

On Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*

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This paper is based upon my class report on *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* by John Dryden which I read in Prof. Bloom's class at Brown University.¹ My conclusion then was that the *Essay* was a practical criticism of Dryden's self-justification defending the kind of drama he was writing at the time. Re-reading the *Essay*, I found that the *Essay* contained problems more complex than I had originally thought, and I strongly felt the need to view it as a whole. Therefore I should like to make this paper a general, rather than specific study of the *Essay*. In this attempt I have freely quoted from critics, but since the object of the paper is almost exclusively the *Essay*, I have limited quotations from Dryden to the *Essay* and the *Defence of an Essay*.²

The narrator begins the *Essay* by describing the occasion when the discourse took place. Christopher Hollis quotes the first two pages entirely in his *Dryden* and expresses enthusiastic praise: "What a superb piece of prose! How magnificent an introduction to a philosophic dialogue! The model of Plato is evident, but did even Plato do anything better than this?"³ The opening scene creates a slightly formalized, though leisurely, atmosphere for the discussion that follows.

The speech by Crites shows a skillful shift from war to poetry:

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- 1 "Essay of Dramatic Poesy," in William Frost, ed. *John Dryden: Selected Works* (San Francisco, 1971), pp. 428-85; hereafter the *Essay*.
 - 2 "Defence of an Essay" in Arthur C. Kirsch, ed. *Literary Criticism of John Dryden* (Lincoln, 1966), pp. 70-89; hereafter the *Defence*.
 - 3 Christopher Hollis, *Dryden* (London, 1933), p. 37.

“ . . . if the concernment of this battle had not been so exceeding great, he could scarce have wished the victory at the price he know he must pay for it, in being subject to the reading and hearing of so many ill verses as he was sure would be made on that subject” (p. 429). George Watson points out that “the opening skirmish . . . is exquisitely contrived to shift the interest from the battle to poetry, and from poetry in general to dramatic poetry in particular.”⁴ This shift from the general to the particular corresponds to the whole structure of the *Essay*. Crites and Eugenius first discuss the ancients and the moderns. Then among the moderns Lisideius and Neander argue about the comparative merits of the French and the English drama. Finally Crites and Neander focus the subject to the relative superiority between blank verse and heroic couplet.

The first few pages introduce four speakers: Crites, the advocator of the ancients and blank verse ; Eugenius, the speaker for the moderns ; Lisideius, the admirer of the French ; and Neander, the defender of the English and rhymed verse. They can be identified as Sir Robert Howard, Charles Sackville, Sir Charles Sedley, and John Dryden himself respectively. As J. T. Boulton says, the choice of the speakers suggests that the *Essay* is “designed to appeal to the cultivated Restoration reader.”⁵ The main purpose of the *Essay* is not to give final judgment to the argument. Dryden says in the *Defence* that the *Essay* is “a little discourse in dialogue for the most part borrowed from the observations of others” (p. 72). I agree with Robert D. Hume who says, “What Dryden does in *Of Dramatic Poesy* is to sketch out

4 George Watson, ed. *John Dryden: Of Dramatic Poesy* (London, 1962), Vol. I, xi.

5 J. T. Boulton, *Dryden, Of Dramatick Poesie* (London, 1964), p. 12.

some possible positions.⁶ The choice of the speakers is an attempt to reflect contemporary opinions. Although the attitude toward drama in the *Essay* as a whole seems to waver considerably, each speaker is "coherent and self-contained" (Hume, p. 8). Hume thinks that Dryden "was deliberately keeping them [i.e. the four speakers] apart for speculative, comparative purposes" (Hume, p. 48, note 13). We see each speaker's opinion much clarified when it is contrasted to the next speaker's idea. The *Essay* makes progress by repeating thesis and antithesis, attack and defense, but the atmosphere of the *Essay* is not harsh at all. The battle of the dramatic poesy is like the war in the background of the *Essay*. We know that it is a war, but all we can hear is the distant sound of cannons.

