Introduction

English poetry of the late seventeenth century and the eighteenth century has attracted many faithful readers and a number of good critics, but it still seems, among college students and the public at large, to be at a disadvantage, to labour under a certain unpopularity. It may be that Matthew Arnold's condescending damnation, "Dryden and Pope are not classics of our poetry, they are classics of our prose,"[1] has done its work so well as to leave lingering effects a century later. General notions of the period have not helped. "The Age of Reason" is a phrase that arouses dislike, perhaps because the hearer conceives him or herself to be less devoted to reason, or less capable of using it, than those who would seem to flourish it about. Attempts have been made to substitute other descriptions of the period, e.g. "The Age of Exuberance," "The Age of Passion," but the older term has stuck.[2] And we have not time to explain quite what our writers meant by "Reason" before a large part of our potential audience wanders away. The term "Augustan" puts off students and other readers, as it seems to refer to something high and arcane, something so Roman and classical as to remain ever obscure to a modern mind.

The novelists of the eighteenth century have by now been largely rescued from the opprobrium in which the whole period once seemed sunk. Novelists write about characters, about adventures and money and sex; they are entertaining, and not really "Augustan." Besides, the novel as a genre was not classical, not a regulated or traditional form; writers could invent and experiment as they went along. But was not poetry in the period subject to set ideas of correctness, enslaved to rules, and directed not (like the novel) to the mass of readers but to well-read gentlemen? How then could such poetry appeal to us?

Something like this reasoning (crudely put here) would seem to have inhibited the study and, more important, the general enjoyment of poetry of the period between the flourishing of the Metaphysicals and the rise of the Romantics. Our modern poets, too, have in general not been notably eager to talk about their relation to Augustan poets, even if real relationships may be seen to exist. T. S. Eliot experimented with couplets somewhat in Pope's manner in the original version of *The Waste Land*, but Ezra Pound told him to take them out, remarking "Pope has done this so well that you cannot do it better."[3] With direct imitation suppressed, the influence of Pope (and of others of the period just before and just after Pope) on Eliot remained obscured. Eliot is better known as the champion of the Metaphysicals, whom he helped to raise into new favour; despite his essay on Dryden,[4] he did not do much for the

reputation of the Augustans. Indeed, they remain the poor fragmented victims of "dissociation of sensibility."

No cure is here offered for this state of affairs. But it seems right that those of us who do like "Augustan" poetry should speak out. The time would seem to be right for offering new reasons for liking the poems. Too much talk about "decorum" and "correctness" can only depress the uninitiated, and even among the initiated some of us may feel there are matters of more importance to be discussed first. The time seems propitious. There have been many excellent new studies of poets of the period, some of them indicating a more lively and stirring view of our Augustans. To single out new works would be invidious, but I would like to pay a special tribute to Donald Davie's discussion of Watts and Wesley.[5] The placement of hymns within the canon of eighteenth-century literature is welcome and long overdue; the new interest may indicate a welcome amplification of the canon in general. There are a number of indicators that the period (or rather, our view of what constituted the literary work of the period) is getting bigger, is broadening so as to include more of what was written – by Dissenters, for instance, or by women. Studies of Restoration and eighteenth-century literature are at present in a more restless and mobile state than formerly. Now would seem to be the time to persuade not only college students but also general readers to take another look at the poetry. It also seems possible now to hazard some speculations, to take up some positions even at the risk of being wrong – to become, in short, controversial about Augustan poetry, a topic that has seldom been truly controversial because the poems have been too seldom read, or read widely.

What I propose is not a complete discussion of Augustan poetry (that would be impossible) but a discussion of some major points of interest. I do not deal with only one poet, nor do I take up a group of writers hitherto little regarded (female poets, hymn writers) though these may figure in my discussion. It is my major purpose to restore the sense of excitement that can come from a reading of Augustan poetry.

