

Essay on the character and style of John Dryden.

It is a solemn, though a necessary and useful thing to gaze into the Past, and reverently to receive the golden rays which fall for ever from those stars which gild the literary firmament of ages, stars which God himself has made immortal. Cast your eyes through the countless years gone by, listen to the thrilling music of the now silent masters, grasp the shadowy hands of the mighty dead — and a gathering awe settles upon the heart; a rapturous solemnity and chaste delight seize on the spirit; for at such times the „unseen“ whisper their mystic lore to plastic minds. It is not for nothing that the author of creation has given to a few an immortality of fame; not useless is it that names and reputations adorn the long centuries gone for ever; Greece, with her array of immeasurable talent, Rome, with her armies of mental giants, and the strong phalanx of more recent times who have moulded nations for good or ill, cannot have lived in vain. It is for us to gather the golden harvest, to treasure up the priceless lore, that we may benefit accordingly, and at least learn, what God has so significantly told us by those gifted hosts, the grandeur and the majesty of man; alas! that we must add his weakness and insignificance also!

Among this host of splendor, there is a star which shines with no uncertain ray over what was once his island-home. To that star, we propose to direct our mental telescope, and with a literary prism digest its beams! It is one among a brilliant constellation, one of the brightest and most illustrious, bedimmed, as is the sun itself, with dark and sullyng spots, yet spots lost in golden light. Its name is John Dryden.

To say that John Dryden died on the 1st of May 1700 — on that day, when England was full of manly and genial sports, as was customary, that on that day,

when nature is clothed anew with vernal beauties and resounding with happiness, the great man of his time was called to pass through the last gloomy valley given for poor humanity to traverse — means to us infinitely more than the bare announcement of the fact. We feel that the brilliant achievements of a God-sent mind are left behind for our instruction, to minister to our knowledge and improvement, and that from them our life should receive large accessions of delight. There is a warning voice too, comes from John Dryden, though he himself has passed away 150 years ago and more. It is a voice of thunder-warning, from the distance doubtless, but loud and clear! The tomb peers upwards as a pyramid in noblest grandeur, yet borders on misty precipices and yielding grounds, full dangerous to the tread. To drop the figure — with a strong desire to extract the beautiful and useful from Dryden's works, it will be our aim to let their deformities stagnate as far as possible in the darkness whence they sprung. For many reasons, this course commends itself to us, but especially because the tongue that could and would reply is now silent for ever — and the hand which wielded a master pen will never grasp one more. Then

„Be his failings covered by the tomb“

„And guardian laurels over his ashes bloom!“

But, for our admonition, with regard also to the passing generation, stern duty compels the gentle exposé.

It is generally admitted that a knowledge of the times in which an author lived is essential to a right and complete understanding of his productions. To know how far his own times acted on Dryden, and how he reacted upon them is, it appears to us, a primary step in estimating the poet and the man. No doubt, a casual reader would pick up much instruction and many beauties, without this peculiar knowledge, but he would inevitably miss what is most valuable of all the moral lesson, how much the great poet and author influenced his own and succeeding generations, and could not wonder at and admire the great instrumentality for good developed by the whole progress of his life. There is always a double source of action, that of circumstances and of mind, combined. The mind is ever to a great extent educated by circumstances, its refinement and direction from other minds and from itself inherently; and it may be added, that the more a mind acts upon its own judgement, the more original it is. If for instance we find John Dryden very impressible to the society of his day — if instead of pouring out the riches of his mental powers regardless of censure or praise, he pandered to the passing vices of the hour — in so much he fails of originality,

and, in so much, of his clear duty. If, on the contrary, he respects the independence of his genius, and exerts his powers as that genius would prompt, he then raises himself to his proper elevation, and his originality becomes a blessing to his race. Between these two extremes are many means, and in consequence as many different estimates to be formed of those different persons who adopt them. It is for us, at present, however to glance at the age of Dryden.

It must never be forgotten that Dryden was cradled in puritan times. His parents were Puritans — and the great Cromwell died only two years after he arrived in London in 1657, at the age of 26, to push his fortunes. Of course the stirring events of the Commonwealth and the civil war which led to it, would the one entirely, and the other partly, pass under the very eyes of his youth and early manhood, events calculated in the highest degree to impress him at that period of his life, by far the most susceptible of lasting and deep impressions. It was at this very time, that the Roundheads, or Puritans, sage, solemn, fanatic, were sweeping across the social sky as a black cloud; and in its sable shadow had withered all that bore even a resemblance to amusements or cheerfulness. Men's visages were severe, and frowned down the smiling countenance of childhood and of youth. The mother's fond lullaby to her beloved infant was done in sepulchral tones, to words of solemn import. To those grave men of those solemn times what were the dewy flower, the umbrageous woods, the gentle hill or winding valley; the songs of birds, or the happy gambols of the brute creation? All in nature, that was „beauty to the eye or music to the ear“ was ignored, swallowed up in the morose, dark sea of religion, or what was deemed religion. All authentic contemporary history, and classic literature paint that time as one of dense gloom, of more than Jewish rigor, of vulgar, persecuting, intolerant spirituality. Nature was all smiling in her fields and flowers, but the strict Puritans would not look upon her face; rather, with souls shaking with fear, would they gaze into the boundless deep, into fathomless darkness, where

„In the lowest deep, a lower deep“

„And opening wide, seem'd threatening to devour.“

In such an atmosphere as this, there is no wonder that those priceless gems, pity and pathos, were stunted in their growth in Dryden's soul, and found but feeble expression in his productions.

