CHAPTER THREE

CRITICAL PREFACES TO POEMS
AND TRANSLATIONS
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The present chapter deals with Dryden's critical output put in his prefaces to his poems and verse translations.

Dryden's views on the poetic technique, of imitation, imagination etc. are most revealing. He challenged Aristotle's concept and gave a direct interpretation of poetry.

Dryden described poetry as essentially an imitation of things in their ideal form, of things, that is as they were first created and as they ought to be. 'In poetry we see the scattered beauties of Nature united by a happy chemistry, without its deformities or faults.'

Dryden made it clear that a poet should not aim at mere copying, but his intention must be to make a beautiful resemblance of the whole. He felt that life need not be strictly represented as it is, but should be made more beautiful.
If we ask ourselves, 'Why read Dryden today?' the answer is simply that we found his works worth reading and at Johnson aptly puts it, it is by Dryden that we are "taught sapere at fari, to think naturally and express forcibly."1. He goes on to say, "What was said of Rome, adorned by Augustus, may be applied by an easy metaphor to English poetry embellished by Dryden, lateritian invenit, marmoream reliquit, he found it brick and he left it marble."2.

"The depreciation and neglect of Dryden as a poet is not due to the fact that his work is not poetry but due to a prejudice that the material, the feelings, out of which he built is not poetic."3. This may be due to the fact that, "Our taste in English poetry has been largely founded upon a partial perception of the value of Shakespeare and Milton, a perception which dwells upon sublimity of theme


and action."

If we would like to ask whether Dryden could be called a true poet, Bernard. N. Schilling gives a proper answer to this question. "What is man to decide what poetry is? Dryden's use of language is not weakening or demoralizing. The lack of suggestiveness in his poetry is compensated by the satisfying completeness of the statement."

In his preface to the poem "Annus Mirabilis", Dryden tries to explain his views on certain general aspects of poetry. "His comments on the verse form employed are significant for they suggest a certain fluidity in his ideas at this stage." 

Dryden had chosen to write his poem in quatrains or stanzas of four in alternate rhyme for, "I have ever judged them more noble, and of greater dignity, both for the sound and number, than any other verse in use: amongst us; - ."


He felt that the couplet verse was much easier since every two lines conclude the labour of the poet. But it is not so in quatrains for the poet has to "bear along in his head the troublesome sense of four lines together. For those who write correctly in this must needs acknowledge, that the last line of the stanza is to be considered in the composition of the first."

John Dryden appreciates quatrains more because a quatrain involves more labour on the part of the poet. This view is valuable because it stresses on the importance of the law of 'karma' or hard work.

Dryden expressed his view that a poem ought to be of 'Wit', which is "no other than the faculty of imagination in the writer. Wit written, is that which is well defined, the happy result of thought, or product of that imagination." So he concludes that the proper
wit of a heroic or historical poem consists in the delightful imaging of persons, actions, passions, or things. He says that it is not the delight of an ill-judging audience in a play of rhyme, but, "some lively and apt description, dressed in such colours of speech, that it sets before your eyes the absent object, as perfectly and more delightfully than nature."

So, invention, fancy and elocution are, according to Dryden, the results of the poet's imagination. "-- the quickness of the imagination is seen in the invention, the fertility in the fancy, and the accuracy in the expression."

Though the whole problem of 'Wit' in poetry may not have been cleared, Dryden's views on this were useful. "-- new light had been shed on the confusion that prevailed, and his particular use of the word 'imagination' is not without
As earlier, John Dryden was concerned with matters of current interest when he wrote the preface to, 'The State of Innocence', an Opera - "The Author's Apology for Heroic poetry and Poetic Licence."

This opera is a dramatic version of Milton's epic, "Paradise Lost." Since Milton's epic was not well appreciated earlier, Dryden now tries to get justice done. This shows another bright spot in Dryden's personality since it proves that his aim was to fight for justice, whether for himself or for others. He himself was a genuine critic and didn't think twice before raising his voice against unfair criticism.

Dryden condemns the critics who seem to think that their main job is to find faults. He also tries to explain what true criticism is. "Criticism, as it was first instituted

by Aristotle, was meant a standard of judging well; the chiefest part of which is to admire those excellencies which should delight a reasonable reader. If the design, the conduct, the thought, and the expressions of a poem be generally such as proceed from a true genius of poetry, the critic ought to pass his judgement in favour of the author. 'Tis malicious and unmanly to snarl at the little lapses of pen from which Virgil himself stands not exempted. 13.

Defending Milton and the greatness of his epic style, Dryden condemns the unlearned critics who pass wrong judgements. "They who would combat general authority with particular opinion must first establish themselves a reputation of understanding better than other men. --- Ought not they rather, in modesty, to doubt of their own judgements, when they think this or that expression in Homer, Virgil,

Tasso or Milton's 'Paradise' to be too far strained, than positively to conclude that it is all fustian, and mere nonsense?"14.

