

AN EVALUTION OF DRYDEN AS A LITERARY CRITIC

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Abstract:

Dr. Johnson described Dryden as the father of English criticism; and Dryden has won high praise from other too by virtue of his critical writing. Dryden wrote only one work of formal critical, namely *An Essay of dramatic Poesie*. He wrote some twenty-five critical prefaces to the works of other poets occupy a very small proportion of his critical interests. And yet he is clearly the founder of descriptive criticism in English. Descriptive criticism, also known as practical criticism, is to be distinguished from theoretical or legislative criticism.

Introduction:

Dryden has won high praise from other too by virtue of his critical writing. He is the founder of descriptive criticism in English. Dryden occupies a significant place in the galaxy of English critics. He has been called “*the father of English criticism*”, in whose works we find, for the first time, not only criticism but criticism being aware of itself. Critics from Dr. Johnson to David Daiches have, after weighing the excellences and shortcoming of Dryden the critic, admitted that his contribution to English criticism has been considerable and lasting.

Types of Criticism:

The new spirit of the age was manifest in marked attention to the more controllable elements in literary composition, to precision and exactitude of expression. Dryden is said to have been the first, in English literature, to use the term “*criticism*”. Literary criticism in general, and in its relation to poetry in particular, can be for three kinds,

- ❖ Legislative criticism
- ❖ Theoretical criticism
- ❖ Descriptive criticism

The *Legislative* criticism has often the tendency of becoming dictatorial. *Theoretical* criticism is concerned with the abstract questions of literary aesthetics. Finally in *descriptive* criticism, the critic places himself in the position of a mediator between the writer and the reader.

Sympathetic Understanding and Catholicity:

Dryden realized that the real function of criticism was not doctrinaire gymnastics, but the appreciation of the positive literary excellences. He brought to his task the ability to evaluate a work of art with sympathy and understanding, in the words of Sherburn, “the high excellence of Dryden’s critical writings derives first, from a mental incisiveness that led him at times with inspired directness to the heart of a problem and secondly, from an unusually catholic sensitiveness to the merits of several divergent literary traditions”. He his will “connoisseur no man out of his senses “, and refuses to be so connoisseured by any, while he will give good reasons for his own and other pleasure “.These are the marks of the true and Catholic criticism; and Dryden has them.”

Recognition of the Value of Fancy or Imagination:

The concept of Imagination now enters into the language of literary criticism in a big way. However, Dryden frequently uses the word fancy instead of imagination. Thus in the preface to “*The Rival Ladies*” he says that imagination in a poet is a faculty so wild and lawless that, like a high-ranging spaniel, it must have clogs tied to it, lest outrun the judgment; and he adds that the fancy then gives leisure to the judgment to come in. Again, when he says that fancy is the principal quality required in a poet, he means by fancy what we means by imagination. Rather we perceive the poet’s true method in the example of Shakespeare who “needed not the spectacles of books to read nature; he looked inwards, and found her there”. “*It is fancy that gives the life-touches*”.

The Critic Not a Lawgiver:

Dryden refuses to recognize the critic as a lawgiver. He discards all bans upon the freedom of judgment. If the mingling of mirth with serious plot is not in conformity with the theory and practice of the Greek critics and dramatists, Dryden does not take it to be reason enough to forbid tragic-comedy. The established French ideal of the singleness of plot for him is no reason to condemn the variety and copiousness of English plots with their underplots. As T.S.Eliots says, “The great work of Dryden in criticism in that at the right moment he became conscious of the necessity of affirming the native element in literature”. He would not offer slavish homage even to Aristotle. Dryden realises that what critical dicta may be right for one age or one may be wrong for another. As ward has observed, “Dryden’s opinions on most subjects were sufficiently fluid to respond without reluctance to the demands of common sense: nor did he ever take pride in a doctrinaire consistency, ever with himself.”

Appreciative Character of His Criticism:

“The great value of the literary criticism of Dryden,” says Saintsbury “consists in the extremely appreciative character.” The comparative method employed by him in his estimates of Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher, and Ben Johnson reveals the appreciative character of his criticism. He institutes comparison, not for censuring, one writer for not possessing the qualities possessed by the other. In the words of David Daiches, “The judicial balancing of virtues and faults, the sense that each of these writers has his own special gifts and is not necessarily to be censured for lacking qualities which another may have, the ability to summarise the total achievements of a writer, are all marks of a great critic”, and these marks Dryden undoubtedly has. As Dr. Johnson observes, “The criticism of Dryden is the criticism of a poet, not a dull collection of theorems nor a rude detection of faults: but a gay and vigorous dissertation, where delight is mingled with instructions, and where the author proves his right of judgment by his power of performance.” By his own example, Dryden has to the critic role of a mediator between the writer and the reader.

Limitations of Dryden, the Critic:

This is, however, not to suggest that Dryden is faultless master of criticism. In the words of Dr. Johnson “Dryden’s occasional and particular positions were sometimes interested, sometimes negligent, and sometimes capricious. When he has any objection to obviate, or any license to defend, he is not very scrupulous about what he asserts. His remarks on ancient or modern writer are not always to be trusted. His literature, though not always free from ostentation, will be commonly found either obvious, or made his own by the art of dressing it; or superficial or erroneous, hastily collected and negligently scattered.” At times, his criticism also shows vagueness, desultoriness and inconsistencies. “There are many things that are antiquated and conventional in his discussions of literary principles. He had his share of the literary pedantries of his age.” It is true that his opinions are sometimes encumbered by the respect which he feels himself bound to pay to established authorities. “His dicta are the dicta not of a judge, but of an advocate in an unsound cause. Yet in the very act of misrepresenting the laws of composition, he shows how well he understands them.”

Conclusion:

He reveals an originality of critical thought, and independence of critical judgment, which entitle him to the originators of English Literary Criticism. Comparing Dryden with Ben Johnson, David Daiches observes: “Johnson, with his neo-classic temper, his concern for craftsmanship and polish, and his sense of involvement in the literary sense of his day, foreshadows in some respects both Dryden and Pope. His own changing tastes and interests helped to make him responsive to different kinds of literary skill and of 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.”

References:

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