Then too the lamp of light literature burned with a sickly flicker, and was fairly extinguished by the puritanic, howling hurricane that raged; uprooting time,

honored institutions and usages, and creating desolation where all was peace before. Then no Burns could sing, no Dickens instruct or please, no Shakespeare utter his divinities, no Scott tell of ancient chivalry. Nothing was permitted but works on religious topics, „ad nauseam“, treated by square and rule, and in all the insufferable jargon of the schools. Observe young Dryden turn aside with disgust from these ashy apples of Sodom, and seeking perhaps stolen interviews with Homer, Sophocles, Cicero, Horace, Lucretius, Ovid and his much beloved Virgil. A mind like his confined to such Divinity as that of his early life! Divinity grappling with no social question; rabid and intolerant; and in short, such as would, carried out to its legitimate conclusions convert the world into an „ἀκελευμάχ“; fill it with canting hypocrites, daucing round the martyr's stake, and change the universal hymn of joy and gladness into one deep groan of sorrowful fanaticism. Let us see in this the origin of Dryden's constant squabbles with his fellow-wits, and the gusto with which he held them up to ridicule. For it was but a natural result that men so placed should grow morbid and unkind; and, lost in misty and dogged tenets, their hearts should be untouched with sunshine and with peace. Allied closely to this subject was the stage, and incredible as it may appear, theatres were suppressed. Sophocles and Shakespeare had no friends, or only such as were compelled to hide themselves from the sullen Dictator. Shakespeare, whose voice was music, and whose words were fire, he whose trump is sounding yet among us, at a distance of 300 years, with increasing power and sweetness, was driven from its sphere among the rest. When Cromwell appeared, their cue became „Exeunt omnes.“

While that tornado of a time, the French Revolution, swept on, the theatres were all open and crowded to suffocation. Cromwell however, enacted his solitary part before angels and men, distaining all rivalry and being the one Collossal Figure in the Scene. Thus an institution which had flourished more than two thousand years, and which, though clogged with many evils, had furnished to millions much innocent amusement and much valuable instruction was suppressed. Indeed when reading only was a rare accomplishment among the masses, the stage as an instructor divided empire with the pulpit and the schools; and it is somewhat difficult to believe that the wily Cromwell, from fanaticism alone, would strike from the then horizon the all but solitary light still left to the people. He, however, willed it and the theatre became a conventicle, and all sports, except war and desolation, were merged into its service. How must we pity the youth of Dryden, when there seemed a combination of nearly

all alike to change the bright face of nature to one of shadow, to convert beauty into deformity, the simply solemn into awe, to scorch up the laughter of the heart by the fire of oppression, and to turn the countless glories of the creation into so many unsightly apparitions? With what impatience must he and myriads more have peered with strained eyes into this pall of darkness, wondering when the more than midnight shroud should vanish, and the golden sunlight be let down again.

The Hudibras of Butcher, that masterpiece of wit, and clever portraiture of the time is quite conclusive as to this insane tyranny, not alone of Cromwell, but of his mirmidons, the Puritans, having reached every grade of society, reached all ages and both sexes. Nor was the moral result, flauntingly indeed displayed, at all better for this inimitable satirist directly charges the sanctimonious race with:

Compounding for sins they are inclined to,
By damning those they have no mind to.

The professions were tainted with the same long-conscienced seriousness. The public Universities were not free from the somber infection, nor yet the public schools. Even the learned of the day bent beneath this most singular phase of society and the phlegmatic English nature found, it must be admitted to some extent, congenial faire in the general madness. The whimsicalities, warped rhetoric, half-crazed notions, the silly antagonisms of class against class, sect against sect, the irrational and eccentric conduct of these times, it would were space at our disposal be easy to point out. Perhaps, it will be pardoned if I refer to the 3rd Canto „Hudibras“ Part I.

There was, however, still lurking in the venerable seats of learning, and hid in deep retreats the old leaven which would leaven the whole lump of society once more, whenever occasion presented itself. After these twenty years of dense misanthropy, and religious whirligigism, it required but one touch from the wand of the goddess of Pleasure and lo! the scene is changed to the opposite extreme, to an undignified dissoluteness made attractive by outward shew and splendor. It was the rebound of the frozen north to the tropics, from the Icy Sea to the Mediterranean.

The occasion of this tremendous change came with the death of Cromwell. „No sooner was this great and singular man passed away, and the sombre though earnest age with him, and Charles II. mounted the throne, than from the darkest recesses of stews and taverns, the whole tribe of banished dancers, fiddlers, mimes, stage-players and play-wrights, knowing their enemy was dead and their hour of harvest had come, emerged in swarming multitudes, multitudes swelled by a vast tribe

of playgoers, who had been counting the hours since a Falstaff had made them laugh, an Ophelia made them weep, and a Lear made them tremble“.

It is not so easy to trace the effects of the „sombre age“ upon the mind of a young person, like Dryden, given as he was to letters, and refined study. To give the mind free scope would be barely possible in its training, because fear that some important rule might be broken, thereby, would operate so as to prevent it. That some fear existed is evident from the numerous prologues he wrote in afterlife, in many of which he expresses a morbid anxiety that his efforts might not please. While the youthful heart is ever disposed to joy and pleasure, the staid solemnity of his elders around him would crush the gay flight or the happy song. It might, moreover, be, that this fact of his being compelled to make so serious a business of life in his youth, would lead to profound thought and meditation; and so Dryden may have found it, and reaped a great advantage. Though in his „Religio Laici“ he opens with

„Dim as the borrowed beams of moon and stars
To lonely, weary, wandering travellers.
Is reason to the soul; and so on high
Those rolling fires discover but the sky.
Not light us here; so reason's glimmering ray
Was lent not to assure our doubtful way.
But guide us upward to a better day“ etc.

yet in that performance there is much of clear reasoning and sound thought. Its poetical merits are great as are those of its argumentative depth and brilliant rhetoric. — Another result would certainly follow: he would be fascinated with sudden and great change „from grave to gay, to lively from severe. The glittering gaiety of French manners, the loose interpretation of even these already enough wanton trifles, the splendor of apparel, and the sparkling though sad gossip of the day, light and insignificant though they were, formed to Dryden's mind, a brilliant contrast to the recent past. To him, so long restrained it would be thrice-alluring a leap from the rigors of winter, to a flowery spring-time, and to this, no doubt, much of the superficiality, the tinselled grandeur, and the frothy nothingness of some portions of Drydens plays is fairly to be attributed. And to this source, too, may be laid the unpardonable filthiness with sullies them nearly all.

