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**Neo-Classical Literary Criticism: Reflection on John Dryden's
An Essay on Dramatic Poesy**

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Introduction

Neoclassical criticism emerged in the late 17th and 18th centuries to represent a significant shift in literary theory and aesthetics, emphasizing reason, clarity, and adherence to classical principles. The favorite prose literary forms were the essay, the letter, the satire, the parody, the burlesque, and the moral fable; in poetry, the favorite verse form was the rhymed couplet, which reached its greatest sophistication in heroic couplet of Alexander Pope; while the theater saw the development of heroic drama, the melodrama, the sentimental comedy, and the comedy of manners. To a certain extent neoclassicism represented a reaction against the optimistic and enthusiastic Renaissance view of man as being fundamentally good and possessed of an infinite potential for spiritual and intellectual growth. Its inspiration was derived from the literary and philosophical works of classical antiquity, particularly those of ancient Greece and Rome. Enlightenment Criticism' came to include social and political inquiry, focusing on the application of reason upon any field. As such, the true concept of criticism indicates that:

a critic or judge of art deals not just with words but also with ideas; not just with syllables and letters but also with the rules underpinning entire arts and works of art. It has already become clear that such a critic must be a philosopher and must understand more than the mere philologists.

Eighteenth-century criticism is described as a revolutionary discontinuity and a rejection of excessive emotionalism; it renewed interest in reason and empiricism. Influential thinkers like René Descartes and John Locke championed reason as the foundation of knowledge, which in turn shaped the Neoclassical approach to literature and criticism. Neoclassical theorists saw man as an imperfect being, inherently sinful, whose potential was limited. They replaced the Renaissance emphasis on the imagination, on invention and experimentation, and on mysticism with an emphasis on order and reason, on restraint, on common sense, and on religious, political, economic and philosophical conservatism. They maintained that man himself was the most appropriate subject of art, and saw art itself as essentially pragmatic — as valuable because it was somehow useful — and as something which was properly intellectual rather than emotional. This is one of the reasons why satire was the dominant genre alongside essay, parody, heroic couplet, and melodrama. Although there are debates on when it exactly began, the neo-classical period is typically divided into three definable periods.

1. The **Restoration** period. This lasted from the mid-1600s to the early 1700s. The period is particularly marked by the reign of King Charles II (1630-1685). The Restoration era can be defined by its frivolity and relaxing of social rules and norms. It was a more permissive time for many. This came as a reaction to the repressive Puritan era that had come before under Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658).
2. The **Augustan** period. This covered the first half of the eighteenth century. This period is named after the Ancient Roman emperor Augustus (63 BC-14 AD), signaling an Ancient Roman influence in the art and literature of the time.
3. **The Age of Johnson**. This final period of the neo-classical movement covered the second half of the eighteenth century. It was named after the prolific English writer Samuel Johnson (1709-1784). The writing of this time was somewhat less formal and more progressive than the earlier neo-classical stages.

An 18th century's critic had certain characteristics. First, he had the ability to affect the forms of polite discourse in a sense that he followed a dialogical approach rather than a dogmatic one. Second, he was a man of taste qualified to judge particular works by his natural ability and "generous" education. Third, his mind was not partial "free from all avocations of business, and from all real vexatious Passions". Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism* explains that:

'Tis not enough, Taste, Judgment, Learning join;

In all you speak, let Truth and Candor shine:

That not alone what to your Sense is due,

All may allow; but seek your Friendship too

(11. 562-6)

The most notable critical figures in neoclassical criticism are divided into French and English. In fact, Neoclassical literary criticism first took root in France from where its influence spread to other parts of Europe, notably England. The most prominent French theorists were Dominique Bouhours, René Rapin, and Nicolas Boileau. On the other hand, the most notable English critics are John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Aphra Behn, Samuel Johnson. criticism from the time of John Dryden to the death of Pope was concerned primarily with moral—and sociopolitical— issues rather than with establishing methodological procedures or analyzing individual texts.