Wimsatt and Brooks say, "One of the chief contribution of Dryden to English criticism is the conversational pace, the gentlemanly tone (though it sometimes masks ironic mayhem), the cool and judicial posture."⁷ Although I find it hard to call the *Essay* conversational, I can understand that Dryden makes the *Essay* a readable, amusing one by providing illustrative examples and coloring them with humor. The following speech by Neander is an amusing one that also serves to make me aware of the distance between Dryden and Neander: ". . . as we, who are a more sullen people, come to be diverted at our plays, so they [i.e. the French], who are of an airy and gay temper, come thither to make themselves more serious: and this I conceive to be one reason why comedies are more pleasing to us, and tragedies to them" (p. 460). The merit of the dialogue form, to quote Atkins, is that it

6 Robert D. Hume, *Dryden's Criticism* (Ithaca, 1970), p. 8.

7 William K. Wimsatt, Jr. & Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York, 1962), p. 192.

permits "a full discussion of conflicting views without requiring any definite finding in conclusion."⁸ In the *Defence*, Dryden explains that "the frame and composition of the work [i.e. the *Essay*]" is "sceptical," and that the *Essay* is "a dialogue sustained by persons of several opinions, all of them left doubtful . . ." (p. 82). Watson (p. xi) agrees with Dryden, but is rather critical about the *Essay*: ". . . in spite of the essentially didactic quality of the Ciceronian dialogue, the whole discourse is sceptical. We are rewarded neither with lively argument nor with much lucid doctrine." What Dryden meant by the word, "sceptical" is arguable. Wimsatt says that "Dryden's basic critical attitude . . . would seem to have been not so much scepticism as a kind of reaction to scepticism which we may call 'probabilism'" (Wimsatt, p. 193). At the moment I should like to suggest that Dryden is warning us against the danger of relating the opinions of the speakers to Dryden's immediately. We see that Dryden sets a distance even from Neander, whose opinion is supposed to be the closest to Dryden's. For example, the gentle mocking tone in describing Neander at the end of the *Essay* tells us that Neander is, after all, one of the speakers: "Neander was pursuing this discourse so eagerly that Eugenius had called to him twice or thrice, ere he took notice that the barge stood still, and that they were at the foot of Somerset-stairs, where they had appointed it to land" (p. 485). It is true that Neander always has the last say in the argument, but it is also undeniable that Dryden leaves a possibility of choice for us.

The points at issue in the *Essay* were all controversial questions at the time when Dryden wrote (1665) and published (1668) the *Essay*.

8 J. W. H. Atkins, *English Literary Criticism: 17th and 18th Centuries* (New York, 1959), p. 55.

According to Watson (p. 11), "In 1664 Samuel Sorbière, a French member of the newly formed Royal Society, had attacked English drama for its neglect of rhyme and of the three unities in his *Relation d'un voyage en Angleterre*." To answer this Thomas Sprat wrote in 1665 *Observations on M. de Sorbier's Voyage into England* claiming the superiority of English drama over French drama (Boulton, p. 8). At about the same time Samuel Pepys, after viewing a performance of *The Indian Queen*, by Dryden and Howard, wrote in his diary: "the play good, but spoiled with the ryme, which breaks the scene."⁹ These questions of the day were of immediate importance to Dryden in particular, who was one of the most active playwrights then. The *Essay* was relevant to its age. It contains many instances that turn our attention to its social context. For example, Crites' mention of "the great plague" indicates the social background of the *Essay*. His statement on the cause of the plague, "whether we had it from the malignity of our own air, or by transportation from Holland . . ." (pp. 472-73) suggests the political condition of the day.

The fact that Dryden has chosen the occasion of the discourse on "that memorable day, . . . when our navy engaged the Dutch" (p. 428) indicates his national concern. T. S. Eliot says, "The great work of Dryden in criticism is that at the right moment he became conscious of the necessity of affirming the native element in literature."¹⁰ Neander affirms the English tradition in drama: "We have borrowed nothing from them [i.e. the French]; our plots are weaved in English looms; we endeavour therein to follow the variety and greatness of characters which are derived to us from Shakespeare and Fletcher" (p. 464).

9 Samuel Pepys, *Diary* (1 Feb. 1664), cited in Boulton, p. 8.

10 T. S. Eliot, *Use of Poetry*, p. 14, cited in Wimsatt, pp. 186-87.

Neander also expresses full confidence in the English language. He says, "English language in them [i.e. Beaumont and Fletcher] arrived to its highest perfection" (p. 466), and gives English as high a position as that of Latin: "Our language is noble, full, and significant; and I know not why he who is master of it may not clothe ordinary things in it as decently as the Latin, if he use the same diligence in his choice of words" (p. 483). Wimsatt points out that "the recent advance of English versification to a state of nearly classic perfection is an assumption so solidly established for the other speakers in the dialog as not to be of main moment to the argument" (Wimsatt p. 185). With this firm belief in English tradition, Neander advocates the superiority of English drama over French drama: ". . . of late years Molière, the younger Corneille, Quinault, and some others, have been imitating afar off the quick turns and graces of the English stage [and as for plots, the French ones] are too much alike to please often; which we need not the experience of our own stage to justify" (pp. 457-58). He also puts down French comedies as "being but ill imitations of the ridiculum, or that which stirred up laughter in the old comedy" (p. 469).