Subtle as a serpent, and as gorgeous in coloring, ramifying, permeating, the newly introduced French taste, requiring for its gratification licentiousness yet more abandoned stole rapidly first into every nook and cranny of the towns, and despite

a strenuous opposition from some quarters, also invaded the country. This taste ran literally riot. Shameless, and prurient, the common decencies of life were outraged by it; it had, in fact, to be cast into forms and shapes, as stiff, stately, and elaborate, as the material was vile; and was not content with corruption, unless served up in a new, piquant, and unnatural manner. Here was an appetite indeed, which required abundant provision! Could there be found a man of genius to prostitute his talents to the infamous task? There were, on the one hand, king, courtiers, courtezans, with gold, splendor and fame, on the other hand, tempting the men of mind, some steeped in poverty, and only too eager to earn position and bread. Suffice it; men were found to do the filthy service! But what was Dryden's position at that time? Was it necessity

„Which supreme is“

„Mong sons o' men“

that drove him to this dirty job? For sorry are we to say that he, the greatest of his time stooped to pander to the vicious requirements of a court above all others lewd and licentious. He was in possession of sixty pounds per annum, left him by his father, a sum equal to twice its amount at the present day, and on which he could comfortably exist. His wife, too, brought an equal sum, and thus doubled his income. „It is“ says one of his biographers „vain to say he wrote for bread“! He did not, he wrote only for the luxuries, not the staff of life; it is vain to say „he consulted the taste of his audience, and suited their atmosphere“! But why did he select that atmosphere as his? And why so much gratuitous and superfluous iniquity in his works? „But he wrote to gratify his monarch“! This would form a good excuse for a Sporus „a white curd of ass's milk“, but not for a strong man like Dryden. But „he was not worse than others of his age“! Pitiful apology! since being the ablest man of his day, and therefore bound to be before it, he was in reality behind it, his plays excelling all contemporary productions in wickedness as well as wit. But „his own conduct was latterly irreproachable“! This we doubt, and Scott doubts it too. But, even if it were true, it is damaging, because it would deprive him of the plea of passion, and reduce him from the warm human painter to the cold, demonlike sculptor of unclean and abominable ideas. It never can be forgotten that whenever Dryden translated even a filthy play, he made it filthier than the original; and that he has once and again scattered his satyr-like fancies in spots such as the paradise of Milton, and in the „Enchanted Isle“ of Shakespeare, which every imagination and every heart had regarded as holy ground. The only extenuating circumstance we can mention is, that

his pruriency was latterly in part relinquished and deplored by himself, and that his other poetry is, on the whole, free from it.

No doubt, on his own standing, possessed as he was of an amount equal to 360 pounds yearly, he had no necessity, was not driven to adopt the stage for his field of labor. But he had married a lady of rank, and he felt desirous of living in a style corresponding with her position, and to that end, he was obliged to do something. „Did other fields and pastures new“ present themselves as well as the reeking stage? And if so, which most lucrative? He might live by writing Panegyrics to the great, or as was usual, fulsome flatteries; but the money value was little, and sometimes contemptuously paid. Then he could write or translate for the booksellers, a wary and niggardly set, without adding much to his exchequer. For satires, as yet, there was little demand. The puritanic age, of which he had seen so much and doubtless heard more, would he leave that spacious field for Butler to reap the entire honors? Certainly, here, or among the cavaliers, was ample employment for pen and brain; but the simple truth is, that Dryden well understood the new system of things introduced by the court; it placed within his reach the prizes of wealth and fame, and he determined to grasp the glittering bubbles. It seems that he knew and felt his powers; and that he could, better than any man living, cater to the popular appetite for the melodramatic, for the grandiloquent, and for the obscene. With the powers of a giant he stooped to this degrading work, and for thirty years continued it! — „a degradation unexampled, whether we consider the powers of the writer, the coarseness, quantity and elaboration of the pollutions he perpetrated, or the length of time in which he was employed in thus profaning the God-given strength and marring the lofty line“.

We have thus seen how the great John Dryden was swept away by the filthy current of his times. He did not „stand in the gap until the plague was stayed“. He used not his mighty powers to stem the disgraceful torrent; but launched his fortunes thereon, plying his oars vigorously, polluting the stream deeply and leaving a track of filth and slime in his rear, broad and deep, of which afterwards there is reason to hope he himself was profoundly ashamed. Oh! what a wreck was here! Contrast only what he might have done and what he did! Had he but plumed his wings and pierced the empyrean unshakled and free, the effects would have been glorious, and no doubt useful in the extreme, but he chose chains and darkness where we decline

to follow for the present, preferring to consider him first in his genius and his poetical works, which are in a great measure free from impurity.

The most obvious and among the most remarkable characteristics of his poetic style, are its wondrous elasticity and ease of movement. There is never for an instant any real or apparent effort, any straining for effect, any of that „double, double, toil and trouble“ by which many even of the weird cauldrons, in which Genius forms her creations, are disturbed and bedimmed.

