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Dryden Rules

Waller was smooth; but Dryden taught to join
The varying verse, the full resounding line,
The long majestick march, and energy divine.
—Pope, “Epistle to Augustus”

Writing to Philip Larkin more than sixty years ago, Kingsley Amis delivered one of his frequent critiques of English poets, this one on John Dryden:

I have stopped reading Dryden. He is very like Chaucer, isn't he? I mean, however hard you try, you cannot *see what people mean* who admired them. Now, I see what people *mean* (though I don't *agree* with them) who like *Donne* or *Pope* or *Wordsworth*, or *Keats*, or even *Milton*, but I cannot with Dryden. A second-rate fucking journalist (“Oh?”). A SECOND-RATE FUCKING JOURNALIST (“Oh”).

Amis showing off for Larkin, of course.¹ But then there was C. S. Lewis pronouncing as if from on high: “Dryden fails to be a satisfactory poet because being rather a boor, a gross, vulgar, provincial, misunderstanding mind, he yet constantly attempts those kinds of poetry which demand the *cuor gentili*.”² And on the occasion of Dryden's tercentenary in 2000, the Oxford don Barbara Everett, one of the shrewdest living critics of poetry, noted with regard to Dryden's low public esteem that “Perhaps the few readers of poetry who still exist need an intensity of verse

¹ *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, ed. by Zachary Leader (London, HarperCollins, 2000), p. 96.

² C. S. Lewis, “Shelley, Dryden, and Mr. Eliot,” in *Rehabilitations* (New York, 1939), pp. 1–34. It's of some interest that Lewis' characterization of boorishness and provinciality would for some eyes (John Betjeman's for example) apply to rough-hewn “Jack” Lewis himself. Dryden's detractors make for some strange bedfellows. Ezra Pound's contribution to the critical “debate” was to aver that he “of all men, don't want Johnnie Dryden dug up again,” and that Eliot's endeavors on the writer's behalf only strengthened his resolve “Never, never again, to open either John Dryden, his works or any comment upon them.” Rather than calling him, as Lewis did, a “boor,” Pound settled for “a lunk-head.” (*Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. by T. S. Eliot, London, 1954, p. 70.)

that Dryden never cared to supply.” She acknowledged that after decades of teaching she has found that “only the rarest of able pupils has agreed to try Dryden, has indeed (it sometimes seems) heard of him.”³ My own experience tallies with Everett’s: in decades of teaching I have supervised but a single honors essay by a student on the writer—that one, as with Everett, by the rarest of able pupils. If Dryden is not read with enthusiasm and admiration in college classrooms, where is such reading likely to occur?

It occurred most memorably in the eloquent testimony of one of his finest critics, Samuel Johnson. In his “Life of Pope,” in *Lives of the Poets*, Johnson made a famous, extended comparison between the characteristics of Pope’s and Dryden’s verse containing formulations such as the following:

Dryden’s page is a natural field, rising into inequalities, and diversified by the varied exuberance of abundant vegetation; Pope’s is a velvet lawn, shaven by the scythe, and leveled by the roller. . . .

If the flights of Dryden therefore are higher, Pope continues longer on the wing. If of Dryden’s fire the blaze is brighter, of Pope’s the heat is more regular and constant. Dryden often surpasses expectation, and Pope never falls below it. Dryden is read with astonishment, and Pope with perpetual delight.

At the end of the parallel, Johnson hopes it will be found just, then makes the following confession:

If the reader should suspect me, as I suspect myself, of some partial fondness for the memory of Dryden, let him not too hastily condemn me; for meditation and enquiry may, perhaps, shew him the reasonableness of my determination.

As a young man, Johnson contemplated writing a biography of Dryden, so the “partial fondness” might be accounted for solely on that ground, and surely the modern reader, contemplating Johnson’s parallel, should feel no need to choose one of these poets over the other. Yet this particular reader after considerable ventures into studying and teaching both poets (Johnson’s “meditation and enquiry”) has become convinced of the reasonableness of Johnson’s determination. The pages to follow attempt to give an account of that conviction.

³ Barbara Everett, “Unwritten Masterpiece,” *London Review of Books*, January 4, 2001.