In the argument between Crites and Eugenius about the ancient drama and the modern drama, Dryden shows a historical sense unusual for his age. Watson defines historicism as "the assumption we all now share that past ages may have governed their behaviour on principles alien to our own" (Watson, xiv). According to Watson, "It is a central neoclassical doctrine, from the sixteenth-century Italians to Samuel Johnson, that (as Dryden obediently echoes it), 'man kind [is] the same in all ages, agitated by the same passions, and moved to action by the same interests'" (Watson, xiv-xv). Eugenius defends the moderns

by quoting Horace: "I am displeased when anything is condemned, not because it is thought clumsy or ungraceful, but merely recent" (p. 432). His statement stands on the same ground with Crites' defence of the ancients: ". . . to admire them [i.e. the ancients] as we ought, we should understand them better than we do" (p. 438). These remarks reflect the idea that one should understand the ancients and the moderns in their own context to judge them properly. Eugenius further confirms this idea in the matter of the wit in the ancients: ". . . the language being dead, and many of the customs and little accidents on which it depended lost to us, we are not competent judges of it" (p. 444), although he shows slight inconsistency when he continues: ". . . though I grant that here and there we may miss the applicacion of a proverb or a custom, yet a thing well said will be wit in all language" (p. 444). Crites expresses historical view most clearly when he imagines the ancients to be in the modern age: ". . . perhaps one of their poets had he lived in our age, . . . he had altered many things; not that they were not natural before, but that he might accommodate himself to the age in which he lived" (447-48). And Neander asserts the historical sense when he says, ". . . not only we shall never equal them [i.e. the ancients], but they could never equal themselves, were they to rise and write again For the genius of every age is different" (p. 479).

Crites accuses the moderns of a lack of originality: "[Ben Jonson] was not only a professed imitator of Horace, but a learned plagiarist of all the others" (p. 438). To this Eugenius answers, ". . . the moderns have profited by the rules of the ancient," and he points out that Crites is "careful to conceal how much they [i.e. the moderns] have excelled them [i.e. the ancients]" (p. 439). Eugenius expresses

his belief in rational progress: “. . . for if natural causes be more known now than in the time of Aristotle, because more studied, it follows that poesy and other arts may, with the same pains, arrive still nearer to perfection” (p. 439). Hume says that “belief in refinement and progress” is one of Dryden’s consistent doctrines (Hume, p. 222).

After Eugenius’ affirmation of man’s progress in art and science, comes the question of what the moderns should do. Neander declares the rise of modern English drama: “. . . , though the fury of a civil war, and power for twenty years together abandoned to a barbarous race of men, enemies of all good learning, had buried the muses under the ruins of monarchy; yet, with the restoration of our happiness, we see revived poesy lifting up its head, and already shaking off the rubbish which lay so heavy on it” (p. 471), and he urges the need to start anew: “There is scarce an humour, a character, or any kind of plot, which they [i.e. the ancients] have not used This therefore will be a good argument to us, either not to write at all, or to attempt some other way” (p. 479). Neander goes on: “This way of writing in verse [i.e. heroic couplet] they [i.e. the ancients] have only left free to us; our age is arrived to a perfection it, which they never knew” (p. 479). This proud belief in the rhymed couplet is reflected in the *Defence*: “I will be the first who shall lay it [i.e. blank verse] down. For I confess my chief endeavours are to delight the age in which I live” (p. 75).

The *Essay* is concerned with *how* to delight this new age. “Practical criticism,” Boulton says, “flourishes in an age which takes the justification of literature for granted; which moves on from theoretical claims for literature as a whole, or for certain literary kinds to the evaluation of a particular writer’s solution of specific stylistic or other

