

B.A (English-Hons)

Part - III

Paper - V

Topic :- Criticism - John Dryden

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John Dryden: The Father of English Criticism

John Dryden (1631-1700) occupies a seminal place in English critical history. Samuel Johnson called him "the father of English Criticism," and affirmed of his "Essay of Dramatic Poesy (1668) that "modern English prose begins here". Dryden's critical work was extensive treating of various genres such as epic, tragedy, comedy and dramatic theory, satire, the ~~literary~~ relative virtues of ancient and modern writers, as well as the nature of poetry and translation. In addition to the Essay, he wrote numerous prefaces, reviews, and prologues which together set the stage for later poetic and critical developments embodied in writers such as Pope, Johnson, Matthew Arnold and T.S. Eliot.

John Dryden was born at the vicarage of Aldwin Northampton Shire, on August 9, 1631, son of Erasmus Dryden and Mary Pickering. His family was Parliamentary supporters with Puritan leanings. He attended Westminster School as a king's scholar under Richard Busby and was an avid student of classics. He had an inborn critical faculty and besides, had studied the ancients with an open mind. Dr. Johnson in the Lives of the English poets calls Dryden the father

English Criticism. He says "Dryden may be properly considered as the father of English Criticism, as the writer who first taught us to determine upon principles the merit of composition." Dr. Johnson was very correct in giving Dryden this honour because before him there was no consistent critic in England. Sidney and Ben Jonson were, of course, there but they only made occasional observations without producing any consistent critical work or establishing any critical theory. Dryden's principal critical work is his Essay of Dramatic Poesy, though his critical observations are also found in the prefaces to several of his works, especially in the Preface to the Fables. Among his important prefaces two were written before the Essay of Dramatic Poesy and the rest afterwards. The first important essay of Dryden is the Dedicatory Epistle to The Rival Ladies (1664). In it he has advocated the use of the heroic couplet for dramatic purposes. The second essay is the Dedication to Annus Mirabilis (1666). Dryden realised the difficulties of the rhyming couplet and its limitations and therefore in this essay he suggests the use of the four line stanza with alternate rhyme for heroic verse. He thinks that it provides greater scope and freedom to the poet. The "Essay of Dramatic Poesy" is ~~developed~~ establishes him as the first historical critic, first comparative critic, first descriptive critic and the Independent English critic. It is a literary debate with a dramatic touch, a conversation among four friends. They are

- Crito - Speakers for the ancient dramatists
- Lisideius - Speaks for the French
- Eugenius - Speaks for the English literature of the last age
- Neander - Speaks for England and liberty

In this way, Dryden develops historical, comparative, and descriptive forms of criticism and finally gives his own independent views through the replies of Neander. He respects the ancient Greek and Roman principles but he refuses to adhere to them slavishly, especially in respect of Tragi-comedy and observance of the three Dramatic Unities. Thus, Dryden began a great regular era of criticism, and showed the way to his countrymen how to be great as creative authors as well as critical evaluators and what makes great literature. Thus, he is indeed the 'Father of English Criticism'.

As a literary critic, Dryden was certainly influenced by ancient Greek and Roman critics such as Aristotle, Longinus, Horace and later Italian and contemporary French critics (such as Rapin and Boileau). But this influence did not go beyond a limit. Dryden accepts and takes a comprehensive view of Aristotle's definition of poetry as a process of imitation. Aristotle has said that: "the poet being an imitator, like a painter or any other artist, must of necessity imitate one of three objects, - things as they were or are, things as they are said or thought to be, or things as they ought to be." He defends Shakespeare's use of the supernatural, because it was founded on popular beliefs. In *The Author's Apology for Heroic poetry and Poetic Licence* he says :-

"Poets may be allowed the liberty for describing things which really exist not, if they are founded on popular beliefs. Of this nature are fairies, pigmies and the extraordinary effects of magic; for 'tis still an imitation, though of other men's fancies: and thus are Shakespeare's *Tempest* and *Mid-Summer Night's Dream* ... to be defended."

The most important quality of Dryden as a critic is his liberal outlook on literature. He is the pioneer of liberal classicism. He refused to be cowed by the French playwrights and critics. His liberal classicism is seen in his noble defence of the tragi-comedy. He sees no reason why tragi-comedy should be forbidden because it mingles mirth with serious plot. In the same way he recognises that blind adherence to the unities often has a cramping effect, and results in absurdity. Their violation, on the other hand, often results in greater variety and copiousness of plot. It is for this reason that he prefers the irregular English plays to the more regular French plays. He is more interested in a work being good of its kind than in its conformity to any preconceived theories about good art. David Daiches appreciates Dryden's freedom from the classical rules and his power of independent judgement and says that his changing tastes and interests helped to make him responsive to different kinds of literary skill and artistic conventions - thus giving him that primary qualification of the good practical critic - the ability to read the work under consideration with full and sympathetic understanding.

Thus, English literary criticism before Dryden was patchy, ill-organized, cursory, perfunctory, ill-digested, and heavily leaning on ancient Greek and Roman, and more recent Italian and French, criticism. It had no identity or even life of its own. Moreover, an overwhelming proportion of it was criticism of the legislative, and little of it that of the descriptive kind. Dryden evolved and articulated an impressive body of critical principles for practical literary appreciation and offered good examples of descriptive criticism himself. It was said of

Augustus that he found Rome brick and left it marble. Saintsbury avers that Dryden's contribution to English poetry was the same as Augustus' contribution to Rome. With still more justice we could say that Dryden found English literary criticism "brick" and left it "marble".

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