No one in the last century, unless it be Mark Van Doren—whose 1920 book on Dryden was the occasion for T. S. Eliot's short but trenchant review essay—has written more sympathetically about the poet than Eliot; yet in thinking about Dryden's status as a great English writer, sentences from another of Eliot's essays come to mind, his even more trenchant one about Ben Jonson. That essay begins by stating bluntly, "The reputation of Jonson has been of the most deadly kind that can be compelled upon the memory of a great poet":

To be universally accepted; to be damned by the praise that quenches all desire to read the book; to be afflicted by the imputation of the virtues which excite the least pleasure; and to be read only by historians and antiquaries—this is the most perfect conspiracy of approval.

Except for the first attribution of universal acceptance—Dryden's acceptance is probably less than universal—the terms fit Dryden equally well, "a poetic practitioner who learned from Jonson" (Eliot's words) and who provided the first significant criticism of Jonson's work. The "virtues" imputed to Dryden—his refashioning of English prose from, in Samuel Johnson's words, brick to marble; his skill as political satirist and arguer in verse; his services as a creative translator of the Latin poets, of Boccaccio, and of Chaucer—are acknowledged more by lip service than by responsive attention to the prose and poetry in which those virtues are embodied.

His posthumous career however may be distinguished from Jonson's in that it is marked, as Jonson's was not, by a series of excellent commentaries from readers who were not merely "historians and antiquaries" but discerning critics whose accounts of the writer's work on various fronts remain fresh and useful in the twenty-first century. A list of these would begin with Johnson's "Life" and continue with the biographical and critical commentary in Walter Scott's great edition of 1808. Near the end of the closing decades of the nineteenth century, George Saintsbury revised Scott's edition and contributed an excellent small book on Dryden to the *English Men of Letters* series; at roughly the same time John Churton Collins in England and James Russell Lowell

in this country wrote substantial essays on him. The classicist A. W. Verrall's *Lectures on Dryden* was published in 1914 after Verrall's death; six years later came Van Doren's book (his dissertation at Columbia University), by all odds the fullest, most perceptive treatment of Dryden's contribution as a man of letters. Eliot's review essay followed the next year, and in 1932 he published the valuable *John Dryden: The Poet, the Dramatist, the Critic*, three talks given for the BBC. The second half of the last century saw an outpouring of books about every aspect of Dryden (including a first-rate biography by James Anderson Winn), the latest examples of which are two further volumes in the excellent *Longman's Annotated English Poets* series, taking Dryden up to 1696, and a volume of essays devoted to him in the *Cambridge Companion* series. Dryden has fared well at the hands of the professoriat, most of whose writing about and editing of him have been exemplary. Of course that still leaves the question of whether such a conspiracy of approval includes readers who read him—in F. R. Leavis' words about Donne—as we read the living.⁴

There is of course no argument about the ambitious variety of Dryden's literary performances. The editor of the *Cambridge Companion* notes

the rapidity and fluency with which Dryden managed the thousands of pages of verse and prose—prologues, epilogues, and plays; songs, satires, state poems, and panegyrics; commendatory verse and elegies; epitaphs, epistles, odes, essays, dedications, prefaces, biographies, and a raft of translations from ancient and modern languages.

In this essay I shall treat none of these modes of verse or prose adequately and shall completely ignore Dryden's plays, which, lively as they were felt to be at the time, are unlikely to attract curious readers of today. And I begin with an autobiographical memory of being introduced to the writer when, as an Amherst College senior, I audited Reuben Brower's course titled "Pope to Tennyson." In fact Brower began, briefly, with Dryden, indeed Dryden at his best, with the allusive satire of *Mac Flecknoe* and

⁴ *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. by Paul Hammond. Vol. One 1649–1681; Vol. Two, 1682–1685 (London, 1995). *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. by Paul Hammond and David Hopkins. Vol. Three 1686–1693; Vol. Four 1693–1696 (London, 2004). *The Cambridge Companion to John Dryden*, ed. by Steven N. Zwicker. (Cambridge, 2004.) All quotations from Dryden's poetry are from the Longman edition. Quotations from his prose are from *Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays*, 2 vols. ed. by George Watson (London, 1962).