problems and the practical lessons that can be learned from his example" (Boulton, pp. 14-15). This is exactly what Dryden does in the *Essay*. W. J. Bate remarks: "Dryden did not deal with the ultimate problems of literature. He tended, instead, to discuss specific matters, usually questions of technique and method."¹¹ In the *Defence*, talking about blank verse, Dryden says, "at least the practice first" (p. 75), and he treats the question of rhyme and blank verse on the realistic, practical level rather than on the theoretical level, thus echoing the practical nature of the *Essay*. Neander says, "As for their new way of mingling mirth with serious plot, I do not . . . condemn the thing, though I cannot approve their manner of doing it" (p. 458). He expresses here the distinction between the subject and the manner of expressing it. A considerable portion of the *Essay* is devoted to the discussion of the means, of the technical aspects of the drama. B. J. Pendlebury thinks that "the first two parts of the *Essay* are really concerned with the same subject, namely, the structural difference between classical and romantic drama, for Dryden seems to be more interested in technical questions than in giving the superiority to the Ancients or the Moderns."¹² In many instances we have a practical but superficial treatment of the subject. For example, Neander, in the argument about the use of rhyme, lists technical, but superficial reasons. Against Crites' accusation about the ridiculousness of rhyme in addressing a servant, Neander answers: "This, Crites, is a good observation of yours, but no argument: for it proves no more but that such thoughts should be waived, as often as may be, by the address

11 Walter Jackson Bate, ed. *Criticism: the Major Texts* (New York, 1952), p. 124.

12 B. J. Pendlebury, *Dryden's Heroic Plays: A Study of the Origins* (New York, 1967), pp. 51-52.

of the poet" (p. 483).

Another practical aspect of the *Essay* is its concern for the audience. "It is obvious," Pendlebury says, "that Dryden had no wish to be didactic, but that his first object was to please his audience, and so get himself a living" (Pendlebury, p. 50). Although this may be true, it is only a partial truth. The consideration for the audience shows that the drama discussed in the *Essay* is not only an idea of drama on the theoretical level but an actual drama living in the context of the age and the people who form the society. All four speakers show their concern for the audience: Crites, quoting Corneille, says that "there ought to be . . . one complete action which leaves the mind of the audience in a full repose" (p. 437); Eugenius says that Catastrophe "ends with that resemblance of truth and nature, that the audience are satisfied with the conduct of it" (p. 440), and he remarks that the judiciously observed plot may lose its charm when it is repeated and when it is known by the audience before the play begins; Lisideius says about tragi-comedy that "we see two distinct webs in a play, like those in ill-wrought stuffs; and two actions, that is, two plays, carried on together, to the confounding of the audience" (p.449); and Neander, saying that "the effects of it [i.e. passion] should appear in the concernment of an audience," mocks the French play from the audience's point of view: ". . . their speeches [in the French plays] being so many declamations, which tire us with the length; so that instead of persuading us to grieve for their imaginary heroes, we are concerned for our own trouble, as we are in tedious visits of bad company; we are in pain till they are gone" (p. 459). Behind Eugenius' speech: "wit is best conveyed to us in the most easy language; and is most to be admired when a great thought comes

dressed in words so commonly received" (p. 445), we see some consideration for the audience.

Then who is the audience? There seems at first glance to be a discrepancy as to the concept of the audience. Crites expresses strong trust in the audience's judgment: "The unanimous consent of an audience is so powerful, that Julius Caesar . . . was not able to balance it on the side" (p. 473), but Neander is sceptical: "If by the people you understand the multitude, . . . 'tis no matter what they think; they are sometimes in the right, sometimes in the wrong: their judgment is a mere lottery" (p. 479). Hume says, "[Dryden] does not, like Johnson, appeal to the taste of audience or readers as the final critical standard. Although he consistently maintains that the business of an author is to please his age, he grows increasingly distrustful of audience taste" (Hume, p. 27). In so far as it is concerned with the *Essay*, however, I do not agree with Hume's opinion that Dryden does not trust the taste of the audience. Neander distinguishes the cultured audience from the general public: "But if you mean the mixed audience of the populace and the nobles, I dare confidently affirm that a great part of the latter sort are already favourable to verse" (pp. 479-80). When Dryden says in the *Defence* that the discourse in the *Essay* is "to be determined by the readers in general; and more particularly deferred to the accurate judgment of my Lord Buckhurst, to whom I made a dedication of my book" (p. 82), he is thinking of the educated reader. Frost points out that "the discussion [in the *Essay*] is larded with Latin quotations, being intended for an educated, somewhat intellectual, audience" (p. 428). Dryden seems to have in mind sort of "an ideal reader" who has proper taste. The *Essay* is consistent in this respect. Dryden's words in the *Defence*, "the

imagination of the audience, aided by the words of the poet and painted scenes, may suppose the stages to be sometimes one place, sometimes another . . .” (p. 84) indicate that he is thinking of the drama as being made with the cooperation of the ideal audience.

