

Basis of the Neoclassical Theory of Poetry

THE pattern described in this article may seem too simple to be true ; but the neoclassicists were people who liked everything simple. In their hands even the universe fell readily into a simple pattern, fixed for all time :

All are but parts of one stupendous whole,
Whose body Nature is, and God the soul ;
That, chang'd thro' all, and yet in all the same :
Great in the earth, as in th' ethereal frame ;
Warms in the sun, refreshes in the breeze,
Glow in the stars, and blossoms in the trees,
Lives thro' all life, extends thro' all extent,
Spreads undivided, operates unspent ;
Breathes in our soul, informs our mortal part,
As full, as perfect, in a hair as heart :

.....
Cease then, nor ORDER Imperfection name :
Our proper bliss depends on what we blame.
.....

All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee ;
All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see ;
All Discord, Harmony not understood ;
All partial Evil, universal Good :
And spite of Pride, in erring Reason's spite,
One truth is clear, WHATEVER IS, IS RIGHT.†

Hence neoclassical literary theory is easy to follow. It did not have the insubstantiality of romanticism nor the diversity and complexity of literary movements of this century. It may indeed be summed up in a word : moderation. This moderation could be achieved by making sure that fancy and judgement (imagination and reason as they were termed by the philosopher) shared equally in the creation of poetry.

Moderation was the dominant urge of the Restoration,² Charles II was welcomed back in England " for the moderating of Extremities, the Reconciling of Differences, and the satisfying of all Interests ".³ England was tired of extremes, of novelty, excess and caprice, of the individualism and comparative lawlessness of the Puritan interregnum, and so turned towards constituted authority in church, state and society, as well as in literature. The turning was from the individual to the general : in place of multifarious individual whims people sought a single objective standard ; and they found

1. Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*, Epistle 1 : 267-276, 281-2, 289-294.

2. See P. S. Wood, " Native Elements in English Neo-Classicism ", M.P. XXIV, 1926, 201-8.

3. The Earl of Manchester's Speech to His Majesty . . . At his Arrival at Whitehall. The 29th of May, 1660.

it in the general opinion, or common sense. Sprat expresses faithfully the mood of the times in his *History of the Royal Society* :

The late times of *Civil War*, and *confusion*, to make recompense for their infinite calamities, brought this advantage with them, that they stirr'd up men's minds from *long ease*, and a *lazy rest*, and made them *active, industrious* and *inquisitive*: it being the usual benefit that follows upon *Tempests*, and *Thunders* in the *State*, as well as in the *Skie*, that they purifie, and cleer the *Air*, which they disturb. But now since the *Kings* return, the blindness of the former *Ages*, and the miseries of this last, are vanish'd away: now men are generally weary of the *Relicks* of *Antiquity*, and satiated with *Religious Disputes*: Now there is a universal *desire*, and *appetite* after *knowledge*, after the peaceable, the fruitful, the nourishing *Knowledge*: and not after that of ancient Sects, which only yielded hard indigestible *arguments*, or sharp *contentions* instead of *food*: which when the minds of men requir'd *bread*, gave them only a *stone*, and for *fish* a serpent.⁴

Common-sense was the new signpost, pointing always to the middle way. Accordingly, the reconstructed monarchy was a compromise between the extremes "Of popular sway and arbitrary reign".⁵ The Church of England was a compromise between the Roman Catholic Church and the dissenters. The Roman Catholic Church stood for absolute authority and centralised church government; the dissenting sects advocated private judgement and decentralised government. On the one side there was tradition and a set form of service; on the other, disrespect for tradition and varying degrees of spontaneity in public worship. In all these respects the Church of England followed the mean. It held to tradition but at the same time called for a measure of private judgement. In church government it rejected the auto-cracy of Rome and the anarchy of decentralisation. It retained a set form for its service but reduced ceremonial. The Roman Catholics accused it of forsaking truth, and the dissenters, of retaining error. And meanwhile Anglican preachers railed against both Puritan and Papist, those who sought revolution as well as those who shunned reform, all, in short, who departed from the middle way.

