinants of the internal character of any critical discourse’ the recognition of which makes fair and understanding commentary possible.⁴ These are, in paraphrase: 1. the particular problem or complex of problems which the critic wants to resolve; 2. the set of assumptions by which the critic’s problem is formulated, which distinguishes it from other problems; and 3. the reasoning devices, the modes of argument by which the critic arrives at his answer. My major interest is in the structure of Dryden’s literary theory, the way it is articulated and how its materials are organized and what this organization implies about his literary assumptions – in short, the second of Crane’s determinants. Because the structure of Dryden’s theory often has itself the effect of a reasoning device, directing and controlling the argument, I find myself frequently concerned with the third of Crane’s determinants as well. But the first I tend to ignore almost altogether.

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This is a limitation which must be confronted at the outset. In Dryden's case it is an especially questionable omission, because of the famously – the almost notoriously – occasional quality of his critical writing. Nearly all of Dryden's critical pieces are occasional in nature, predicated upon considerations that are immediate and personal – why he has written his work, or how, and why he feels it necessary to explain his methods. They are thus consistently related not only to poetic practice in general, but to the particular poems or plays which they introduce, and often the particular problems that arose in the writing of these poems and plays. About these problems, about the way these problems 'determine' Dryden's criticism, the reader will find little here, except in the last chapter and conclusion. The reason for this limitation is the reason for any limitation – to get a more detailed focus on what I do wish to discuss. Of course there is a point of diminishing returns, but whether this particular point has been exceeded here it is up to the book, not its introduction, to show. Meanwhile, I hope the title of the book and of its first section prevent false expectations: the *structure* of Dryden's *theory*, a particular emphasis on a single aspect, a tendency to abstract the discourse in question from the practical problems that contributed towards its articulation.

What is this structure? In a word, balance, the balance of the golden mean. 'Balanced' is often used to describe Dryden's writing, both poetry and prose, and to describe Augustan literature generally. But the term is often used imprecisely or incorrectly. We hear frequently about the 'antithetical' structure of the poetic line in Dryden and his contemporaries, as if this term were interchangeable with 'balanced'. This is not strictly so. 'Deep' and 'clear', 'gentle' and 'not dull' in Denham's famous line are not antitheses but contraries. They describe different values, both of which the poet admires and seeks. Or closer to home, Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*: Dryden's *Essay* is one of the acknowledged classics of literary theory, an essential anthology piece, yet like so many classics its interest and importance for us, even its significance, is not always immediately obvious. Who wins the debate, or is Dryden vacillating and unsure? These questions have dominated interpretations of *An Essay*, but they obscure and misrepresent the

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poise of its dialogue form. For Dryden in *An Essay* is not trying to reject some alternatives in favor of others, but to describe a variety of literary values, different but not contradictory or antithetical. All of them are legitimate, and the balance of the mean provides a structure of thought flexible enough to contain them all. The mean is classical, Greek in origin, and 'classical' is another critical epithet I've tried to restore to a more exact and meaningful usage. The mean predominates among some writers in antiquity (Aristotle, Plutarch, Horace, Longinus) and other writers around Dryden's time (Jonson, Boileau, Bouhours, Pope). Dryden's *Essay* and indeed his criticism generally should be seen as articulated within this classical tradition. Such a perspective allows us to recognize a far greater clarity and consistency of purpose in Dryden than has usually been granted. It enables us also to become familiar with a traditional mode of examining, ordering and understanding literary experience, vital throughout the Restoration and eighteenth century, and of enduring interest and value.

So much for the structure of Dryden's theory, and now context. By context I mean the cultural and historical circumstances in which the theory was produced. In the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* Crites asks rhetorically, 'Is it not evident, in these last hundred years...that almost a new Nature has been revealed to us?' It was during the most recent of these years, in the time of Dryden himself, when this revelation became pre-eminently evident, and though the specific nature of the changes is difficult to define, we can feel justified in accepting the understanding expressed by Dryden himself in *propria persona* throughout his writing that his was a truly new age. Every age is a new age, but some are newer than others in breaking more sharply with the past. One result of such a break is the need to establish a new set of norms that would be responsive to the new taste, the need, in some measure, to reinvent both literature and literary criticism. Dryden is often admired as a civilizing influence, in making the cultural traditions of contemporary Europe and classical antiquity available to English thought and art in ways far more profound than at any earlier time. If Dryden went eagerly to Boileau's Paris and Horace's Rome, the move was dictated in major part by his felt need to explore new and different ideas. And Dryden's

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responsiveness to the same need justifies our familiar description of him as 'a transitional figure'.