It is true that "Augustan" is not a really satisfactory term for the poetry I am describing. It is both too specific and too vague. It meant various things to contemporaries; in 1709 Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, thought the "*Augustean Days*" in England had gone with the age of Charles I I.[6] Some modern critics have tried to do without the word. Donald Greene treats "Augustan" and "Augustanism"[7] (a "maddeningly opaque term") to a memorable rejection. Yet, if it is not a satisfactory term, it is the term we have, the one we have used for years, the one that inspires recognition. It is partly my object to change slightly what "Augustan" means, so that certain forms of poetic excitement become associated with the term. It is not a novelty to point out that there is a resemblance and a relationship between the works of very diverse poets from Butler and Dryden to Cowper and Crabbe, and that poets from 1660 to the end of the following century (or even slightly beyond that) come into the same story. The relationship between a poet like Dryden (or

Thomson or Pope) and a Romantic poet like Wordsworth (or Coleridge or Keats) also exists, but that is another story; it is, however, true that English literature can in one light be seen as a continuum and that all breaks of "periods" and so forth are somewhat artificial. The "Augustans" were what the Romantics knew.

I wish, however, to stress qualities that I think are peculiar to or characteristic of this poetry which is often too little regarded. My emphasis will be on the excitement of the works, and on their strangeness. That is not because strangeness is all that could be found in the poetry, but because precisely these qualities have received least attention, and are least associated with the poetic work of the age. Even "irony" or "wit" (topics which have been much talked about in this connection) could, at least momentarily, become clearer or more engaging if seen in stimulating association with other matters. I take the liberty of ranging in time and in hierarchies. That is, the discussion is not primarily chronological, and "minor" or almost unknown works will be quoted as well as the works of the established poets.

After first discussing in general some of the most salient characteristics of the adventurous Augustan poetry, I shall turn in the second chapter briefly to the past, the past of the Civil War, to examine the origins of the new poetry which, as the following chapter observes, was marked by stylistic versatility, generic self-consciousness and distrust of set forms. The fourth chapter deals with what the English Augustans found useful or congenial in the great Roman poets, particularly in those who were markedly versatile in use of styles and experimental in genre. The fifth chapter, "Charivari and metamorphosis," discusses the Augustan poem in the light of its energies of transformation. The sixth chapter traces out connections between the English eighteenth-century novel and the poetry of the age in terms of similarities in modes of proceeding, in transformations and in formal distrusts. The eighteenth-century English novel has long been felt by students to be more accessible than the poetry; I wish to show how closely related they are and to point out that understanding the one assists comprehension of the other. The last chapters deal with more purely "poetic" topics, ultimately bringing the entire previous discussion to bear on a detailed examination of the use and significance of that great poetic achievement, the Augustan couplet.

I do not believe that my discussion will provide a final statement on Augustan poetry. I could not even hope for that – should not, as Augustan poetry is greater than any (or all) of its critics. ("Critic" is a portentous word in the period, and the Augustans gave us much good advice about "*Pride*, the *never-failing Vice of Fools*.") I do hope, however, that some new suggestions will be found stimulating, will arouse some argument and response, and, in so doing, will help push Augustan poetry to the forefront of the consciousness of those who like English poetry. Some of my suggestions may seem peculiar, others rash, but literary rashness, as the Augustans themselves were fond of pointing out, is not always a fault if it serves some worthy end.

I

Appetite, imperialism and the fair variety of things

Pope had likewise genius; a mind active, ambitious, and adventurous, always investigating, always aspiring; in its widest searches still longing to go forward, in its highest flights still wishing to be higher; always imagining something greater than it knows, always endeavouring more than it can do. (Johnson, *Life of Pope*)

Johnson's statement about Pope which here serves as epigraph can be taken as a description of the eighteenth-century idea of poetic genius. In a sentence whose structure echoes the sense (the clauses still longing to go forward) Johnson defines the poetic mind, and poetry itself: it investigates, aspires, goes wide and high, always tries to surpass the point where it is. Without this adventurous excitement there is no great poetry. In defending Pope against detractors (like Joseph Warton), Johnson is appealing to standards recognized throughout the age from Dryden to Crabbe. Poetry is active, experimental (endeavouring more than it can do) and vitally energetic. At the end of the previous century Swift (or his Apollo) makes a similar statement in his exhortation to Congreve; the "vigorous fancy" has to have room to move about in, and must not be forced into depressing conformity, or yield in subjection to academic or other regulation:

> *Beat not the dirty paths where vulgar feet have trod,*
> *But give the vigorous fancy room.*
> For when like stupid alchymists you try
> To fix this nimble god,
> This volatile mercury,
> The subtil spirit all flies up in fume;
> Nor shall the bubbl'd virtuoso find
> More than a fade insipid mixture left behind.
> ("To Mr. Congreve," 1693)

Swift's own verse here exhibits the daring he is urging upon the dramatist. The verse form has altered for this prophetic or oracular stanza into an imitation "Pindaric" mode (the rest of the "Ode" is "Horatian"). The image alters suddenly, so we move from footpaths to alchemy; the alchemical imagery in a profusion of technical terms is played with in the metaphysical manner. There seems to be, as well, a slight comic allusion to Volpone's mountebank speech describing unsuccessful competitors (*Volpone* II. i), and to various parts of *The*

Alchemist (e.g. II. i; IV. iii). Such transplanted reference, put to new and original use, is far from being mere imitation or conformity, as Swift shows.

The whole of Swift's "To Mr. Congreve" exhibits the force of "vigorous fancy." In it, the poet, speaking with confidence though with assumed bashfulness (at times) to another writer (a contemporary), ranges through the world for metaphors, employs a number of styles and devices; he includes fables, and short narratives, and social vignettes after the manner of Rochester; his Muse among critics is like a "bright country virgin" caught up in a knot of rallying town beaux who offend her – much as the Yahoos are later to disgust Gulliver:

> *But with the odious smell and sight annoy'd*
> *In haste she does th'offensive herd avoid.*

Swift is nothing if not sensuous and particular, even in (or especially in) the sensuousness of satiric aversion. But such distasteful if fascinating images of disgust as "th'offensive herd," or "beds of dung," or worms which grow into city butterflies ("other kind of things / Than those with backs of silk and golden wings") are mingled in the poem with images of poetic beauty:

> Here by a mountain's side, a reverend cave
> Gives murmuring passage to a lasting wave;
> 'Tis the world's wat'ry hour-glass streaming fast,
> Time is no more when th'utmost drop is past;
> Here, on a better day, some druid dwelt,
> And the young Muse's early favour felt;
> Druid, a name she does with pride repeat,
> Confessing Albion once her darling seat.

The first two lines of this passage foreshadow Thomson. The second two lines compose a complete metaphysical image: a waterfall audaciously compared to an hour-glass. The last four lines here quoted also foreshadow Thomson's fondness for "druids" as representing the original vitality of English poetry. Swift's early poem can, as we look at it, become, like many "Augustan" poems when closely looked at, an archetype of the work of the whole period from the Metaphysicals to Crabbe. It surprises us with its range, its variety and its ability to mix likes with unlikes. Swift was not alone in finding the world *miscible* – or at least the poetic, the literary world.

The last verse-paragraph of "To Mr. Congreve" is a statement in four lines containing at once a riddle, an exhortation and a Biblical prophecy.

> In this descending sheet you'll haply find
> Some short refreshment for your weary mind,
> Nought it contains is common or unclean,
> And once drawn up, is ne'er let down again. (lines 231–4)

Swift tells Congreve, then, that the sheet (of verses) produced by his Muse may offer his fellow-writer refreshment, something to feed on, presumably not only

because of the encouragement and advice it contains but also because of the poetic entertainment it offers. It is, as Swift has said all along, a production for once and once only, as the poet rarely has such fire, and could write only under the inspiration of Congreve's own muse, borrowed (or prostituted) for the occasion. Yet Swift's conclusion is far from humble, certainly. The most outrageous thing about this poem is its ending. Swift's poem is compared, not to an offering, but to a vision supplied by God. The whole of these four lines is a sustained allusion to the apostle Peter's vision before he went to Cornelius the centurion, as recorded in Acts 10: 9–16. Peter fell into a trance

> 11 And saw heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending unto him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth:
> 12 Wherein were all manner of four-footed beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air.

A voice told Peter "Rise, Peter; kill, and eat" but the apostle was unwilling, "for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean." To this objection (a reference of course to the Jewish dietary laws) the voice from heaven replied "What God hath cleansed, *that* call not thou common." We are told "This was done thrice" (not just once) and then "the vessel" (or sheet) was "received up again into heaven."