That power of doing everything with perfect and conscious ease, which Dug. Stewart ascribed to Barrow, and to Horsely in prose distinguished Dryden in poetry. Whether he discusses the deep questions of fate and foreknowledge, in „Religio Laici“, or lashes Shaftsbury in the „Medal“ or pours a torrent of contempt on Shadwell, in „Mac Flecknoe“, or describes the fire of London in the „Annus Mirabilis“ or soars into lyric enthusiasm in his „Ode on the death of Mrs. Killigrew“ and in „Alexander's Feast“, or paints a tournament in „Palamon and Arcite“, or a fairy dance in the „Flower and the Leaf“ — he is always at home and always aware that he is. His consciousness of his own powers amounts to exultation. He is like the steed who glories in that tremendous gallop which affects the spectator with fear. Indeed, we never can separate our conception of Dryden's vigorous and vaulting style from the image of a noble horse, devouring the dust of the field, clearing obstacles at a bound, taking up long leagues as a little thing, and the very strength and speed of whose motion gives it at a distance the appearance of smoothness. Pope speaks of his

„Long resounding march and energy divine.“

Perhaps „ease divine“ had been words more characteristic of the almost super-human power of language, by which he makes the most obstinate materials pliant, melts down difficulties as if by the touch of magic, and, to resume the figure, comes into the goal without a hair turned on his mane, or a single sweat-drop confessing effort or extraordinary exertion. We know no poet since Homer who can be compared to Dryden in this respect, except Scott, who occasionally in „Marmion“ and in „The Lay of the Last Minstrel“ exhibits the same impetuous ease and fiery fluent movement. Scott does not, however, in general carry the same weight as the other; and the species of verse he uses, in comparison to the heroic rhyme of Dryden, gives you often the impression of a hard trot, rather than of a „long resounding“ and magnificent gallop. Scott exhibits in his poetry the soul of a warrior; but it is of a warrior of the Border, somewhat savage and coarse — Dryden can assume

and display the spirit of a knight of ancient chivalry, gallant, accomplished, elegant and gay.

Thus, the language and versification of Dryden have been justly praised. His style is worthy of a still more powerful genius as his own. It is a masculine, clear, elastic and varied diction, fitted to express all feelings save the deepest; all fancies save the subtlest; all passions save the loftiest; all moods of mind save the most disinterested and rapt; to represent incidents, however strange; characters, however contradictory to each other; shades of meaning, however evasive; and to do all this as if it were doing nothing, in point of ease, and as if it were doing everything in point of felt and rejoicing energy. No poetic style can in such respects, be compared to Dryden's. Pope's to his is feeble and Byron's forced. He can say the strongest things in the swiftest way, and the most felicitous expressions seem to fall unconsciously from his lips. Had his matter, you say, but been equal to his manner, his thought in originality and imaginative power but commensurate with the boundless quantity, and no less admirable quality, of his words! His versification deserves a commendation scarcely inferior. It is „all ear“ if we may apply an expression of Shakespeare's. No studied rules, no elaborate complication of harmonies — it is the mere sinking and swelling of the wave of his thought, as it moves onward to the shore of his purpose. And, as in the sea, there are no furrows absolutely isolated from each other, but each leans on, or melts into each, and the subsidence of one is the rise of the other — so with the versification of his better poetry. The beginning of the „Hind and Panther“ we need not quote; but it will be remembered as a good specimen of that peculiar style of ramming the lines into one another, and thereby producing a certain free and noble effect, which the uniform tinkle of Pope and his school is altogether unable to reach; a style which has been copied by some of our poets f. i. by Churchill, by Cowper and by Shelley. The lines of the artificial school on the other hand, may be compared to rollers, each distinct from each, „each being in itself a whole, but altogether forming none“. Pope, somebody somewhere justly remarks, has turned Pegasus into a rocking horse.

Dryden's intellect was remarkably clear and sharp, and absolutely free from muddiness and opacity. He possessed a knowledge embracing the gathered harvests of science and learning of his day, and especially the classic learning of Greece and Rome. To this a deep and comprehensive experience was added; and he was thus furnished with the necessary working materials by which that astonishing, penetrating

and logical power of mind he so eminently possessed, could image itself out in words and „linked sweetness“. His subject once selected, the inspiration was at hand to vivify, intensify, colour and allure. No waste of words — no forced breaking-times — but on the contrary, image after image of richest kinds, rare also and terrific, biting and contemptuous, follow uninterruptedly, naturally, in language so terse, so appropriate and significant, and excelling in this particular all previous writers. It has been well said of him that he is more of a logician than a poet. But, he is still more wonderful in his facile use of words; his poem is a well-rigged ship bound upon a voyage; and the master spreads her canvass never too much or too little, alike prepared for calm or storm, in her passage across the fathomless deep. Rhyme never impedes his reasoning; „he reasons better in rhyme than in prose“. He goes into the field of his labor, the magic wand in hand, and forthwith he sets each subject in a blaze of unmistakable prominence, and the horizon is filled with the sparkling splendor. It is the work which he produces, which inevitably you would conclude issues from the keenest and acutest intellect, attired in the most effective and telling fashion. „Parts of his „Religio Laici“ and the „Hind and Panther“ resemble portions of Dun's Scotus, or Aquinas set on fire“. Yet it is rarely, if ever, Dryden reaches the sublime. Whether from long residence in towns, amid bricks and mortar, or whether from an inaptitude to realise, in the high sense of the word, the mysterious Infinite and Immense, unbroken and far-off solitudes, or peopled grandeur of countless worlds, Dryden's themes are usually of the earth, earthy, and therefore we miss altogether the thrilling and awful sublime, which, when fully felt, or as fully as may be, is all but sufficient to unbalance the mind; and which we often meet with in Shakespeare and Byron. When the latter poet wrote

There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,

There is society where none intrudes,

By the deep sea and music in its roar — etc.

it was the utterance of a grandeur that Dryden could never reach. He was much too fond of using the antique coloring, and at times much of his vigor and fire is lost by a college veneration for Homer and Virgil. He hung the ancient custom on the modern style — but, even with these considerable drawbacks his meaning is ever clear and racy — and his argumentation acute if not always sound.