Singularity in anything was out of favour. In dress for instance. Thus Richard Head says sarcastically of the dissenters :

Their speech and habits they cannot indure should be like their Neighbours, and are very curious to be in all things contrary to the common mode, that they may be taken notice of for singular men.⁶

In *Hudibras* Butler satirizes fanaticism, eccentricity, enthusiasm and unconventionality. The Overdoer, for example is always wrong because he is always immoderate. Butler drives this point home in his note on the Overdoer :

for Those that Use *Excess* in any Thing never understand the Truth of it, which always lies in the *Mean*.⁷

4. 1667, pp. 152, 153.

5. J. Dryden, *The Medal*.

6. *Proteus Redivivus*, 1675, p. 236.

7. *Characters and Passages from Notebooks* ed. A. R. Waller, Cambridge, 1908, p. 273.

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In *Absalom and Achitophel*, Part I, Dryden finds that the solution to one of the major political crises of the times lies with "the moderate sort of men". Even parties in this age of moderation should avoid extremes:

We have, like them [poets of the age of Augustus], our Genial Nights; where our discourse is neither too serious, nor too light; but alwayes pleasant, and for the most part instructive: the raillery neither too sharp upon the present, nor too censorious on the absent; and the Cups onely such as will raise the Conversation of the Night, without disturbing the business of the Morrow.⁸

Matthew Prior hoped that he might be neither mournful nor frivolous

Democritus, dear droll, revisit earth,
And with our follies glut thy heightened mirth;
Sad Heraclitus, serious wretch, return,
In louder grief our greater crimes to mourn.
Between you both I unconcerned stand by:
Hurt, can I laugh? and honest, need I cry?⁹

And a landlady was applauded because,

With a just trim of virtue her soul was endued,
Not affectedly pious nor secretly lewd,
She cut even between the coquette and the prude.¹⁰

Literature, like everything else, had to achieve a balance between extremes. It must be neither too bright nor too dull, neither too deep nor too shallow, neither too hot nor too cold, and so on. It must attain the classical equipoise, the silver mean of the neoclassicists. This worship of moderation accounts for the neoclassicists' penchant for coupling contraries. After 1660 almost all critical statements on the nature of poetry contain lists of coupled contraries. Worth in poetry, they would lead us to believe, can come only from an even blending of such-and-such qualities with their opposites.

The true wonder of Poesy is, That such contraries must meet to compose it: a Genius both Penetrating and Solid; in Expression both Delicacy and Force; and the Frame or Fabrick of a true Poem must have something both Sublime and Just, Amazing and Agreeable. There must be a great Agitation of Mind to Invent, and a great Calm to Judge and correct; there must be upon the same Tree, and at the same Time, both Flower and Fruit.¹¹

for in fine, to accomplish a Poet, is required a temperament of wit and fancy, of strength and of sweetness, of penetration and of delicacy: and above all things, he must have a sovereign eloquence, and a profound capacity.¹²

where is that sparkling Wit, and that solid Judgment? That flame and that flegm? That rapture and that moderation which constitute that Genius we enquire after?¹³

Many poets in the past did not possess these opposite faculties in equal measure and so failed to achieve a just balance in their poetry.

8. J. Dryden, "Dedication of *The Assiguation, or Love in a Nunnery*", 1673, sig. A3.

9. "Democritus and Heraclitus", in W. P. Ker, *Restoration Verse, 1660-1715*, p. 304.

10. Matthew Prior, "Jinny the Just", in Ker, *ibid.*, p. 308.

11. Sir William Temple, "Of Poetry" 1690, in *Seventeenth Century Critical Essays* ed. J. E. Spingarn, Oxford, 1909, III, 81.

12. R. Rapin, *Reflections on Aristotle's Treatise of Poesie*, tr. Thos. Rymer, 1674, p. 3.

13. *ibid.*, pp. 7, 8.

Lucan often in his *Pharsalia* grows flat for want of Wit. And *Ovid* in his *Metamorphosis* sometimes loses himself through his defect of judgment. *Arioste* has too much flame. *Dante* has none at all. *Boccace's* wit is just, but not copious : the Cavalier *Marino* is luxuriant, but wants that justness . . .¹⁴

Not so *Virgil*, however, who " maintains Majesty in the midst of plainness ; he shines but glares not ; and is stately without ambition, which is the vice of *Lucan* ".¹⁵ *Richard Blackmore* in his *Creation* also achieves the desired balance :

The Reader cannot but be pleased to find the Depths of Philosophy enlivened with all the Charms of Poetry, and to see so great a Strength of Reason, amidst so beautiful a Redundancy of the Imagination.¹⁶

There must be a balance between the pleasing and the profitable :

As the Inventions of Sages and Law-givers do please as well as profit those who approve and follow them, so those of Poets Instruct and Profit as well as please . . . and the happy mixture of both these makes the excellency in both these compositions.¹⁷

To instruct delightfully is the general end of all Poetry.¹⁸

Another essential balance was that of probability : the mean between the historical and the fantastic.