Swift in his poem is making an impudent allusion to Holy Writ – impudent and serious. Though we are often told that the "Augustans" disliked puns, and certainly they were often willing to censure puns or "quibbles," Swift is not alone among Augustan writers in employing them; here the whole is a conceit, depending on the outrageous pun on "sheet" (of paper) and the "sheet" in Peter's vision. Swift says that his own work, like the sheet in Peter's vision, contains nothing that should be called "common or unclean." The poem ends by announcing a freedom from law and restriction (with Scriptural backing). The ending is a defence both jocular and spirited of that mixed quality (mixed in style, images, topics) of Swift's works. The traditional interpretation of Acts 10 (an interpretation supplied in the New Testament) is that Peter's vision told him that Jewish Christians must not despise the Gentiles, that the old rules against a Jew keeping company with people of another nation were no longer applicable, and that Jewish dietary laws need not obtain for Gentile converts to Christianity. Nothing is prohibited, nothing is to be shunned; everything can be taken in superabundance – mixed superabundance – and consumed. In Swift's poem, the implication is that all is open to the poet, all can be taken; no mixture of styles, no images of sources "clean" or "unclean" can be disdained. The poet under the New Law is not prohibited from the use of anything; all, including creeping things, can go into the poetry that fills his sheet. What God, or the Muse, hath cleansed, that call not thou common.

Swift's "To Mr. Congreve" could be called a late manifesto of Restoration poetics. Written thirty-three years after the Restoration, it gives voice to governing principles already recognizable and indeed set forth elsewhere by

Restoration poets. I have dwelt upon it because it gives such a succinct account of some major principles of daring, and because its final conceit clearly sets out one of the central characteristics of poetry we have come to call "Augustan." Liberty and audacity, adventure and experiment are central principles of our major poets of the period. Above all, they value the restless reaching of poetic desire. Poetry, or a poem, must be allowed to consume whatever in the cosmos it finds refreshing or appropriate at the moment.

The poetry of the Restoration and of the period which followed is strongly *appetitive*. If we miss this quality in Augustan poetry, we risk misunderstanding statements about decorum, propriety and so on, for the notion of limitation is introduced only on the understanding that the appetite is there, almost ungovernably strong, and is in itself a good, though it may require occasional restraint. The urge of Restoration poets in particular is very visibly to reach out and grab the world – and any reference to anything like rules is only a reminder that the grasping, the taking, the deglutition must be done effectively. Decorum is occasional; appetite, permanent. Lack of daring, the timidity that refuses to "*Snatch* a *Grace* beyond the Reach of Art" is the crowning poetic sin. Failure to reach, to go forward, to endeavour to have and be more is lamentable. Johnson praises Pope precisely for exemplifying the opposite of such feebleness, such timid respect for limits. Pope's genius always wanted to take in more than it already had. It did not produce what Swift called "fade insipid mixture," the product of the cautious vulgar (poets and critics) who try to fix fancy's mercury.

Appetite and expansive movement come naturally to the mind of the writers of this period whenever they are talking of poetry or of poetic genius. Dryden's famous simile describing poetic wit has often been discussed, and perhaps sometimes wrongly discussed as presenting a dull and mechanistic notion of the poetic mind (in contrast to the notions of the Romantics):

> wit in the Poet, or wit writing ... is no other than the faculty of imagination in the writer, which, like a nimble Spaniel, beats over and ranges through the field of Memory, till it springs the Quarry it hunted after ...
>
> ("An Account of the Ensuing Poem [i.e. *Annus Mirabilis*] in a Letter to the Honourable Sir Robert Howard," 1667)