The critical standard in the *Essay* is the problem much argued among critics. I see many instances where it is hard to find the criterion of the argument. For example, Neander may hardly be called fair to the French when he says, “I acknowledge that the French contrive their plots more regularly, and observe the laws of comedy, and decorum of the stage (to speak generally), with more exactness than the English. . . . yet, after all, I am of opinion that neither our faults nor their virtues are considerable enough to place them above us” (p. 457). There is no substantial comparison between rhyme and blank verse. Neander’s praise of rhyme for its restraining function: “It had formerly been said that the easiness of blank verse renders the poet too luxuriant, but that the labour of rhyme bounds and circumscribes an over-fruitful fancy” (p. 484) seems irrelevant to his attack on the French plot for its rigid regularity and to his praise of the English plot for its loose luxuriousness: “by their [i.e. the French] servile observations of the unities of time and place, and integrity of sciences, they have brought on themselves that dearth of plot, and narrowness of imagination, which may be observed in all their plays” (p. 462); and “. . . if you consider the plots, our own are fuller of variety; if the writing, ours are more quick and fuller of spirit” (pp. 463-64). Furthermore, Neander’s remarks about rhyme contradict each other. He first asserts that rhyme is proper for the drama “since the custom of nations at this day confirms it” (p. 478), then in the next page he says that “the people are not generally inclined to like this

way [i.e. to write plays in rhyme] —if it were true, it would be no wonder, that betwixt the shaking off and old habit, and introducing of a new, there should be difficulty” (p. 479), and a few pages later he says that repartee in a line is acceptable because “it was never observed as a fault in them [i.e. Greek tragedians and Seneca] by any of the ancient or modern critics” (p. 482), which shows some similarity to Crites’ remark: “. . . says, Aristotle, ’tis best to write tragedy in that kind of verse . . . which is nearest prose: and this amongst the ancients was the Iambic, and with us is blank verse” (p. 473).

The discourse about rhyme and blank verse is especially unsatisfactory because Crites and Neander argue over, if not superficial, mostly technical particulars, and we are at a loss as to the standard used in the argument. For example, to Crites’ accusation that rhyme is unnatural in a play whose dialog “is presented as the effect of sudden thought” (p. 473), Neander answers that blank verse is as unnatural as rhyme and is less effective, and adds that “blank verse is acknowledged to be too low for a poem, nay more, for a paper of verse; but if too low for an ordinary sonnet, how much more for tragedy” (p. 480). In addition to the pettiness of the argument, when we consider the fact that Dryden himself converted to the use of blank verse from the use of the heroic couplet, we doubt the sincerity of the dispute. Hume claims that “Dryden’s shift on this issue [i.e. rhyme] makes perfect sense if it is regarded as a function of the change in his views on imitation in drama” (Hume, p. 216). Wimsatt explains that “the rhymed heroic couplet was to have its successes, but not in heroic drama” because the nature of rhymed couplet is more suitable for “epigrammatic, moral and reflective poetry” (Wimsatt, p. 189) than for heroic tragedy.

We may understand this explanation about Dryden's conversion from rhyme to blank verse in his lifetime, but how can we deal with the inconsistency within the framework of the *Essay*? It is also ambiguous whether Neander thinks "unities" important or not when he asks, "Now, what, I beseech you, is more easy than to write a regular French play, or more difficult than to write an irregular English one, like those of Fletcher, or of Shakespeare?" (p. 463) What is the meaning of Eugenius' strange accusation against the ancients: ". . . when I condemn the ancients, I declare it is not altogether because they have not five acts to every play, but because they have not confined themselves to one certain number" (p. 440)? Neander, in particular, is to blame for lowering the level of the argument to superficiality. For example, to Crites' criticism that a character in Ben Jonson's play is unnatural, Neander offers excuses on the realistic level: "Ben Jonson was actually acquainted with such a man" (p. 468) I suspect that the reason why Neander excludes "all comedy from my defence" (p. 475) is that he has to use comedy later in contrast to tragedy in order to say: "I answer you . . . by distinguishing betwixt what is nearest to the nature of comedy, which is the imitation of common persons and ordinary speaking, and what is nearest the nature of a serious play: this last is indeed the representation of nature, but 'tis nature wrought up to a higher pitch" (p. 480). This seems to me more like a trick than a rhetorical device. We may not be surprised now even if we come across Neander's words: "When a poem has many beauties, I shall not be offended at a few blemishes" (p. 472).