Poetry has no life, nor can have any operation, without *probability* ; it may indeed amuse the People, but moves not the *Wise*, for whom alone (according to *Pythagoras*) it is ordain'd.¹⁹

For what there is in any Poem, which is out of Nature, and contrary to *Verisimilitude* and *Probability*, can never be *Beautiful*, but *Abominable*.²⁰

Finally *Bouhours'* clever definition of wit, " C'est un corps solide qui brille " ²¹, is a statement of balance between contraries.

The basic balance was that between fancy and judgement. Once this was established all other desired balances would follow naturally. If fancy and judgement concurred in the production of poetry, the resulting poetry would be instructive and delightful, probable without being prosaic, neither too fantastic nor too dull, and so on.

The opposition between fancy and judgement, or between imagination and reason as these faculties were called by the philosophers, was one of the determining conceptions of seventeenth century thought. The thought of the century was directed towards a subjugation of imagination to reason.

14. *ibid.*, p. 2.

15. *J. Dryden*, " Preface to *Sylvae* ", 1685, sig. A6.

16. *J. Addison*, *Spectator*, No. 339, 29th March, 1712.

17. *Sir William Temple*, *op. cit.*, in *Spingarn*, *op. cit.* III. 74.

18. *J. Dryden*, " Preface to *Troilus and Cressida* ", 1679, sig. A2.

19. *T. Rymer*, " Preface to the Translation of *Rapin's Reflections on Aristotle's Treatise of Poesie* ", 1674, in *Spingarn*, *op. cit.*, II, 165.

20. *Charles Gyldon*, " An Essay on the Art, Rise and Progress of the Stage in Greece, Rome, and England ", in *N. Rowe, Works of Mr. William Shakespeare*, 1709, VII, viii

21. *Les Entretien d'Ariste et d'Eugene*, Amst. 1671, p. 211.

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According to Bacon, the scholars had been locked up in their own little worlds and committed to subjective speculation within these worlds. Weary of the confusions this had created, seventeenth century thinkers turned away from the subjective faculty, imagination, to the objective faculty, reason, the faculty which had most to do with establishing truths about the world outside oneself. "Things, not words" became the motto of the newly-founded Royal Society. Bacon had warned that reason may be seduced by the vehicles of the imagination, poetry and eloquence, "which do paint and disguise the true appearance of things".²² And from Bacon's time on scientists and philosophers joined in lowering imagination and elevating reason.

Reason was supreme in Stoicism and the Cartesian philosophy, two of the dominant philosophies of the latter half of the century. Another popular school expounded the theory of the two worlds in man, one consisting of the higher powers, will, understanding, and mind, and the other consisting of lower powers, sense, imagination and "brutish Affection", which can acquaint him only with things "Terrene and Earthy".²³

In a century whose main intellectual movements were concerned with lowering the status of imagination, it is no wonder that poetry, an imaginative creation, should be distrusted except by the few; and that even the few who kept faith in it should come to distrust its imaginative element. Bacon had noted the antinomy between poetry and reason—poetry submits "the shows of things to the desires of the mind; whereas reason doth buckle and bow the mind unto the nature of things"²⁴—and realisation of this antinomy grew during the century into a dilemma; as such it is well described by Henry Barker in 1700:

If we respect only the Senses, and their Pleasures, the Imagination, and its Charms, the Passions and their Motions; a good *Poet*, I confess, is really inestimable, because amongst the other Pleasures of the Mind, the Talent of Poetry is the most exquisite, especially to Persons of a delicate Fancy.

But if we guide ourselves by our Reason and its Decisions, this Quality becomes on a sudden contemptible; the pretended Charms and Excellencies of a *Poets* Wit being like those dull heavy Beauties we look on with Indifference.²⁵

Those who put reason first, the philosophers and the scientists, naturally took the second of these two alternatives and had a poor opinion of poetry. They regarded it as mere trifling, at best a refined sort of trifling.