It is worth pointing out that the "Account" of *Annus Mirabilis*, written twenty-six years before Swift's "Ode to Congreve," expresses the same idea; the poetic imagination is nimble, ranging and appetitive. The connection of the spaniel to appetite (and to human appetite) may be half-forgotten by those of us who do not engage in field sports, but Dryden, a country man originally, knew these field sports well, and his spaniel springing its quarry is naturally connected with the idea of killing and eating. Imagination searches quickly, disdaining bounds; it ranges over large spatial territory until it finds what can be snatched and consumed. The imagination is a hungry hunter. In an earlier preface, Dryden had said that "Imagination in a Poet is a faculty so Wild and Lawless that, like an High-ranging Spaniel it must have Cloggs tied to it, least

it out-run the Judgment" ("To the Right Honourable Roger, Earl of Orrery," Preface to *The Rival Ladies*, 1664). By the "Cloggs" Dryden here means the practice of rhyme, which disciplines poetry; blank verse is too luxurious, leading to prolixity and looseness. But the imagination, the high-ranging spaniel, is approved of; imagination ought to be, centrally, "Wild and Lawless" or it isn't imagination at all. In the *Annus Mirabilis* preface, Dryden uses the spaniel image again, to concentrate on the splendour of the free-ranging poetic appetite.

The idea of appetite comes naturally to Dryden when discussing poetry. We find the idea – and the word itself – strikingly and slightly differently applied later in a preface of 1693. We may take it that Dryden's tribute to Dorset, however undeserved a piece of flattery in relation to its particular object, expresses what Dryden thinks are the most delightful and admirable qualities of poetry:

> 'tis Your Lordships particular Talent to lay your Thoughts so close together, that were they closer, they wou'd be crouded, and even a due connexion wou'd be wanting. We are not kept in expectation of two good lines, which are to come after a long Parenthesis of twenty bad; which is the *April* Poetry of other Writers, a mixture of Rain and Sun-shine by fits: You are always bright, even almost to a fault, by reason of the excess. There is continual abundance, a Magazine of Thought, and yet a perpetual Variety of Entertainment; which creates such an Appetite in your Reader, that he is not cloy'd with any thing, but satisfy'd with all. 'Tis that which the *Romans* call *Coena dubia*; where there is such plenty, yet withall so much Diversity ...
>
> ("Discourse concerning the Original and Progress of Satire," dedication of translation of Juvenal, "To the Right Honourable Charles, Earl of *Dorset* and *Middlesex*," 1693)

Good poetry should be close-crowded with good things, bright even to a fault, offering "perpetual Variety," surprising by a fine excess – and good poetry creates "such an Appetite in your Reader," creates the appetite by which it is to be enjoyed. Good poetry, appetite-provoking, is produced by the appetitive imagination which it then stimulates in others. Hunger provides a major Augustan metaphor for artistic creation and for the psychological workings of imagination. Over sixty years later, Samuel Johnson spoke of "that hunger of imagination which preys incessantly upon life" (*Rasselas* [1759], ch. 21). This is not, for Johnson, a personal defect or virtue of the individual mind, just a fact; without being hungry, imagination is not imagination.

"Rise, kill, and eat" might be taken as the motto of English poets of the Restoration, from Butler on, and, to only a slightly lesser extent, of all the succeeding poets to the end of the eighteenth century. Nothing is so common, so bizarre, so "unclean" – or so grand – that it can't be apprehended and consumed by the poetic process. Everything that has being, physical or mental, is available to the poet. Our tendency, inculcated in schools (when Augustan poetry is talked of at all), to think of the poets of the time as "neo-classical" and hence bound by a notion of some abstract classic dignity

can lead to serious misreading. The poets were not in love with some marble-cool, remote and stiff dignity, some bare white essence of unassailable grandeur. "Neo-classicism" has its place, as a new movement, emanating from France and promising philosophic and aesthetic possibilities of considerable interest – rather like structuralism or semiotics in our own time. Strange things happen, however, to Continental theories when they are taken up in English-speaking lands. We will misunderstand the neo-classical enthusiasm (to use that typical figure of the Augustans, an oxymoron) if we do not see first the appetitiveness and excitement that underlay all interest in new literary movements, techniques, or forms of criticism.