One of the possible reasons for this sometimes inconsistent practical nature of the *Essay* is, as Kirsch remarks, that Dryden "is concerned with justifying his profession as a dramatist" (Kirsch, x). It is true,

as Hume points out, that "the dramatic practice implicitly recommended in *Of Dramatic Poesy* is that which Dryden was to explore during the next few years in his rimed 'heroic' plays" (Hume, p. 204). Kirsch may be right in pointing out that in the *Essay* Dryden vindicates himself as a dramatist, but it is still a partial truth. To regard the whole *Essay* as Dryden's self-justification runs the danger of ignoring the question of the critical standard in the *Essay*. Here I should like to listen to Hume's warning: "The occasional nature of Dryden's criticism, its studied casualness, and his preoccupation with technical matters of construction tend to obscure the real seriousness of his view of literature and his belief in its essentially moral function. Amid the welter of details and particulars critics lose sight of substantive issues, and so apparent contradictions in details have loomed large" (Hume, pp. 225-26). Then what view of literature, what belief, can be found in the *Essay*?

I once again would like to think of the structure of the *Essay*. Margaret Sherwood says, "Important questions [in the *Essay* are] the *relative* values of the ancient and the modern drama; of the French and the English drama; the advantages and disadvantages of rime."¹³ When Neander esteems that "in serious plays where the subject and characters are great, and the plot unmixed with mirth, which might allay or divert these concernments which are produced, rhyme is there as natural and more effective than blank verse" (p. 475), he is not talking about the absolute value of rhyme. It is a *better* way than blank verse under the particular condition described above. Dryden's relative-value thinking in this point is more apparent in the *Defence* when he

13 Margaret Shewood, *Dryden's Dramatic Theory and Practice* (New York, 1966), p. 22, italics are mine.

touches upon the unity of place: “. . . the nearer and fewer those imaginary places are, the greater resemblance they will have to truth; and reason, which cannot make them one, will be more easily led to suppose so” (p. 86). The historical sense in the *Essay* is, in Hume’s words, “the sense of cultural relativity” (Hume, p. 80). The practical nature of the *Essay*, with its superficial inconsistency, is attributed to the fact that the *Essay* is a study of the relative value of the problems in dramatic poesy.

Dryden’s mode of thinking reflected in the *Essay* belongs to “the multi-valued orientation,” in S. I. Hayakawa’s term.¹⁴ “The multi-valued orientation” is “the ability to see things in terms of more than two values” which is used in contrast to “the two-valued orientation” based ultimately “on a single interest” (Hayakawa, p. 233). Dryden in the *Essay* rejects the idea of the extremes. For example, poets who are mocked there are those who run extremes like Plautus, “who is infinitely too bold in his metaphors and coining words, out of which many times his wit is nothing” (p. 444). Neander, though half-mockingly, supposes two extremes and excludes them from the argument: “. . . he who has . . . so infallible a judgment that he needs no helps to keep it always poised and upright, will commit no faults either in rhyme or out of it. And on the other extreme, he who has a judgment so weak and crazed that no helps can correct or amend it, shall write scurvily out of rhyme, and worse in it. But the first of those judgments is nowhere to be found, and the latter is not fit to write at all” (p. 484), but this does not mean that there is no standard in this argument. Neander continues, “To speak therefore of judgment as it is in the best poets; they who have the greatest proportion

14 S. I. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action* (London, 1959), p. 233.

of it, what other helps than from it, within" (p. 484). Here we notice the distinction between the helps within as judgment and helps without. Paul Ramsey says, "the crucial truth about Dryden's criticism is that it is consistent in fundamentals . . . yet flexible in dealing with secondary principles," and "Dryden distinguished between the primary, unshakable rules and the secondary rules which require mediation and qualification."¹⁵ What Ramsey talks about here is the plural standardness, the multi-valued orientation of the *Essay*.

Then what are the primary, consistent principles? In order to deal with this question, I should like to examine "the definition" of a play which itself is not an object of the argument in the *Essay*. Lisideius defines a drama as "a just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humours, and the change of fortune to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind" (p. 434). Words such as "just and lively" and "delight and instruction" show that the idea behind the definition is not of the two-valued but of the multi-valued orientation. This definition is, as Boulton remarks, "the central concept" of the *Essay* (Boulton, p. 17). We are liable to forget this too obvious fact because of the practical, technical surface of the *Essay*. Apparently the definition is the "norm" of the argument. Then what is the meaning of the definition? The four speakers never discuss the definition except in the case of Crites' objection that it is "only *genere et fine*" (p. 434), but the discussion based on the definition reflects the nature of the definition.