I that am too simple or too serious to be cajol'd with the frenzies of a bold and ungovern'd Imagination cannot be perswaded to think the Quaintest plays and sportings of wit to be any true and real knowledge.²⁶

22. Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, Everyman edn., 1915, pp. 82, 83.

23. Benjamin Whichcote, *The Works of Reason*, 1660, n E. T. Campagnac *The Cambridge Platonists*, Oxford, 1901, pp. 51, 52.

24. op. cit., p. 12.

25. *The Polite Gentleman*, p. 80.

26. Samuel Parker, *A Free and Impartial Censure of the Platonick Philosophie*, 1670, p. 73.

Poets and critics of poetry could not of course afford to think so lowly of their profession or pet interest, whichever it happened to be, but they were nonetheless impelled by the trend of opinion in their times to call for more judgement and less fancy in poetry. They blamed fancy for the excesses of metaphysical and Italianate poetry, and claimed that such excesses might be avoided if fancy were controlled by judgement.

I was transported [Dryden of his *Eleonora*] by the Multitude and Variety of my Similitudes ; which are generally the Product of a luxuriant Fancy ; and the Wantonness of Wit.²⁷

Into what Enormities hath *Petrarch* run in his *Africa* : *Ariosto* in his *Orlando Furioso* ; Cavalier *Marino* in his *Adonis*, and all the other *Italians* who were ignorant of *Aristotle's* Rules ; and followed no other guides but their own Genius and capricious Fancy . . .²⁸

Fancy with them [the Arabians] is predominant, is wild, vast, and unbridled, o're which their *judgment* has little command or authority : hence their conceptions are monstrous, and have nothing of exactness, nothing of resemblance or proportion.²⁹ Addison looks upon writers of this kind " as *Goths* in Poetry, who, like those in Architecture, not being able to come up to the beautiful Simplicity of the old *Greeks* and *Romans*, have endeavoured to supply its Place with all the Extravagances of an irregular Fancy ".³⁰

The neoclassicists could not, like earlier ages, willingly enter into the fantastic world of Italianate poetry. They did not feel at home in enchanted woods where trees were bewitched and turned into people, where gossamer maidens precipitated bloody duels, where horses flew, where dragons vomited their young from innumerable heads, and where knights had magical swords as well as valiant hearts. All this world of " *Chimerical and Romantick Knight-errantry* " ³¹ seemed spurious to them. Moreover with all these extravagances of subject went the other excesses of poetry, incoherent plots, involved witticisms, forced metaphors, and the rest.

For all these excesses fancy was held responsible : it contained the sparks of all excess ; even of madness.

when once the Imagination is so inflam'd, as to get the better of the Understanding, there is no Difference between the Images, and the Things themselves ; as we see, for Example, in Fevers and Madmen.³²

Every man who is not absolutely beside himself, must of necessity hold his Fancys under some kind of Discipline and Management. The *stricter* this Discipline is, the more the Man is rational and in his Wits. The *looser* it is, the more fantastical he must be, and the Nearer to the Madman's State.³³

A near-madman writes to Mr. Spectator saying that his fancy is out of hand. He frequently sees castles rising out of nothing or dissolving in mists and gusts

27. " Dedication of *Eleonora* ", 1709, p. 3.

28. Rapin, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

29. Rymer, *op. cit.*, in Spingarn, *op. cit.*, II. 165.

30. *Spectator*, No. 62, 11th May, 1711.

31. Rapin, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

32. J. Dennis, " The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry ", in *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. E. N. Hooker, Baltimore, 1939-I, 2.

33. Anthony Ashley Cooper, *Soliloquy : or Advice to an Author*, 1710, p. 164.

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of wind. He begs Mr. Spectator to suggest a means of cooling his brain-pan (that is, of curbing his fancy. Neoclassicists held the quaint belief that heat quickened the imagination. An overheated imagination, they thought, inevitably produced excesses. It was no wonder that the Egyptians, living as they did in a very hot country, called their ruler "Nutmeg of Delight!")³⁴.

It was clear that this faculty, which if allowed complete freedom, stimulated the hallucinations of madness or created a poem like "a continuance of extraordinary Dreams, such as excellent Poets and Painters, by being over-studious, may have in the beginning of Feavers",³⁵ must be controlled. Poets and critics, like all other intellectuals of their day, turned to the sovereign corrective, reason.