Absalom and Achitophel, and the elegiac grandeur of “To the Memory of Mr. Oldham.” I brought no experience of Virgil to my reading of these poems, and they were hard going, more so than the ones by Pope that followed. But I believed in Brower, if not yet in Dryden, and tried to imitate my teacher’s way of reading and responding. Not until rereadings in graduate school and beyond did I catch a foothold to the point where I could begin to enjoy the poet, perhaps even to understand Eliot’s pronouncement in his essay, that “to enjoy Dryden means to pass beyond the limitations of the nineteenth century into a new freedom.” A heady claim: was I experiencing anything like it?

Brower’s training as a classicist as well as a close reader of English poetry (he studied at Cambridge with Richards and Leavis) made him an ideal critic of what he liked to call Dryden’s “allusive irony,” a better term he thought than the usual “mock heroic” for the poet’s particular technique. In his long out-of-print Dryden selection in the *Laurel Poetry* series (price thirty-five cents), Brower considered passages from *Mac Flecknoe* in order to show that “The surface magnificence of Dryden’s jokes is essential to his way of expressing high scorn, of imparting greatness to his opponents while deftly letting them down.” These observations were made apropos of the famous couplets about Shadwell, the inheritor of his father Flecknoe’s kingdom of Dullness:

Besides, his goodly fabric fills the eye,
 And seems designed for thoughtless majesty:
 Thoughtless as monarch oaks that shade the plain,
 And, spread in solemn state, supinely reign.

Brower said about the word “supinely” that it sounds “deceptively noble, in its Latinity,” until we realize that Shadwell’s reign is rather unlike that of the monarch oaks he’s been compared to, since his “goodly fabric” is displayed from flat on his back.

Brower noted that Dryden’s fusion of venom and majesty made for satire that was the opposite of the “slovenly butchering of a man” Dryden alluded to in the long essay from his final decade, the “Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire.” The reference to the “slovenly butchering of a man” occurs in what the editor of his critical essays, George Watson, has called

one of the finest moments in Dryden's prose:

How easy it is to call rogue and villain, and that wittily! But how hard to make a man appear a fool, a blockhead, or a knave, without using any of those opprobrious terms! To spare the grossness of the names, and to do the thing yet more severely, is to draw a full face, and to make the nose and cheeks stand out, and yet not to employ any depth of shadowing. This is the mystery of that noble trade which yet no master can teach to his apprentice; he may give the rules, but the scholar is never the nearer in his practice. Neither is it true that this fineness of raillery is offensive. A witty man is tickled while he is hurt in this manner, and a fool feels it not. The occasion of an offence may possibly be given, but he cannot take it. If it be granted that in effect this way does more mischief—that a man is secretly wounded, and though he be not sensible himself, yet the malicious world will find it for him—yet there is still a vast difference betwixt the slovenly butchering of a man, and the fineness of a stroke that separates the head from the body and leaves it standing in its place. A man may be capable, as Jack Ketch's wife said of his servant, of a plain piece of work, a bare hanging; but to make a malefactor die sweetly was only belonging to her husband.

From the notes to this passage in the Longman edition, we learn that Jack Ketch, public hangman from around 1663 (he died in 1686), was notorious for his botching of public executions, so perhaps Mrs. Ketch was partial. No matter, nor does it matter that as Watson suggests in his note on the passage that it seems as much an aspiration on Dryden's part as a true description of his art, since Dryden's satires are more political and sometimes abusive than the ideal account lets on.

Yet even so qualified, this description of the satirist as Dryden conceived himself to be rose out of his actual practice in the great satires of more than a decade previous, most notably *Mac Flecknoe* and *Absalom and Achitophel*. The standard account of Dryden's progress and discovery of his true gift as a poet contrasts these vivid, ironically voiced poems with the panegyrical strain he practiced earlier in poems such as the *Heroic Stanzas* on Cromwell (1658), the celebration of Charles's restoration (*Astraea Redux*, 1660), and the historical poem about England's sea wars with the Dutch and the great fire of London (*Annus Mirabilis*, 1667). The declamatory, mono-voiced soliloquizing in the heroic plays he wrote during the sixties, culminating in the two-part *Conquest of Granada* (1672), would also seem inimical to the tonal complexity