The French poet, satirist, and critic Boileau had a pervasive influence on French, German, and English critics and poets. His *Art of Poetry*, first published in 1674 and was translated into English by John Dryden, represents a formal statement of the principles of French classicism. It drew heavily on Aristotle and Horace, and in its turn was a powerful influence on English neoclassical writers such as Pope; in fact, some of it is echoed very directly in Pope's *Essay on Criticism*. Like Pope's *Essay*, Boileau's text is written as a poem, in the tradition of Horace's *Ars Poetica*, and offers advice to the poet in various genres such as tragedy, comedy, epic, and ode, as well as summaries of various aspects of literary history. Like Pope after him, Boileau appeals to nature: "To study nature be your only care." The poet, he says, must know human nature and the "secrets of the heart." He must observe and be able to paint all kinds of people, at all stages in life. But even here, the following of nature is seen as obeying the rules of reason: "Your actors must by reason be controlled; / Let young men speak like young, old men like old" (III, ll. 390–391). Indeed, the poet must observe "exact decorum," which itself rests on a knowledge of human nature and on the exercise of reason: each person must be portrayed in his "proper character," which must be both self-consistent and consistent with the character's country, rank, and native customs (III, ll. 110–112, 121). Hence the poet must not only know human nature; he must also be an observer of various customs and ages; he must "Observe the town and study well the court" (III, l. 392). All of this emphasis on decorum is seen by Boileau as resting on the use of reason: "I like an author that reforms the age, / And keeps the right decorum of the stage, / That always pleases by just reason's rule" (III, ll. 422–424).

John Dryden: The Father of Literary Criticism

It was Dr. Johnson who first called Dryden, "the father of English criticism." There had been critics like Sir Philip Sidney and Ben Jonson. But their critical works are merely occasional utterances

on the critical art. Dryden's critical work was extensive, treating various genres such as epic, tragedy, comedy, and dramatic theory, satire, 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.

On the nature of poetry, Dryden agrees in general terms with Aristotle's definition of poetry as a process of imitation but he adds some qualifiers to it. In *The Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy* he explains that the poet is free to imitate "things as they are said or thought to be," he also gives spirited defense of a poet's right to imitate what could be, might be, or ought to be. He cites in this context Shakespeare who exploits elements of the supernatural, popular beliefs and superstitions. He regards these elements as an "imitation [of] other men's fancies." Dryden, further, believes that the final end of poetry is delight and transport rather than instruction. It does not imitate life but presents its own version of it. The poet, according to Dryden is neither a teacher, nor a bare imitator but a creator, one who, with life or Nature as his raw material, creates new things altogether resembling the original. Dryden enhances the necessity of fancy, or what Coleridge call "The shaping spirit of imagination"

Dryden's "Essay of Dramatic Poesy" is written as a debatable dialogue on drama conducted by four speakers, Eugenius, Crites, Lisideius, and Neander who speaks for Dryden himself. Crites favours classical drama whose rules are established by Aristotle and emphasize that "tragedy is an imitation of life". Crites adds that classical dramatists and neoclassical favour rules related to the three unities (time, place, and action). Crites believes that classical dramatists were more skillful in language than their successors. Eugenius, on the other hand, favours modern dramatist and attacks the classical playwrights who did not themselves always observe the unity of place, their tragedies lack originality because they are based on well-known myths, and their comedies are based on overused curiosity of stolen heiresses and miraculous restorations.

Lisideius favours French drama of earlier 17th century. This drama led by Pierre Corneille strictly followed unities of time, place and action. French drama, in addition, never mixes tragedy with comedy and thus adhere to the poetic justice. Moreover, French dramatists interweaves truth with fiction to make it interesting. They prefer emotions over plots, and violent actions take place off stage and are told by messengers rather than showing them in real.

Neander favours English dramatists, represented by Elizabethans, over French dramatists: "**The French contrive their plots more regularly and observe the laws of comedy and decorum of the stage with more exactness than the English...I am of opinion that neither our faults nor their virtues are considerable enough to place them above us.**" French dramatists, in contrast to English ones, produce plays that tackle "**beauties of a statue but not of a man, because not animated with the soul of poesy, which imitation of humor and passion.**" However, Neander confirms that in late years French dramatist start to follow the steps of the English in a sense that Moliere, for example, "**[has] been imitating afar off the quick turns and graces of the English stage. They have mixed their serious plays with mirth, like our tragicomedies...Most of their new plays are, like some of ours, derived from the Spanish novels.**"

Neander argues that "tragic-comedy" is the best form for a play because it is closer to life in which emotions are heightened by mirth and sadness. He justifies this in the following question:

Does not the eye pass from an unpleasant object to a pleasant in a much shorter time than is required to this? and does not the unpleasantness of the first command the

beauty of the latter? ...A scene of mirth, mixed with tragedy has the same effect upon us which our music has between the acts...we have invented, increased, and perfected a more pleasant way of writing for the stage than as ever known to the ancients or modern of any nation, which is tragi-comedy.