Love Reason, then: and let whate're you Write
Borrow from her its Beauty, Force and Light.³⁶

Reason must restrain fancy if poetry were not to become extravagant and ridiculous.

As all is dulness, when the Fancy's bad,
So without Judgment, Fancy is but mad;³⁷
for though *Poesie* be the effect of fancy, yet if this fancy be not regulated, 'tis a meer
Caprice . . .³⁸

Imagination in a Poet is a faculty so Wild and Lawless, that like an High-ranging
Spaniel, it must have Cloggs tied to it, least it out-run the Judgment.³⁹

Fancy was frequently likened to a bird which should fly high but never out of sight. Dryden remarks of Settle's fancy that it never flew out of sight but often sank out of sight.⁴⁰ Wesley talks of fancy as "*Headstrong Coursers*" which must be kept in rein.⁴¹

Detailed analyses of the mental processes of fancy and judgement were made. Hobbes' analysis is too famous to need quotation, and Wesley's is merely a variation of Hobbes', with a fuller description of judgement's function:

Judgment's the Act of Reason; that which brings
Fit *Thoughts* to *Thoughts*, and argues *Things* from *Things*,
True, Decent, Just, are in its *Balance* try'd,
And thence we learn to *Range, Compound, Divide*.⁴²

34. J. Addison, *Spectator*, No. 160, 3rd September, 1711.

35. Sir William Davenant, "Preface to *Gondibert*", 1650, in Spingarn, op. cit., II, 6.

36. Sir W. Soames and J. Dryden, *The Art of Poetry*, by the Sieur de Boileau, Made English, 1683, p. 3.

37. John Sheffield, "An Essay upon Poetry", 1682, in Spingarn, op. cit., II, 287.

38. Rapin, op. cit., p. 7.

39. J. Dryden, "Epistle Dedicatory to *The Rival Ladies*", 1664, sig. A4.

40. "Preface to Notes and Observations on *The Empress of Morocco*", 1674, in Scott and Saintsbury, *Works of John Dryden*, XV, 406.

41. Samuel Wesley, *An Epistle to a Friend Concerning Poetry*, 1700, p. 2.

42. *ibid.*

The subtlest analysis was that given by Dr. Walter Charleton in his *Two Discourses*, 1669 :

By *Judgment* we distinguish subtilty in objects neerly resembling each other, and discerning the real dissimilitude betwixt them, prevent delusion by their apparent similitude . . .

By *Imagination*, on the contrary ; we conceive some certain similitude in objects really unlike, and pleasantly confound them in discourse : Which by its unexpected *Fineness*, and allusion surprising the Hearer, renders him less curious of the truth of what is said.⁴³

A caution must be added. At no point in neoclassical criticism is it suggested that fancy should be debarred from poetry. Judgement was to correct, not to replace, fancy. Neoclassical poetry was not a "poetry of reason" (though this phrase may be of some use in comparing neoclassical poetry with that of certain other movements). The neoclassical critics, no less than romantic theorists, gave pride of place in poetical creation to fancy ; but at the same time—and this is where they differ from the romantic theorists—they insisted that fancy should share this pride of place with judgement. Most believed that fancy and judgement were of about equal importance, although there was some show of favouritism. Critics like Rymer, Le Bossu and Rapin, seem to attach more importance to judgement than to fancy, while others, like Dryden, Wolseley and Pope, clearly favour fancy. Pope prefers Homer to Virgil because Homer has more fancy than Virgil. "A cooler Judgement", he says, "may commit fewer Faults, and be more approv'd in the Eyes of *One Sort* of Criticks : but that Warmth of Fancy will carry the loudest and most universal Applauses which holds the Heart of a Reader under the strongest Enchantment".⁴⁴ George Farquhar goes so far as to say that Homer was too much a Poet to give Rules to that, whose excellence he knew consisted in a free and unlimited Flight of Imagination.⁴⁵ Farquhar, however, is an exception. As has already been stated, the majority were in favour of a fairly even blend of the imaginative and rational elements. The mean in this as in everything.

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43. p. 19.

44. "Preface to the Translation of *The Iliad*", 1715, in *Critical Essays of the Eighteenth Century (1700-1725)*, ed. W. H. Durham, New Haven 1915, p. 341.

45. *A Discourse upon Comedy*, 1702, in Durham, op. cit., p. 271.