Dryden saw and was fascinated by the little world of man, seen under intrigue, folly, faction, and excitement; seen too by the torchlight, in the very hotbeds of

London then life. He did not take his solitary way out in the solemn night, and gaze upon the golden stars, to one sense tangible alone; the oppressive silence of the night so full of startling awe he considered not; the steps of the Mighty One, as he strides from world to world, and universe to universe, were to him inaudible, invisible; and his swelling mind was grasping with feeble effort for one hold on the garments of the Almighty; if the Invisible cannot be seen, he never seems to have exhibited. The splendor of a cloudless day reminded not him of other splendors, „brighter than the sun“, and „countless as the stars“. Such dread flights were not essayed by him, although Milton before, and others after him, as Young, Coleridge etc. have sung in immortal numbers the subjects with which man connects all that is awful and sublime. Pleasure, high excitement, rapture even, he often produces; but such feeling as is produced by these lines of Shakespeare, put in the mouth of Othello, immediatly after killing Desdemona, never:

My wife! my wife! what wife? I have no wife!

O, insupportable! O, heavy hour!

Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse

Of sun and moon; and that the affrighted globe

Should yawn adulation.

Compare in proof of this the description of the tournament in „Palemon and Arcite“ — amazingly spirited as it is — to the contest of Achilles with the rivers, in Homer; to the war of the Angels, and the interrupted preparations for contest between Gabriel and Satan, in Milton; to some of the combats in Spenser; and to that wonderful one of the Princess and the Magician in the „Arabian Nights“, in order to understand the distinction between the most animated pictures of battle, and those into which the element of imagination is strongly injected, by the poet, who can, to the inevitable tremor of human nature at the sight of struggle and carnage — add the far more profound and terrible shiver, only created by a vision of the attendant circumstances, the consequences — the „Unseen Borders“ of the bloody scene. Take these lines for instance:

They look anew: the beauteous form of fight

Is changed, and war appears a grisly sight;

Two troops in fair array one moment showed;

Not half the number in their seats are found,

But men and steeds lie grovelling on the ground;

The points of spears are stuck within the shield;

The steeds without their riders quit the field:
 The knights unhorsed on foot renew the fight.
 The glittering falchions cast a gleaming light,
 Hawberks and helms are hewed with many a wound.
 Out spins the streaming blood, and dyes the ground etc.

This is vigorous and vivid, but is not imaginative or suggestive. It does not carry away the mind from the field to bring back thoughts and images which shall, so to speak, brood over and aggravate the general horror. It is, in a word, plain good painting, but it is no poetry.

Most of the English poets have been enthusiastic lovers of Nature, and, in consequence, their works abound in natural imagery, and pleasing metaphor. In Dryden's poetry, however, there is all but a complete lack of his beautiful ornament of poetry. Wordsworth, indeed, makes the assertion „that there is not a single image of nature in the whole of his poetical works“. This, however, is not true altogether; for thinly scattered, here and there, are images of this kind, „few and far between“. Here is an example from Part I. „Hind and Panther“ line 501:

Then, as the moon who first receives the light,
 By which she makes our nether regions bright,
 So might she shine reflecting from afar
 The rays she borrowed from a better star.

Still, the few images that occur seem often the results of his reading, rather than of actual observation. What Wordsworth adds is, we fear, true; in his translation of Virgil, where this author can fairly be said to have his „eye“ upon the subject, that he is writing from actual observation, Dryden spoils the passage. The reason of this, apart from high imaginative sympathy, may be found in his want of that intimate daily familiarity with natural scenes, which can alone supply thorough knowledge, or enkindle thorough love. Nature is not like the majority of other mistresses. Her charms deepen the longer she is known, and he that loves her most warmly, has watched her with the narrowest inspection. She can bear the keenest glances of the microscope, and to see all her glory would exhaust an antediluvian life. „The appetite, in her case, grows with what it feeds on“ — and finds a boundless variety; but such an appetite was not Dryden's. But probably his long residence in London, would, in part, prevent his visiting the country, except at infrequent intervals. This is the more to be regretted because of the admirable use to which these natural figures are put. One of the English national poets has for instance:

O, Life, how pleasant is thy morning!

Young fancy's rays the hills adorning!

How affecting for manhood to look back upon youth with such emotions! How touching for manhood to look forward, anticipating the brevity of human life in language by the same bard, as follows!

Life is but a day at most.

Sprung from night in darkness lost!

Or like the Borealis race

That flit ere you can point their place!

Or like the snowfalls on the river,

A moment white-then gone for ever!

Nearly allied to this, is another of Dryden's poetical, and great defects — a lack of human tenderness and pathos. He is lamentably deficient in this feeling, and few passages of his can be termed pathetic. In those performances wherein you might reasonably expect to find it in excess, as in his Elegies and funeral Odes, you look for it in vain; they sometimes, indeed, almost without exception, rise into fervid eloquence; but eloquence moves to admiration only, not to tears. It is most singular that a deficiency of this kind should be so marked in the works of a man of such surpassing ability and command of language as was Dryden.