Critics evaluate literature. Shouldn't someone control the critics, especially when they are not fair? To be able to fight for justice and question the ones who pass unfair judgements was a great feature in Dryden. It is also useful because it will make the critics careful not to pass hasty and unfair judgements. However, his suggestion was not that a critic should always praise, but that he should be capable and reasonable. "Tis true, there are limits to be set betwixt the boldness and rashness of a poet; but he must understand those limits who pretends to judge as well as he who undertakes to write."15.

In the preface to Ovid's Epistles', Dryden makes
another important observation when he says that a poet should always have the goal, i.e. the end, in his mind, while writing a poem. He praises Ovid for having this trait. "But our poet has always the goal in his eye, which directs him in his race. Some beautiful design, which he first establishes, and then contrives the means, which will naturally conduct it to his end."16.

Giving his opinion on the method of translation, Dryden says that there are three ways in which an article could be translated into another language. a) turning an author word by word, b) translation where the author is kept in view, but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense and c) in the third way the author assumes the liberty not only to vary from the words and sense, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion.
We would certainly agree with Dryden's view that the second method is the best, for, as Dryden points out, 'Tis impossible to translate verbally, and well, at the same time; for the Latin often expresses that in one word, which either the barbarity, or the narrowness of modern languages cannot supply in more. When a painter copies from life, I suppose he has no privilege to alter features, and lineaments, under the pretence that his picture will look better."17.

Therefore, he comes to the conclusion that, "-- it would be unreasonable to limit a translator to the narrow compass of his author's words; 'tis enough if he choose out some expression which does not vitiate the sense. -- By this means the spirit of an author may be transfused, and yet not lost."18.

In the preface to 'Sylvae', the second part of his
Miscellany poems, Dryden once again discourses on the methods of translation. A translation could be said to be perfect only when it is alike the original in its sense and charm. Commenting on this, Dryden says, "--- a translator is to make his author appear as charming as possibly he can, provided he maintains his character, and makes him not unlike himself. --- 'Tis one thing to draw the outlines true, the features like, the proportions exact, the colouring itself perhaps tolerable, and another thing to make all these graceful, --- chiefly by the spirit which animates the whole."19.

It is essential for a translator to know both the languages perfectly. Dryden rightly says that, "--- a good poet is no more like himself in a dull translation, than his carcass would be to his living body. ---. Thus it appears
necessary that a man should be a nice critic in his mother tongue, before he attempts to translate a foreign language."20.

Just as how no two men can be exactly alike, neither can two poets, however good might they be, be exactly alike. So, it is the business of the translator to interpret their individual styles accordingly, Dryden makes an interesting comment on this, "Suppose two authors are equally sweet, yet there is great distinction to be made in sweetness, as in that of sugar, and that of honey."21.

The secret of birth and death is a mystery to every normal human being. Since no dead person comes to tell us his experience, perhaps this will remain a mystery for ever. However, we would like to believe that there is life even after death. Dryden's views on this issue are interesting. Dryden was ready to appreciate other writers,
but at the same time he was independent in his views on any matter and makes it clear whenever he disagrees with one.

While appreciating the genius of Lucretius, Dryden felt that his opinions on the mortality of the soul were absurd. Lucretius was a materialist defying any invisible power. But as long as there is a mystery insolvable by human beings, we will have to accept the existence of a supernatural power.

"--- to take away rewards and punishments is only a pleasing prospect to a man who resolves before hand not to live morally. But on the other side, the thought of being nothing after death is a burden insupportable to a virtuous man---."22.

Many a time, we find in this World, good and virtuous men suffering and the bad ones happy. There is no direct explanation which can be offered for this state of affairs.
All that can be done is to hope for a better future. "We naturally aim at happiness, and cannot bear to have it confined to the shortness of our present being, especially when we consider that virtue is generally unhappy in this world, and vice fortunate. So that 'tis hope of futurity alone, that makes this life tolerable, in expectation of a better."23.

When we ask ourselves what the difference between animals and human beings is, the first one that strikes us is our capability to think and judge. Even if a perfect individual is to act according to his natural impulses, perhaps he would not have been good enough. Therefore, it is our ability to control our natural impulses and follow the right path that makes us human. But, if there is no fear of punishment, perhaps we wouldn't think twice before committing a sin. "Who would not commit all the excesses to which
he is prompted by his natural inclinations, if he may do them with security while he is alive, and be incapable of punishment after he is dead."24.

Therefore, Dryden's philosophical views too are equally interesting and valuable. He said confidently, "I think a future state demonstrable even by natural arguments."25.

Dryden might not have been accepted as a poet earlier, but that by no means should be made a standard. "In the next revolution of taste it is possible that poets may turn to the study of Dryden. He remains one of those who have set standards for English verse which it is desperate to ignore."26.