I

DRYDEN'S WORK, CHARACTER AND INFLUENCE

SCOTT, in the 'Advertisement' prefixed to his complete edition of Dryden's works, writes that Dryden 'may claim at least the third place' in the list of English classics, and Gray in his *Progress of Poesy*, when he comes to English poets, celebrates Shakespeare, Milton, and Dryden. It is needless to discuss the order of merit, especially as new competitors have arisen in the nineteenth century. These have not yet been sifted; even if the two great Poets Laureate of last century, Wordsworth and Tennyson, obtain two hundred years—and perhaps they will not obtain more—of permanent interest, their work can hardly be of higher value than that of Dryden.

Gray's words in the *Progress of Poesy* are carefully chosen. Passing on from Milton, he writes of Dryden's 'less presumptuous car' borne 'wide o'er the fields of glory.' 'Wide' serves to remind us of Dryden's success in almost every class of literature. In drama he was the principal figure from the Restoration to the Revolution, prolific both in

comedy and tragedy; the heroic play, of which his writings are the leading examples, was at one time supposed to have rivalled the works of the Jacobean playwrights.

Then he became the voice of the nation in a supreme political crisis, and created for this purpose almost a new type of poem, akin to satire but essentially different—the First Part of *Absalom and Achitophel*, published in November, 1681.

From this there was a double development, first in the direction of personal satire, where the result was *The Medal* (March, 1682), *Mac Flecknoe* (October, 1682), and the satire on Settle and Shadwell, as Doeg and Og, in the Second Part of *Absalom and Achitophel*, published in November, 1682. These poems were not original in form, but unprecedented in smartness, in energy, and in eloquence.

The second development lay in the direction of arguments on religion, then a part of politics. Here Dryden represented the national voice in a form practically new and characterised by dexterity and apparent simplicity. He takes the tone of the reasonable man, who tries to see his way amid the difficulties of the subject; he commands an extraordinary range of feeling, from the highest passion to mere conversation, but the transitions from one mood to another are perfectly natural and the whole is written in almost faultless verse. The two poems, *Religio Laici* (November, 1682) and *The Hind and the Panther* (April, 1687) represent opposite sides,

the latter poem having been published after his conversion in the reign of James II.

Then again take his narrative poetry. Here lay his ambition; the English epic, then and still wanting,—for Milton's *Paradise Lost* is not a national epic—he never achieved, but he won notable successes in this line. In his early career, during the interruption of his dramatic work occasioned by his absence from London at the time of the Great Plague, he wrote *Annus Mirabilis*, 1666. This poem, which describes the Dutch wars and the Fire of London, is not an epic but is an essay in that direction, as Dryden himself clearly recognised; this he shows by his judgements upon the Latin epic poets, especially Lucan and Virgil, in the *Letter to Sir R. Howard* prefixed to the poem. The work is not really Virgilian, but Dryden's comparison of it with the Roman national epic is all the more significant, as showing that he conceived the object as similar. Dryden's poem contains much admirable work and is still interesting. He was led back to narrative poetry in his closing years by his straitened circumstances after the Revolution. He turned then to translation and adaptation of other poets; with assistance, he translated the whole of Virgil, a work which was almost a national monument. But its success has been overrated; Pope, for instance, called it 'the most noble and spirited translation which he knew in any language,' a judgement which we cannot endorse. He also translated or adapted parts of Chaucer and of Ovid and made

poetical adaptations from the prose of Boccaccio. His Chaucerian translations were admirable and new to the public; specially to be recommended to readers are his versions of *Palamon and Arcite* and *The Cock and the Fox.* The stories, fables as he calls them, based on Boccaccio are virtually original. Take for instance *Theodore and Honoria*: Boccaccio's tale is neither a poem nor a poetic story; Dryden's version could hardly be improved. This is a great effect to be produced by an old man near seventy, already at the height of his fame and not expected to succeed in this way.