The youth of Dryden, we cannot think would be without pathos. The influences of a court, licentious in the extreme, and irreligious to a certain degree, it is quite clear have a fatal tendency to harden the heart, and did so act, no doubt, upon him. Then he was long immersed in the pollutions and artificialities of theatres; was must unhappy for a lengthened course in his domestic relationships; passed through the indurating annoyances of a hack author, a party scribe and a satirist, until the fine feeling of his boyhood and his youth was obliterated, and he became insensible to the softer emotions, or at any rate to dissimulate them in his writings. The fact has been established without a doubt, that in his early life he was a true lover of a lady of his relation, although a perusal of his works would lead to the conclusion that he was incapable of feeling a pure passion. So placed, his heart grown worldly, and his love decayed, it was not possible he could reach the sources of tears and sympathy, which lie deep in man's heart, and which are connected with all that is dignified and all that is divine in man's nature.

Wordsworth, whom we have quoted before, says on this topic, „whenever his language is poetically impassioned, it is mostly upon unpleasing subjects, such as the

follies; vices and crimes of classes of men or individuals". This is unquestionable. Indeed so much of false veneration was paid to court and monarch, whom he flattered inordinately, that the concerns of a higher world, or even of man's higher interests and powers, were subordinated to the low standard of the passing taste, and the pænyrics of Dryden were as ill-suited and ill-fitted to their objects as would be the attire of Gog or Magog, the giants put upon Tom Thumb. His satire partakes of the same „outrageous hyperbole"; the king is more than god; his enemy, worse than a fiend. Yet, he never so nearly reaches sublime as when he is expressing contempt. His flights are the dawnward swoops of an eagle, and no prey survives the ferocious vigor of the attack, except to live crippled and maimed as long as the works of Dryden may be read. His satire is, moreover, peculiar, inasmuch as while it runs with liquid smoothness, it is the smoothness of volcanic lava, withering, scorching, destroying wherever it flows. Take for instance his picture of the unstaid Buckingham:

A man so various that he seemed to be

Not one, but all mankind's epitome;

Stiff in opinions, always in the wrong,

Was everything by starts and nothing long.

But, in the course of one revolving moon,

Was statesman, chemist, fiddler and buffoon!

Still more piquant, clever and biting is his portraiture of Shaftesbury; it is however too long to quote, but may be found in his „Absalon and Architophel" Part I, line 150. In one word, his inimitable satire may be described in his own language, as applied to Shaftesbury himself „sagacious, daring, turbulent, restless, unfixed and fiery". He adds, in this same terrific draught of character:

Great wits are sure to madness near allied,

And thin partitions do their bounds divide.

Alas! had it not been so, Dryden would not have written obscene plays and hireling satires; but his absolute power in literature would have warned his countrymen against vice, and led and showed the way to virtue.

In concluding our general estimate of Dryden as a poet, it will not be far from the truth to say that he is the most eloquent and rhetorical of English poets. His words and rhyme are the very soul of music, his reason, if sometimes unsound is ever subtle, poignant and profound. There was in him, as in Lucretius, an astonishing power of reasoning in verse, in mellifluous verse, even when the subjects

were dry, severe and metaphysical abstractions. It is easy to perceive, that with a force so singularly able as to make uninviting themes attractive, that had Dryden chosen to follow the flights of imagination, or the ever welcome tenderness of heart, he would have won the admiration of an entire nation, instead of only a select few, and those studious and learned alone. With the „Dii majorum gentium“ of the Poetic Pantheon of Britain, Dryden ranks not. The Shakespeares, Chaucers, Spensers, Miltons, Byrons, Wordsworths, Coleridges etc. are not approached by him, although he towers above, far above, the Moores, Grays, Goldsmiths and Priors. There is a middle class, but still high order, in which we find the name of Scott, as a poet, Johnson, Pope, Cowper, Southey, Crabbe, and two or three others, who while excelling Dryden in some qualities, are all excelled by him in others, and bulk on the whole about as largely on the public eye. He is, however, unequalled in his eloquence. Those subjects which he treads are shewn in every variety of coloring, in all their shades of meaning and substance, and yet withal so naturally, that while you read you fancy to encounter nothing more difficult than a school-book, whereas the very riches of genius and learning in words of unutterable oppositeness are taking your very soul captive, all unknown to yourself. Such witchery as this, combined with logic resistless as the mighty river; and the sparkling creation of a mind „rich and rare“ will ever stamp Dryden, as a star of splendor, in the spacious sky.

Before we pass to a critical estimate of Dryden's meed of praise and blame we perhaps may be pardoned a passing glance at his other separate works, those not touched upon by us already. And first his Lyrics. His songs, poperly so called, though lively, and pleasing, are much marred by the stiff and pedantic mannerisms, always or nearly always sullyng the amatory effusions of his times. Compared to Shakespeare's they are „earthly, sensual“. Shakespeare's are full of sweetest music, of ethereal tones, of unearthly melody, falling as it were right down from the distant skies. Dryden's are cold, slow, inanimate, aside of the gushing, living songs of tenderness of the giant Burns. None of Dryden's remain popular, while there is scarcely one of Burns's but is still sung with enthusiasm, and cherished as a gem. Better, much better than his songs are his Odes. That „on the death of Mrs. Killigrew“ has much divided the attention of critics, Dr. Johnson calling it magnificent, and Wharton denying it any merit at all. The truth to us is between the two extremes. Some passages are bold and telling; the first and the last stanzas are very forcible and possess much power; and the whole is full of that rushing torrent-like movement