Yet as 'transitional figure' itself suggests, Dryden's novelty is a complicated phenomenon. In 'crossing over' to the new, he came well stocked with much freight, still usable, from the old. This complication characterizes his cultural as well as temporal novelty. Dryden may have civilized his countrymen by making available to them a sophisticated and highly developed foreign tradition, but he didn't just impose it; he incorporated it into a native tradition with its own kinds of sophistication. If he successfully Gallicized English taste, it was because he could Anglicize French thought. In this kind of complication resides the connection between the areas I study in this book, the link between structure and context. Dryden's characteristic structure is, I think, interesting in its looseness, in the way it can contain different ideas and values in a unity without either denying their differences or allowing them to realize their potential contradictoriness. His characteristic transitions themselves imply transitionality. At once unusually respectful of distinct identities and yet supremely capable of defining an area where they can peacefully coexist, they articulate a body of discourse admirably suited to organize a *variety* of material, old and new, native and foreign. Dryden's style, Samuel Johnson once remarked, lacked 'the formality of a settled style', rather being 'airy, animated, and vigorous'.⁵ If it is dynamic, if Dryden's critical style embodies a process of change, this is one measure of its unique adaptability to – or, equally plausible, its determination by – the variously changing contexts within which his criticism was produced.

The organization of this book follows from the interests I outline above. The first three chapters form a single section, an endeavor in explication and description of the structure of Dryden's theory. In the first chapter I range throughout his critical essays in order to examine some of their basic assumptions, techniques and strategies. In the second I analyze the argument as it develops in a single critical piece, *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*. The third chapter is an attempt to justify 'classical' as a description of Dryden's theory, by showing the affinities in mode between Dryden and classical writers, both ancient and contemporary, especially in the shared balance of

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the golden mean. The last three chapters broaden the focus to contexts. In the fourth I examine the relations between Corneille's and Dryden's dramatic criticism, with an emphasis upon the vitality of Dryden's ability to adapt and assimilate material borrowed from a different thinker in a different culture. In the fifth chapter I attempt to relate Dryden's theory at once to earlier and later traditions of critical thought in England, to Renaissance and Augustan views, the emphasis again upon Dryden's ability to contain multitudes within a meaningfully coherent structure. The last chapter is somewhat anomalous. Concerned with theory and practice, examining Dryden's criticism in terms of some of the particular problems it wished to resolve, this chapter seeks to go beyond the limitations self-imposed earlier. But it seeks also to make use of the material in earlier chapters in order to suggest how much variety and difference and change Dryden's poetry can comprehend.

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PART ONE: STRUCTURE

1

THE STRUCTURE OF DRYDEN'S THEORY

At the center of Dryden's theory of literature is doubleness. What I mean by doubleness is perhaps best explained by illustrations of what I do not mean. Doubleness does not mean the presence of antinomies, antitheses, paradoxes, polarities. All of these suggest such tension between two values or sets of values as precludes sustained coexistence. Both the Manichean heresy and Hegelian dialectic are examples of such structures in that they organize two different forces or ideas or values in ways that embody this kind of tension. In the Manichean heresy conflicting values compete for supremacy, for that state or stasis, however temporary or partial, when one has conquered the other. In Hegelian dialectic there is a similar conflict between mighty opposites, with the difference that thesis and antithesis merge into a new synthesis which becomes immediately a new thesis predicating a new antithesis in a continuing dialectic. Both of these examples describe a situation which is unstable as a result of the competition between equal or nearly equal forces, and which consequently must progress to a new situation. A third example of what I do not mean by Dryden's doubleness is in the relation between good and evil according to traditional Christian doctrine. The situation in this example is much more stable because evil is understood as merely a perversion of good; sin is love misdirected. The stability results from good's subsuming of evil; because good is of a higher order than evil, there can be no ultimate competition between them.

These ways of ordering experience are not helpful in describing the doubleness in Dryden's theory. They impose a kind of order that does not exist; indeed, a kind of order that Dryden

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wishes to avoid. A case in point of Dryden's doubleness is his admiration for both French drama and English drama. By faithfully observing the unities, the French dramatists, Dryden felt, ensured a close proportion between their plays as works of art and the nature which their plays imitated. For example, if a play took a few hours to perform, the time of its dramatic action should not extend to a period of years. A play that tried to represent years of action in a few hours would be conspicuously artificial. The unities, thus, are associated with the stylistic ideal of perspicuity, the concealment of art. Dryden's most general formula to describe the values he admired in French drama is *a just imitation of nature*. The esthetic values of English drama resided elsewhere, in what Dryden typically calls *a high* or *a lively imitation of nature*. Here the emphasis is not so much on a close proportion between the play and nature as on the elevation and magnitude of the play itself. If French plays depend especially on the judgment, the observing faculty, English plays are primarily the product of the fancy, the elevating faculty. English dramatic action is varied, more complex, and the characters of English drama are larger than life. While French drama is characterized by perspicuity, the particular pleasure of the English stage comes from the audience's sense of the artist as he choreographs his action, unravels his complications in ways too richly complete to be supposed the result of chance.

Dryden's attitude towards French and English drama suggests the nature of his doubleness of view and the inapplicability of the other structures I have described to characterize this doubleness. French and English drama do not correspond to black and white, the mighty opposites of Manicheanism, nor to the poles of Hegelian dialectic. If we picture Dryden's criticism as a dramatic struggle between mutually exclusive values, we are projecting onto his sensibility a psychomachia which, interesting as it might be in itself, is not typical of his mind. He perceives literary qualities in terms of complementaries – both/and; a statement of preference in an exclusive sense, either/or, tends to be the last kind of statement that Dryden wishes to make. There are values in French drama and there are values in English drama, and any responsible theory of literature ought to respond to both sets. The French can