The poets who were young in the late years of the Interregnum or the early years of the Restoration did not think of themselves as old classical poets, or as musty classics of English literature, or as correct and stiff "Augustans." They (and the generations who came after them) thought of themselves (rightly) as new poets, and as part of a new movement in English poetry. The idea of a "movement" is of course a modern one, coming from the late nineteenth century. At least, the phrase is modern, but the sense is visibly there in the late seventeenth century, a sense sharpened by a new and heightened feeling of the importance of time, a new idea of historical period. Earl Miner has pointed out that in Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* "the concept of historical periods of literature emerges . . . for the first time in English criticism, along with a sense of historical movement or development – and of a period of literature as something related to the other events of the time."[1] Men now spoke of "the age"; they could see difference between historical periods, even the relatively minute periods of generations, or decades. The experience of the Civil War had given Englishmen a sharpened and modern sense of the historically possible, of change in history, and had led to a sense of the characteristic qualities of a period. "The new" has a new indicative and prophetic meaning. Changes of fashions, the possibilities of degeneration, had been noted, often gloomily, since classical times (*O tempora! o mores!*) and the Renaissance furnished a heightened sense of the possibility of what we call progress, as well as (heavily stressed) processes of deterioration. But our whole way of thinking about time (which includes our habit of trying to explain social and other change historically, and our endeavours to predict the future on the basis of assumptions about inevitable change) can be seen as a direct inheritance from the latter part of the seventeenth century.

One by-product of this way of thinking about time, of considering the new, is an urgent sense of possibility and adventure in undertaking novel literary forms and techniques, in writing new poetry. Like Wyatt and Surrey (and the other contributors to *Tottel's Miscellany*), like Philip Sidney writing *Astrophel and Stella* or the *Arcadia*, like Donne producing Songs and Sonnets, the writers of the Restoration were conscious of bringing something new and adventurous to English literature. Indeed, it is less of an anachronism to speak of a "movement" when referring to Butler, or Dryden, or Rochester, or (to move up in

time) to Swift and Pope than when referring to Wyatt or Sidney or Donne, since novelty, and the sense of some kind of forward movement through history, were notions now central to consciousness. The feeling that one is contributing something to one's own "age," both reflecting that age and being reflected in it, is visible throughout the period, and is part of that Augustan self-consciousness which I shall deal with later.

The new poets thought of themselves as new poets of new movements always do – as dashing and experimental. They would, to say the least, have been disappointed to hear that we think of them as less colourful or less adventurous than the Elizabethans and Jacobeans – however great their respect for their predecessors. They would have been deeply chagrined had they known that their works were considered by anybody, even by schoolchildren, as characterized by dull correctness. And once one gets to know those works, such a view cannot hold. Certainly, these poets, both those of the Restoration and those of the later generations who succeeded them, thought they had opened up the field of poetry. In their eyes, the great Elizabethans, and the so-called (by us) "Jacobeans" and "Metaphysicals," had produced wonderful poetry but their works were much too limited in scope to be satisfactory contemporary models. The new poets felt the exaltation which all poets in new movements always feel, of breaking through old limits, doing away with old rules, tossing antique blueprints out of the window. They were excited by the idea of doing more than their great forebears. Poetry had a licence to range, to grab, to take, to consume more of the world than the elder poets had allowed themselves. Until recently, so many of us have been brought up on Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, the manifesto of another new movement, that we have tended to take Wordsworth's opinions of Augustan poetry too much as truth. Or at least we did so when we were in school, and found the indoctrination hard to outgrow, because Wordsworth got his word in first. We then missed the comedy of seeing the parallel between Wordsworth's eager assumption that he and some of his contemporaries could write in the *real* language of men and the early Augustans' own ardent protests that that was exactly what *they* were doing, in contradistinction to an older poetry that had got timid and crouched within the palings of its own set limits.

Dryden in his "Account" of *Annus Mirabilis* gives us one of the early (1667) manifestos of the new poetry, in drawing attention to his expanded use of language.

> In general I will onely say, I have never yet seen the description of any Naval Fight in the proper terms which are us'd at Sea; and if there be any such in another Language, as that of *Lucan* in the third of his *Pharsalia*, yet I could not prevail my self of it in the *English*; the terms of Arts in every Tongue bearing more of the Idiom of it than any other words. We hear, indeed, among our Poets, of the thundring of Guns, the smoke, the disorder, and the slaughter; but all these are common notions. And certainly as those who, in a Logical dispute, keep in general terms, would hide a fallacy, so those who do it in any Poetical description would vail their ignorance . . . For my own part, if I had little knowledge of the Sea, yet I have thought it no shame to learn . . .