characteristic of the poet. But the sinkings are as deep as the swellings are high, and the inequality disturbs the general effect. This is still more true of „Threnodia Augustalis“ the ode on the death of Charles II. The spirit of this ode is fulsome, the statement of the facts therein partial, and many of its lines are feeble, and the whole is wire-spun. The two odes „on St. Cecilia's“ are both admirable, though in different ways. „Alexander's Feast“, like Burns's „Tom O' Shanter“, seems to come out at once as from a mould, as if they were sung spontaneously and without an effort. Dryden's is pure inspiration, but of the second order, rather that of the Greek Pytho-ness than of the Hebrew Prophet. Dryden himself thought this the best ode that ever was or will be written in the English language. In one sense he was right. For ease, vivacity, movement, eloquence, it has never been equalled. But there are odes in the English language which certainly excel it in strength of imagination, grandeur of conception, and unity of execution and effect. We may perhaps be permitted to name two of them, say Coleridge's ode „to France“ and Wordsworth's „Power of Sound“.

Dryden has two compositions, both didactic or controversial poems, „Religio Laici“ and „The Hind and the Panther“. In the former there is a spell made up of what is often dissociated, reason and rhyme; and its interest chiefly consists in the fight it throws upon Dryden's uncertainty of religious opinions. He startles us with no original thoughts, has less of the music of his versification than is his wont, and not one sentence or passage of surpassing power. Far more faulty in plan, and far more unequal in its execution, „The Hind and Panther“ has, on the other hand, many passages of wondrous eloquence, some satire equal to anything he ever wrote, some vivid natural description; and even the absurdities of the fable and the sophistries of the argument add to its character as the most exquisitely perverted piece of ingenuity in the English language. It is written in support of Roman Catholicism, and to stab the protestant; and nothing but high genius very rigorously exerted, could reconcile us to a story so monstrous, and to reasoning so palpably one-sided and unfair.

Turn we now to his Epistles. As might be expected in his compositions of this kind, Dryden exhibits his usual penetrating sense, his delicate though sarcastic observation, and resistless manner. Some, however, are colored deeply with his fulsome flattery, and at this distance of time, and with our present tastes, we cannot peruse them without a feeling of disgust. There are two exceptions to this sweeping censure: that to „Sir Godfrey Kneller“, in which the poet pays a masterly tribute to

the painter by a clever and original description of the art — and the epistle addressed to Congreve, a noble and fraternal piece, remarkable alike for its being the retiring farewell of the now aged poet to the stage, and for its welcome given to a young and successful rival. It is also to be noted as containing the iteration of a singular idea; — he says: „to make a Congreve, it took the united excellencies of Ben Jonson, and Fletcher“; and in a few lines at another time, he has: „to constitute a Milton, the superlative merits of a Homer and Virgil were combined.“

His „Annus Mirabilis“ is unworthy of the poet. It is „done“ in the bad, metaphysical style of his earlier years, of Cowley, Donne and Drayton. From such trammels he escapes in a few passages into fervid description, and the true poetic vein, but altogether it is not what does honor to Dryden's well-known abilities and muse. There are some absurdities in it which have been laughed at far and near, such as: God turning a „crystal pyramid into a broad extinguisher“ to put out the fire — the ship „London“ compared to „a sea-wasp floating on the waves“ — and men in the sea-fight killed by „aromatic splinters“ from the Spice Islands! Long ago criticism has said its worst and its best about these early escapades of a poet, whose taste to the last was never equal to his genius.

His translations have ever been general favorites, and possess great and acknowledged merits. His Virgil cost him three years of labor, and brought him a sum of from 1200 to 1400 pounds, and by this work he is best known in England. No doubt there are more learned and correct translators than Dryden; but none more vigorous, more exulting in their vitality, and in those parts peculiarly adapted to his powers, so true to the soul of his original. Parts of Virgil he does not translate well — he has no sympathy with Maro's elegance, „concinntas“, chaste grandeur, and minute knowledge of nature; but wherever Virgil begins to glow and gallop, Dryden glows and gallops with him; and whenever Virgil is nearest Homer, Dryden is nearest to him.

Last and, as we consider, best of his works are his Fables. They form the apex of his pyramid of poems, and contrast most favorably with the forced style and obscenity of his plays. Comparatively they are pure, high-minded, manly and eloquent. As every one knows, the ground-work of these Fables is with Chaucer, Dryden only changing the originals by substituting the elegance of modern for the rude but more vigorous and antique language of Chaucer; the plots remaining the same. But, this granted, they are still adaptations so exquisite, as to form masterpieces, nay rare models

of composition. They do not, it is true, exhibit the creative powers of genius, but, lacking that, they are full of beauties of character, of language, of metaphor, and the mind closes a perusal of them with infinite satisfaction and delight. How high and august the flow of their numbers! How forcible and spirited their language! How witching their stories of entrancement! How uniform their characters, and skilful their development! How ancient chivalry, fine as a star, vivifies the „Palamon and Arcite!“ What a luscious yet tender, pure though gorgeous love lives in the „Flower and the Leaf!“ What gay and gallant badinage, surpassing sarcasm, and spell-binding history in the story of the „Cock and Fox!“ And what a depth of knowledge, of penetration of human nature, and complete arrangement of the materials in „The wife of Bath's Tale!“ George Ellis calls these Fables „the noblest specimens of versification to be found in any modern language“. There is much truth in that remark. But they are, further and greatly valuable for the insight they give us of Dryden's consummate abilities. Let us suppose that Dryden had lived in a romance and novel-writing age and instead of being lured by courts and courtiers to write plays which true taste and modesty must ever condemn, had used his great powers as a writer of fiction, it is our deliberate opinion that he would have ranked in that sphere, with Scott, Fielding or Cervantes, as one of the best fictionists that ever lived. For „he was vigorous and facile in diction; possessed of dramatic skill; had an eye to character; wielded the power of graphic description, and rapid, various nature; he had the command of the grave and the gay, the severe and lively; and a sympathy both with the bustling activities and the wild romance of human life; if not with its more solemn aspects, its transcendental references, and its aerial heights and giddy abysses of imagination and poetry“. What pity that Dryden did not live in other times than those of the unutterably impure Charles II.! How painful the thought that the world has received comparatively little but dross from a mind which Nature had formed chiefly of one pure chrysolite!