of the humorous poems to come. But something surprising happens in *Annus Mirabilis*, when Dryden subtly complicates his heroicizing of the English fleet. In his preface to that poem he announced that “the adequate delight of heroic poesy” was constituted by certain “descriptions or images, well wrought.” These “beget admiration . . . as the images of the burlesque, which is contrary to this by the same reason beget laughter.” Dr. Johnson admired the poem, although he felt that in it Dryden “seems not yet fully to have formed his versification, or settled his system of propriety.” Johnson quoted some quatrains from the sea fight in which the English pursue the Dutch:

Like hunted castors, conscious of their store,
 Their waylaid wealth to Norway’s coast they bring;
 There first the north’s cold bosom spices bore,
 And winter brooded on the eastern spring.

By the rich scent we found our perfumed prey,
 Which flanked with rocks did close in covert lie;
 And round about their murdering cannon lay,
 At once to threaten and invite the eye.

Here as in other places in the poem, Johnson declared, “the sublime [is] too often mingled with the ridiculous.” He was bothered by Dryden’s itch to illustrate everything with a simile that would supposedly win our admiration. Such constant solicitation may make the wonder cease, and perhaps a similar thought occurred to the poet.

Whatever his state of mind, there is a moment in the Anglo-Dutch battle that is richly predictive of the satirist to come. The “haughty Belgians,” as Dryden calls them, with their different styles of ship construction, direct their fire at the sails of the English ships, with the following result:

And as the built, so different is the fight:
 Their mounting shot is on our sails designed;
 Deep in their hulls our deadly bullets light,
 And through the yielding planks a passage find.

Our dreaded admiral from far they threat,
Whose battered rigging their whole war receives:
All bare, like some old oak which tempests beat,
He stands, and sees below his scattered leaves.

Heroes of old, when wounded, shelter sought,
But he, who meets all danger with disdain,
Ev'n in their face his ship to anchor brought,
And steeple-high stood propped upon the main.

Dryden terms the admiral's behavior "excess of courage," such as to make his foes temporarily withdraw in awe. But more is going on in the presentation: the editor notes, with respect to the bareness of the weather-beaten oak, its leaves brought down by the assault, that it recalls an item from the *London Gazette* recounting that "The Duke had all his Tackle taken off by Chain-shot, and his Breeches to his Skin were shot off." Dryden here adapts a passage from the fourth book of the *Aeneid* where—in an earlier translation from the seventeenth century—we hear of tempests, the old oak, and scattered leaves. In his book about the poem, Michael McKeon says that "Dryden converts the ridiculous destruction of Abermarle's breeches into an occasion for celebrating his manliness."⁵ But this is to presume that the movement is one way only, from "low" subject to high epic celebration. One could just as well look at the portrait of Abermarle as mock heroic, a nice mixture, to use Johnson's terms, of the "sublime mingled with the ridiculous," or, in Dryden's words, "images of the burlesque . . . [that] beget laughter."

The elegance of Dryden's portrayal of the admiral may be brought out by contrast with some lines from another poem about Abermarle's receiving what Pepys referred to as "a little hurt in the thigh." The author of "Third Advice to a Painter," now attributed to Andrew Marvell and published the year before *Annus Mirabilis*, puts it this way:

But most with story of his hand or thumb
Conceal (as Honor would) his Grace's bum,

⁵ Michael McKeon, *Politics and Poetry in Restoration England* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), p. 53.

When the rude bullet a large collop tore
 Out of that buttock never turn'd before.
 Fortune, it seem'd, would give him by that lash
 Gentle correction for his fight so rash,
 But should the Rump perceiv't, they'd say that Mars
 Had now reveng'd them upon Aumarle's arse.