Then, to turn to lyric poetry: the songs in the plays and a few other pieces show his admirable ear; he wrote simple rhythms with a new perfection. But here again there was a surprise at the end. The complicated lyric with irregular metre—the ode—had been practised by Dryden to a small extent, it is true, but beyond the common standard; then, happily using casual occasions—the meetings of a musical society—he gave to the ode and to lyric verse generally an entirely new standard of technical execution. The two *Odes for St Cecilia's Day*, 1687 and 1697, are immensely important both technically and historically: from them derives the work in this line of Gray, Collins, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Tennyson. The second ode, *Alexander's Feast, or the Power of Music*, with its characteristic combination of simplicity and science is almost unrivalled in popularity:—'None but the brave deserves the fair,' and 'like another Helen

fired another Troy,' are familiar to many who have never opened a volume containing Dryden's 'Works.' This ode was written when Dryden was in his sixty-seventh year.

Beyond this, there is much work not easily classed, but taking the form of complimentary pieces, addresses, epistles, etc. The poem conveying to Lady Castlemaine Dryden's thanks for her patronage of an unsuccessful play in 1663 is important as giving perhaps the first decisive proof of his special power. This series of poems also ends only with his life and rises to the last, in the domestic and autobiographical Epistle to his cousin John Driden, a rural magistrate and member of Parliament. This Epistle was included in the last of Dryden's published volumes, which contained among other matter the translations from Chaucer; the Epistle was very popular at the time and is still pleasing. It is Horatian, more so than the Epistles of Pope, for like the Roman poet's writing it excites a friendly feeling in the reader.

Further, there is a large mass of prose, mostly connected with the poetry, in the form of critical prefaces—very characteristic of Dryden, who was a conscious artist—but some similar work was independently published. Most worth study are perhaps the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, written in 1668, and the *Preface to the Fables* in 1700. His style is pleasant and gentlemanly, and his work takes an important place in the development of practicable prose. In the period in which he wrote England

saw the first formation of a large literary society in London, and this is reflected in his dedications; the courtly profusion of compliment is characteristic of the age but is managed by Dryden with singular dignity.

More might be added, but this is sufficient to prove the accuracy of Gray's descriptive 'wide.' Even if we make all possible deductions, such for instance as the whole of the dramatic work—an exception which is, however, not fair, for the play of *All for Love* certainly has merit—the permanent part still remains very large, when the lapse of time is considered. The indestructible part of Dryden's work is sufficient for a first-rate reputation; the First Part of *Absalom and Achitophel*, *Theodore and Honoria*, and the two *Odes for St Cecilia's Day*, are more than enough in themselves.

The historical interest of Dryden to a student of English literature is immense. He was the principal figure and agent in the formation of permanent standard English, the conscious work of the age. In this his action was perfectly deliberate; he intended to improve the literature and especially the poetry of his time, to improve it generally, that is to say, and to raise the normal standard. In his *Threnodia Augustalis*, a lament on the death of Charles II, he gives us a literary retrospect describing how the muses return with the King:—

> And such a plenteous crop they bore
> Of *purest* and *well-winnow'd* grain
> As Britain never saw before;

and the same feeling is expressed in the *Epistle to Sir Robert Howard*. To understand the precise meaning of this claim on behalf of the Post-Restoration poetry we had better take an instance.

Cowley, a predecessor of Dryden, writing in the reign of Charles I, was a man of thorough academic training—he had been educated here at Trinity College—a poet of high reputation and ambitious of style. He was the creator of the 'Pindaric Art' and in his *Ode in Praise of Pindar*, where sublimity is contrasted with simplicity of style, there are fine lines. He describes Pindar's poetry which 'Like a swoln flood from some steep mountain pours along'; and writes that 'The grave can but the dross of him devour.' And yet Cowley can admit the following:—

> Whether some brave young man's untimely fate
> In words worth dying for he celebrate,
> Such mournful and such pleasing words
> *As joy to his mother's and his mistress' grief affords*;
> He bids him live and grow in fame,
> Among the stars he *sticks* his name.