The French, in contrast, “cannot so speedily recollect [themselves] after a scene of great passion and concernment as to pass to another of mirth and humor and to enjoy it with any relish.”

As for plot, Neander explains that French plots “are single; they carry on one design which is pushed forward by all actors” English drama, by contrast, “besides the main design, have under-plots ...which are carried with the motion of the main plot: as they say the orb of the fixed stars and those of the planets, though they have motions of their own, are whirled about by the motion of the Primum mobile, in which they are contained.” He finds single action in French drama as to be rather inadequate since it so often has a narrowing effect. Whereas, in English drama, there is no unity of action –a matter that “if well ordered, will a greater pleasure to the audience.” In this sense, he acknowledges their variety whether in form, plot, or action, Neander gives his palm to the violation of the three unities because it leads to the variety in the English plays. He argues against the neo-classical critics who present their critical perspective in rhymed poetic form, his rejection is based on the idea that nobody speaks in rhyme in real life. Instead, he supports the use of blank verse. About the realistic tendency of poesy, Neander defines drama as “just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humors, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind.” According to this definition, the image that drama imitates is not a mere imitation “just”, it is also lively: “instead of persuading us to grieve for their imaginary heroes, we are concerned for our own trouble” The realistic tendency in drama cannot be achieved by means of long speeches. Short speeches are

more apt to move the passions and beget concernment in us than the other; for it is unnatural for anyone in a gust of passion to speak long together, or for another in the same condition to suffer him without interruption. Grief and passion are like floods raised in little brooks by a sudden rain; they are quickly up; and if the concernment be poured unexpectedly in upon us, it overflows us; but a long sober shower gives them leisure to run out as they came in, without troubling the ordinary current.

Neander advocated “variety” in English drama because of which they are (English drama) “more quick and fuller of spirit” He further adds: “our plots are weaved in English looms; we endeavor therein to follow the variety and greatness of characters which are derived to us from Shakespeare and Fletcher; the copiousness and well-knitting of the intrigues we have Johnson.” About Shakespeare and Johnson, Neander (Dryden) believes that “Shakespeare was the Homer or father of our dramatic poets; Johnson was the Virgil, the pattern of elaborate writing; I admire him, but I love Shakespeare.” Shakespeare, according to Dryden, has the comprehensive soul of all ancient and modern poets; when he describes anything one can not only see it but feel it too; “he was naturally learned”. Though “he is many times flat, insipid; his comic wit degenerating into clenches, his seriousness swelling into bombast. But he is always great when some great occasion is presented to him; no man can say he ever had a fit subject for his wit and did not then raise himself as high above the rest of the poets.” Johnson, on the other hand, is “the most learned and judicious writer which any theater ever had.” He severely judges himself as well as others; he has “frugal” wit because of which there is nothing to retrench or alter in his works; they are (his works)

marked by wit and language and **humor which is his proper sphere** “**in that he was delighted most to represent mechanic people.**” One seldom finds him making love in any of his scenes or endeavoring to move the passions; his genius was too sullen and saturnine to do it gracefully.” Dryden describes Johnson as “**the more correct poet but Shakespeare the greater wit.**”

To conclude with. Dryden presents his argument in a dialogical approach to be more comprehensive and persuasive. With such approach he imitates Plato who presents his critical and philosophical perspective by means of dialogues exchanged among different character. Dryden, furthermore, represents what is handled by Aristotle in his *Poetics* that “**the poet may imitate by narration—in which case he can either take another personality...or he may present all his characters as living and moving before us.**” He tries to detach himself as much as possible so as to present an argumentative tone that is empty of any subjectivity.

Dryden does not depend upon dialogue only. He employs the comparative approach through which he fosters the priority of certain group upon the other. This comparative approach is enhanced by examples of literary works to support the argument he aims to prove.