The Longman editor says that these lines “less sympathetically” record the incident; put positively, why not say that Dryden’s more sympathetic portrayal of the admiral is remarkably satisfying for its cool fusion of the heroic and the bathetic, done without batting an eye. From here it is but a step to the lines in *Mac Flecknoe* where Shadwell is compared to monarch oaks spread in solemn state and supinely reigning. Or to that other passage Brower singled out as a great instance of Dryden’s allusive irony in its presentation of Flecknoe and his chosen heir:

The hoary prince in majesty appeared,
 High on a throne of his own labours reared.
 At his right hand our young Ascanius sate,
 Rome’s other hope, and pillar of the state:
 His brows thick fogs, instead of glories, grace,
 And lambent dullness played around his face.

The editor brings out, as did Brower, the Virgilian echoes in “Rome’s other hope” (“*spes altera Roma*,” *Aeneid* xii) and in “lambent dullness played around his face” (“*Lambere flamma comas et circum tempora pasci*,” *Aeneid* ii).

Further help in distinguishing Dryden’s mode of satiric attack, especially from Pope’s, is provided by George Saintsbury in an impressionistic disquisition on how the couplet works in *Absalom and Achitophel*.

It must be always well in hand, serious without passion, and disdainful without loss of temper. Everywhere in the measure, as well as in the sense, perfect command has to be manifested: the poet cannot afford to miss a hit, to fire in the air, to boggle anything; and he does not. It is almost enough to say that the passage of Pope’s satire which most reminds us of Dryden is the character of Atticus, and that the principal thing which reminds us that it is not Dryden is the deadly

earnest of it—the absence of the Olympian quality. Pope attacks on the level, or from below, and sometimes from behind; Dryden always from above.

This is too absolute to fit some of the “low” touches in *Mac Flecknoe*—“Echoes from Pissing Alley ‘Shadwell’ call, / And ‘Shadwell’ they resound from Aston Hall”—but will do for other ones where dullness is enlarged and glorified. (Some editors following the miscellany of 1684 print “Sh-----” rather than “Shadwell,” thus bring out the excrementitious theme. But Dryden originally spelled out his whole name.) And although Eliot in his essay doesn’t mention Saintsbury, he may well have had him in mind when he (Eliot) contrasted Dryden’s style of portraiture with Pope’s:

Pope alters, he diminishes; he is a master of miniature. The singular skill of the portrait of Addison, for example, in the Epistle to Arbuthnot, depends upon the justice and reserve, the apparent determination not to exaggerate. The genius of Pope is not for caricature. But the effect of the portraits of Dryden is to transform the object into something greater . . .

A fiery soul, which working out its way,
Fretted the pigmy body to decay,
And o’erinform’d the tenement of clay.

These lines are not merely a magnificent tribute. They create the object which they contemplate.

What Saintsbury calls Dryden’s “Olympian” quality is related to or perhaps just another way of talking about the magnificence Eliot found in these lines from the character of Achitophel/Shaftesbury in *Absalom*. But before considering the lines in the larger context of the portrait, we may note the amazing high spirits, the positive *geniality* of the verse in *Absalom* at its best—most splendidly in the opening lines:

In pious times, ere priestcraft did begin,
Before polygamy was made a sin,
When man on many multiplied his kind,
Ere one to one was cursedly confined;
When nature prompted, and no law denied

Promiscuous use of concubine and bride;
 Then Israel's monarch, after heaven's own heart,
 His vigorous warmth did variously impart
 To wives and slaves: and wide as his command
 Scattered his maker's image through the land.

The alliterative play that gives life and voice to the lines; the when . . . when . . . then sequence that wheels us precipitously into Israel's monarch; the complete confidence of rhythm; the sudden full-stop after "wives and slaves" in the next to last line—these are a few of the qualities that contribute to magnificence. Admittedly David/Charles II is a "good" character here, but he is presented through the man-of-the-world jaunty knowingness of Dryden, which presentation is really not different in kind from the way the "bad" guys are treated in their turn.