The definition, emphasizing "human nature," as Hume suggests, shows "a startlingly static conception of drama" (Hume, p. 191), when it is compared to Aristotle's "the objects of imitation are men in

15 Paul Ramsey, *The Art of John Dryden* (Lexington, 1969), pp. 2-3.

action . . .¹⁶” Hume points out that Dryden “is making character rather than action the prime constituent of a play” (Hume, p. 192). Since the English play is praised for its rich characters in the argument on the English and the French drama, Kirsch remarks, “the very definition of a play which the company agrees upon is calculated to serve the English side” (Kirsch, x). Dryden says in the *Defence*, “I have never heard of any other foundation of dramatic poesy than the imitation of nature” (p. 81). The concept of art as “imitation of nature” is a traditional one since the time of Plato. Then what does Dryden mean by “nature”? Crites deplores the disadvantage of the modern poetry quoting Petronius: “Nature, which is the soul of it [i.e. poetry], is not any of your [i.e. modern] writings” (p. 432). Frost annotates “Nature” as “reality” (p. 509). H. James Jensen says, “[in Dryden], ‘nature’ never means idealized nature of ‘la belle nature’ unless he qualifies it with perfect, best, etc.”¹⁷ What matters in the *Essay*, however, is heightened nature, the qualified one. Neander says, “A play, . . . to be like nature, is to be set above it; as statues which are placed on high are made greater than the life, that they may descend to the sight in their just proportion” (p. 481), and he talks about the nature in tragedy: “’tis nature wrought up to a higher pitch” (p. 480).

As for the meaning of “imitation,” Sherwood says, “Dryden, for the most part, uses the phrase, imitation of nature, in this lower sense of wax-work literalness in reproduction, not in the higher one of the meaning in object or event” (Sherwood, pp. 18-19). Crites seems to

16 James Harry Smith & Edd Winfield Parks, ed. *The Great Critics* (New York, 1951), p. 30.

17 H. James Jensen, *A Glossary of John Dryden's Critical Terms* (Minneapolis, 1969), p. 80.

prove this idea when he says, "Those ancients have been *faithful imitators* and wise observers of that nature which is so torn and ill represented in our plays; they have handed down to us a *perfect resemblance* of her; which we, like *ill copiers*, neglecting to look on, have rendered monstrous, and disfigured" (p. 435, italics are mine). Eugenius' idea of "partial imitation" seems to support the idea of imitation as "exact copying." In the *Defence*, however, Dryden shows a different concept of imitation. About Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew-Fair*, Dryden says, "the copy [i.e. the play] is of price, though the original [i.e. the real fair] be vile" (pp. 74-75), and again in the *Defence*, he says, "one great reason why prose is not to be used in serious plays, is, because it is too near the nature of converse: there may be too great a likeness" (p. 73). This idea of imitation in the *Defence* is far from naturalism. Dryden here does not mean exact copying. Before we call this Dryden's inconsistency, we need to remember that Neander talks about "heightened nature." Is the exact copying of elevated nature possible?

A similar case is the treatment of "truth" in the *Essay*. Absolute truth is not the subject in the *Essay*. Lisideius says, "the spirit of man cannot be satisfied but with truth," but he goes on, "or at least verisimilitude" (p. 451). Although he speaks of truth, he is actually interested in "verisimilitude," which is "what seems to be true" (p. 451). Crites echoes a similar idea: "A play is still an imitation of nature; we know we are to be deceived, and we desire to be so; but no man was deceived but with a probability of truth" (p. 474). When he says, "since the mind of man does naturally tend to truth; and therefore the nearer anything comes to the imitation of it, the more it pleases" (p. 474), he is applying the relative-valued thinking to the truth in

drama. Dryden affirms the idea of verisimilitude in the *Defence*: "The poet dresses truth, and adorns nature, but does not alter them," and he quotes Horace: "Fiction made for delight should resemble truth" (p. 80, italics mine). As the pursuit of ultimate truth is not the object of the drama, the imitation of nature is not an absolute reproduction of nature. It is something that resembles nature.

We need to examine the words, "just and lively" that modify the imitation of nature. In modern usage, "just" and "lively" seem to be of opposite natures, but Jensen suggests that Dryden uses the word, "just" in the sense of the French "juste" meaning "appropriate, describing that which preserves decorums, is suitable, well-balanced, proportionate" (Jensen, p. 70), and lively as "lifelike, probable, natural, having the appearance of being like life (not of being life itself)" (Jensen, p. 73). We may, therefore, understand that Dryden uses the two qualifying words not as the words of opposing natures, but as similar and probably inseparable ones. When we take these adjectives as a unit and combine them with the somewhat ambiguous phrase, "imitation of human nature," we may be able to understand the first part of the definition as "an appropriate, probable representation of characters."