The verse 'as joy to his mother's and his mistress' grief affords' has almost as many mistakes as words: the forced grammar of 'affords' is especially offensive in the rhyming word; the emphasis of the rhyme falls upon a weak word, and that word the wrong word, for 'gives' or 'brings,' not 'affords,' represents the meaning; there is a faulty omission of the second 'to' in 'to his mother's and his mistress'' so that it would be supposed that only one person was

indicated; the word 'his' is lopped, 'to 's mother's and 's mistress'' ; there is a clumsy inversion of the whole sentence, the word 'joy' being apparently the subject whereas it is found ultimately to be the object of the verb. So again in the last line quoted the word 'sticks' is at least unlucky, even if we suppose it to have been unobjectionable at the time.

This case is typical; there is a very small amount of composition earlier than the Restoration which is not open to like objections. This was the chaff which Dryden justly desired to 'winnow,' and this object he achieved; such lapses as Cowley's are hardly possible in a poet of reputation since Dryden's time.

The deliberate attempt to improve English literary style was part of a movement natural in the circumstances of the time. The increase of wealth and the diffusion of culture, together with the growth of London, brought together a large but yet coherent society. There was also the example of France, where the Academy had been founded in 1635, and where the Court of Louis XIV was the centre of French classical literature. England was much in arrear; there was no authorised grammar, no dictionary. Dryden himself wanted an Academy; but the whole movement of the age was academic.

The appearance of Dryden at this time was fortunate. His practical command of English is immense; so too is his vigour, of which the main principle is that there is no waste, no 'chaff.' There is hardly an idle word; the metrical emphasis is

correctly adapted to the meaning, there are no 'fetches' for rhyme, and his instinct for vocabulary, for the permanent, accounts for the astonishing freshness of his composition; there is almost nothing in his writing which marks a date. No doubt this is partly the consequence of subsequent imitation, and of the adoption of Dryden by later writers as a standard; Charles Fox, for instance, told Lord Holland that he would admit no word into his book, his projected *History of James II*, for which he had not the authority of Dryden. But this is not sufficient explanation, and does not extend to his grammar or to the turning of his phrases. The point is best illustrated by examples from his writing.

Let us take first the *Song* from the play *An Evening's Love*, published in 1668:—

Damon. Celimena, of my heart
None shall e'er bereave you:
If, with your good leave, I may
Quarrel with you once a day,
I will never leave you.

Celimena. Passion's but an empty name,
Where respect is wanting:
Damon, you mistake your aim;
Hang your heart, and burn your flame,
If you must be ranting.

Damon. Love as dull and muddy is
As decaying liquor:
Anger sets it on the lees,
And refines it by degrees,
Till it works the quicker.

Celimena. Love by quarrels to beget
Wisely you endeavour;
With a grave physician's wit,
Who, to cure an ague fit,
Put me in a fever.

Damon. Anger rouses love to fight,
And his only bait is,
'Tis the spur to dull delight,
And is but an eager bite,
When desire at height is.

Celimena. If such drops of heat can fall
In our wooing weather;
If such drops of heat can fall,
We shall have the devil and all
When we come together.

Or again take the Jacobites' Song, *The Beautiful Lady of the May,* written probably in 1691, and published after Dryden's death:—

A quire of bright beauties in spring did appear,
To choose a May-lady to govern the year;
All the nymphs were in white, and the shepherds in green,
The garland was given, and Phillis was queen;
But Phillis refus'd it; and sighing did say,
'I'll not wear a garland while Pan is away.'

While Pan and fair Syrinx are fled from our shore,
The Graces are banish'd, and Love is no more:
The soft god of pleasure that warm'd our desires
Has broken his bow, and extinguish'd his fires,
And vows that himself and his mother will mourn,
Till Pan and fair Syrinx in triumph return.

Forbear your addresses, and court us no more,
For we will perform what the Deity swore:
But, if you dare think of deserving our charms,
Away with your sheephooks, and take to your arms;