Here is still one question remaining, and it is so far important that we have delayed it to the last, in order to give it the greater prominence. The points bearing upon it have been fully discussed, and nearly exhausted, and little remains for us in this matter but to give a rapide resume of the subject. The question is put in this way: „How far is a poet particularly in the moral tendency and taste of his writings to be tried, and either condemned or justified by the character and spirit of his age?“ Undoubtedly, here are extremes and elements which require a critic's nicest care, and

profound attention. It is, in the first place, an utter impossibility that any critic, however penetrative or poetic, so understand John Dryden as to place himself in Dryden's position. There are infinite difficulties in the way of this. After the lapse of 150 years, since the death of the poet, who can be acquainted with the life daily and yearly even of him whom we are considering? We may probably obtain an uncertain glimpse or two, but it is the fiat of the Creator that one man shall not be the judge of the merits of another; for the simple reason, that he has made motives, influences and interests, invisible, intangible. But, in what a writer has done, in his works, taken by itself, or with the additions of such small light as a defective knowledge of the author himself can give, there are certainly materials on which to form an approach to a correct estimate. It is unmistakeably clear, that we shall, in our attempt to solve this very difficult question, have to produce a reasonable standard by which to test. And here „Doctors differ“. Some think that writers who have graced former centuries and times, should be measured by the tastes and standards which obtain in this cultured and civilized nineteenth century. Some think the Scriptures furnish the necessary standard in principles and practise. Now it must be admitted that taste and opinion in every age partake largely of the arbitrary and conventional. The taste of one age may be more correct than another; but each age believes in its own standard as the right one. Simply, however, we do an act of injustice to the past, by applying to it our own standard as much and more than if we judged of the dress of our ancestors by the fashions of the present day. So also as to morals. It is obvious that it would be unfair to deal out the same measure of condemnation against breaches of decorum or decency living before or living after the introduction of christianity; as you would vary your estimate of the Satyrs, Priapi, and Bacchantes, of antique sculptors as compared with their imitations in later times by coarser and inferior artists. It has been well remarked, „there must be a certain measure of allowance, made for the errors of Genius, when it was working as the galley-slave of its position and period; and when it had not yet received the Divine Light“. To look for modern philanthropy in the Iliad of Homer, to expect in the Metamorphoses of Ovid, that reverence for the Supreme Being which the Bible has taught us — or to seek, in Aristophanes and Plautus, that refinement of manners and language, which has only of late prevailed among us — is equally absurd and useless. But, in times not so remote, which have revolved since the christian dawn, a certain coarseness of thought and language has prevailed. For this ample allowance should be made, as resulting more

from simplicity than sensuality, from rustic ignorance than from polished corruption — and carries along with it a rough and rare raciness smacking strongly of the sturdy aboriginal past.

There are two cases, then, in which the critic should modify his condemnation of the bad taste or impurity to be met with in writers of genius; the first is in that of a civilization, refined no doubt, but unblest with the purifying elements of a revealed Religion — and next, in that of those times when religion was contending for mastery with barbarian rudeness. Perhaps there are still two more cases capable of palliation, that of a mind so constituted as to be nothing if not a mirror of its age; and faithfully and irresistibly reflecting even its vices and pollutions; or, that of a mind in love with the morbidities and the vile passages of human nature. But, suppose the case of a writer sitting under the full blaze of Gospel truth, professedly a believer in the Gospel, and intimately acquainted with its oracles, living in a late and dissipated, not a rude and simple age, possessed of various and splendid talents, which qualified him to create as well as mirror, and with a taste naturally sound and manly, who should yet seek to shock the feelings of the pious, to gratify the low tendencies, and fire to frenzy the evil passions of his time — such a one is not to be shielded by the apology that he has only conformed to the bad age on which he was so unfortunate as to fall. Prejudice may indeed put in such a plea for his defence; but common sense at once distinguishes between what is done from necessity and what from choice, between coarseness and corruption, between passively yielding to and actively and energetically encouraging the false taste and obscenity with which he comes in contact; and will pronounce the plea nugatory — and the author „guilty“.

With sincere regret we have come to the conclusion that this is Dryden's case. He did not live before the Christian era — was not a „barbarian or Scythian“; neither was he a helpless reflector of his times, but a conscious artist, and master of himself; his power in the literary circle was absolute, supreme. If, at first against strong resistance and much obloquy, he had pitted his giant powers against the licentiousness of his times, it is difficult not to believe that he would have succeeded, and left a brilliant track, perhaps a moral age as his accomplishment, and his nation's heritage!

It is pleasing to find that Dryden's latest efforts are his purest, and his best; yet, while looking upon this fact we must after all conclude that his chief service to his country is to stand as a mighty, though storm beat signal warning the immoral of danger and wreck!

NB. I regret not having had sufficient time at my disposal to join to the above short and unpretending essay some remarks about the far more interesting „dramatic style“ of our author.

Rich^d. Foertsch.

Berichtigung.

Seite 14. Zeile 17. statt the affrighted lies th'affrighted.

„ „ „ 18. „ adulteration „ alteration.