Probably the greatest single portrait in all Dryden's gallery is of Achitophel, and here geniality or disdain, or the Olympian quality Saintsbury identifies, is replaced by something even richer. Everyone admires the passage, but its special fineness has not I think been enough remarked. We know that Dryden added some lines later in the portrait to mitigate his adverse judgment of his villain by admitting that Shaftesbury's record as Lord Chancellor was creditable. But the unforgettable sequence of lines from which Eliot extracted the triplet about Achitophel's "fiery soul" precedes the added lines and can be experienced as a whole. The plotters against David/Charles are introduced beginning at line 150:

Of these the false Achitophel was first:
 A name to all succeeding ages cursed.
 For close designs and crooked counsels fit,
 Sagacious, bold, and turbulent of wit;
 Restless, unfixed in principles and place,
 In power unpleased, impatient of disgrace.
 A fiery soul, which working out its way
 Fretted the pigmy body to decay,
 And o'erinform'd the tenement of clay.
 A daring pilot in extremity:
 Pleas'd with the danger, when the waves went high

He sought the storms; but for a calm unfit
 Would steer too nigh the sands to boast his wit.
 Great wits are sure to madness near allied,
 And thin partitions do their bounds divide:
 Else why should he, with wealth and honour blessed,
 Refuse his age the needful hours of rest?
 Punish a body which he could not please,
 Bankrupt of life, yet prodigal of ease?
 And all to leave what with his toil he won
 To that unfeathered, two-legged thing, a son:
 Got while his soul did huddled notions try,
 And born a shapeless lump, like anarchy.
 In friendship false, implacable in hate,
 Resolved to ruin or to rule the state;
 To compass this the triple bond he broke,
 The pillars of the public safety shook,
 And fitted Israel for a foreign yoke.

The more Dryden writes about Shaftesbury the less he understands him; or, to use the English equivalent of the Latin *admirare*, the more he wonders at him—at why he did what he did. This comes through most strongly after the famous alliance of great wits with madness and the question that follows: “Else why should he . . . // Punish a body which he could not please, / Bankrupt of life, yet prodigal of ease?” No subsequent abuse of the ill-made son and heir (“that unfeathered, two-legged thing”) will make the questions any more answerable. Dryden’s satiric portraits regularly eschew any attempt at getting what Eliot called, in his essay on Ben Jonson, the human, “third” dimension—but this one is an exception. As for the famous triplet that Eliot says “creates the object that it contemplates,” Christopher Ricks in his brilliantly resourceful essay “Dryden’s Triplets” (from the *Cambridge Companion*) sees the lines as a “corporeal triplet” that conjures up “in all his damaged and damaging energy” the life of Shaftesbury:

A fiery soul, which working out its way
 Fretted the pigmy body to decay,
 And o’erinform’d the tenement of clay.

Ricks writes:

Dryden's triplet animates not only a soul but a body, and then, through the body of the verse itself, it works that of which it speaks. For the soul of the lines can be seen and heard to be working out its way, out through the acknowledged restraint, even while fretting to decay the body of the couplet—more, while over-informing the tenement that is the couplet-form itself.

Here Ricks gives Eliot's claim substantial life.

2

Dryden the literary and political satirist has had more justice done to him than the other Drydens Steven Zwicker names in the *Cambridge Companion* introduction. His prose has received many tributes, none more telling than the "masculine" vigor and directness informing the biographical pages of Walter Scott's edition. It is sometimes forgotten that Matthew Arnold in "The Study of Poetry," just before he produced the patronizing claim that Dryden and Pope were classics of English prose rather than of English poetry, paid handsome tribute to Dryden the prose writer by contrasting him with two of his predecessors. Arnold quotes sentences from George Chapman (the Elizabethan dramatist and translator of Homer) calling them "intolerable," then does the same for Milton, whose prose he judges "obsolete." He then quotes part of the first sentence from Dryden's postscript to the reader, appended to his 1697 translation of the *Aeneid*: "What Virgil wrote in the vigour of his age, in plenty and at ease, I have undertaken to translate in my declining years; struggling with wants, oppressed with sickness, curbed in my genius, liable to be misconstrued in all I write." How similar this is, rhythmically, to the cadences of Dryden's couplets, their balance, their energy-within-restraint. Arnold says justly that "here at last we have the true English prose, a prose such as we would all gladly use if only we knew how." Eliot confirms this in his BBC talks on Dryden, noting that in the two-hundred-odd years since his death (Eliot was writing in 1932), "hardly a word or a phrase has become quaint and obsolete."