Let us now examine the end or the purpose of the drama, "the delight and instruction of mankind." Dryden says in the *Defence*, "Moral truth is the mistress of the poet as much as of the philosopher; poesy must resemble natural truth, but it must be ethical" (p. 80). Dryden seems to esteem moral aspects most highly, but in the same *Defence*, he says, "delight is the chief, if not the only end of poesy: instruction can be admitted but in the second place, for poetry only instructs as it delights" (p. 73). If we accept these statements as

they are on face value, we must say that are contradictory. From this we may conclude as Pendlebury does: "It is obvious that Dryden had no wish to be didactic, but that his first object was to please his audience, and get himself a living; to do this, he found it necessary to conform, to some extent, to critical orthodoxy, or at least to provide specious reasons for departing from it; hence his perfunctory inclusion of instruction as one of the objects of dramatic poetry" (Pendlebury, pp. 50-51). Before we readily accept his opinion, however, I should like to examine the relation between "delight" and "instruction" in the *Essay*. Lisideius says, "He so interweaves truth with probable fiction that he puts a pleasing fallacy upon us; mends the intrigues of fate, and dispenses with the severity of history, to reward that virtue which has been rendered to us there unfortunate" (p. 450). Here we see the idea that what is pleasing is moral or vice versa. Therefore it may be more appropriate to think that the "delight" and "instruction" in the *Essay* are to be taken as a unit, as an indispensable quality for a play rather than to be regarded as separate objects of a drama. Dryden does not make a selection between them. He simply aims at both. The definition itself is an example of multi-valued thinking. The definition contains many elements of the drama, and what is important is to include them all without discrepancy. The problem discussed in the *Essay* is not that of sacrificing any one of the purposes. What matters is the question of *how* to fulfil all these ends.

Dryden says, in the *Defence*, ". . . if nature be to be imitated, then there is a rule for imitating nature rightly; otherwise there may be an end, and no means conducting to it" (p. 81). The end is expressed in the definition. What Dryden discusses in the *Essay* is "the means" to accomplish this end. Hume says, "Dryden is primarily

interested in creating an effective work, and the rules of genres are merely means toward that end" (Hume, p. 27), but here we must distinguish rules between the primary and the secondary ones. What Hume means in the above are the secondary rules that lead to the technical matters. When Neander says, "no poet need constrain himself at all times to it. It is enough he makes it his general rule" (p. 478), he is talking about the secondary rules. The argument about unities and rhyme is the discussion of the secondary rules.

Then what is the primary rule in the *Essay*? When we think of the criterion in this multi-value-oriented *Essay*, we should pay attention to the following speech by Neander about judgment: "Judgment is indeed the master-workman in a play; but he requires many subordinated hands, many tools to his assistance. And verse I affirm to be one of these" (pp. 484-85). Judgment is the primary rule. The subordinate hands, technical restrictions like unities and rhyme are the secondary rules. Judgment is the "rule for imitating nature *rightly*" (*Defence*, p. 81, italics are mine). What is consistent in the *Essay* is the idea that there is a right judgment. Kirsch remarks, "The central question for critics and writers is the appropriateness of means to ends—otherwise known as decorum" (Kirsch, p. 70). The basis of the argument in the *Essay* is the idea of decorum, or propriety, which, according to G. W. Chapman, "always implies propriety to nature, and is a rhetorical corollary of the theory of imitation."¹⁸ What Dryden argues for in the *Essay* is the *proper* "mediation between the experience of classical literature and criticism and the demands of his own audience" (Kirsch, p. 70). The idea of decorum is essentially multi-

18 Gerald Wester Chapman, *Pitery Criticism in England: 1660-1800* (New York, 1966), p. 40.

valued. It is the idea to try to find the golden mean of the divergent values. Hume says, "Decorum as a general principle applies both: the subject must be moral (or at least yield a negative lesson), and the imitation must be fitting in order to be effective" (Hume, pp. 228-29).

In the *Essay*, Dryden presents contemporary opinions about the drama, and gives them proper places by casting light on them from various angles. He strongly affirms the national tradition and the excellence of the modern English drama, and urges the need to start anew as one of the active dramatists of the day. Although he sometimes shows some surface inconsistency, under the practical and technical argument, he keeps his firm principle of decorum, a strong belief in the proper mediation of means and ends.

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