Dryden the translator has been the subject of Charles Tomlinson's effort to establish him not only as himself a great one but responsible for the important conviction that translation is—in Tomlinson's words to his introduction to the *Oxford Book of Verse in English Translation*—"essentially a compromise between the original texts and the present interests and capacities of a given writer." Dryden believed that the translator must be a poet, and that the extremes of "metaphrase"—dogged literalism in following the original—and "imitation" of the "free" sort later practiced among others by Pound and Robert Lowell, were to be avoided. If asked to fix on a single instance of Dryden's empathetic skill as a reader and "bringer-over" of a predecessor's language, I would choose his treatment of Lucretius, of whose *De Rerum Natura* he translated various sections. In the preface to *Sylvae* (1685), a volume containing renderings of Virgil, Lucretius, Theocritus, and Horace, Dryden turns from remarks about translating Virgil to describe what's distinctive about Lucretius:

If I am not mistaken, the distinguishing character of Lucretius (I mean of his soul and genius) is a certain kind of noble pride, and positive assertion of his opinions. He is everywhere confident of his own reason, and assuming an absolute command not only over his vulgar reader but even his patron Memmius. For he is always bidding him attend, as if he had the rod over him, and using a magisterial authority while he instructs him. From his time to ours I know none so like him as our poet and philosopher of Malmesbury. This is that perpetual dictatorship which is exercised by Lucretius, who though often in the wrong yet seems to deal *bona fide* with his reader, and tells him nothing but what he thinks.

Dryden's translation of the latter part of the third book of *De Rerum Natura*, "Against the Fear of Death," begins thus:

What has this bugbear death to frighten man,
 If souls can die, as well as bodies can?
 For, as before our birth we felt no pain
 When Punic arms infested land and main,
 When heaven and earth were in confusion hurled
 For the debated empire of the world,
 Which awed with dreadful expectation lay,
 Sure to be slaves, uncertain who should sway:
 So, when our mortal frame shall be disjoined,

The lifeless lump uncoupled from the mind,
 From sense of grief and pain we shall be free;
 We shall not feel, because we shall not be.

Here is the “perpetual dictatorship,” the “positive assertion of his opinions” Dryden singles out in the preface as central to the Lucretian style. It’s hard to talk about pace, but these lines are typical of the brisk, strong continuity of movement Dryden is so adept at creating—the conjunctives “for” and “when” and “So” contributing to the sweep of inevitable argument. Some later lines consider the many things that will be swept away with death (*tot praemium vitae*):

“Ah wretch,” thou criest, “ah! miserable me,
 One woeful day sweeps children, friends, and wife,
 And all the brittle blessings of my life!”
 Add one thing more, and all thou say’st is true:
 Thy want and wish of them is vanished too,
 Which well considered were a quick relief
 To all thy vain imaginary grief.
 For thou shalt sleep and never wake again,
 And quitting life, shall quit thy living pain.
 But we thy friends shall all those sorrows find
 Which in forgetful death thou leav’st behind;
 No time shall dry our tears, nor drive thee from our mind.

The final alexandrine gives extra force to how the dead one’s memory lengthens on in those who remain to grieve, even as he himself has been set free. A modern reader can’t but think of Philip Larkin’s response to this attitude toward death in the lines from “Aubade” that scornfully invoke “specious stuff” like

No rational being
 Can fear a thing it will not feel, not seeing
 That this is what we fear—no sight, no sound,
 No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
 Nothing to love or link with,
 The anaesthetic from which none come round.

Still, that “specious stuff” caught Larkin’s attention, provoking perhaps the poem’s finest moment; Dryden’s Lucretius makes the idea something—almost—other than specious.

On the basis of the two long poems of historical and religious controversy he wrote during the 1680s, *Religio Laici* (1682) and *The Hind and the Panther* (1687), Dryden is often praised for being a better arguer in verse than his successor Pope managed to be in his *Essay on Man*.⁶ Yet no part of his work has fallen more into oblivion—always excepting for the specialists—than these two poems. Scott, whose wise comments on each are to be found in his introductory notes to them, said about Dryden in *The Hind and the Panther* that “He launched forth into a tide of controversy, which, however furious at the time, has long subsided, leaving his poem a disregarded wreck, stranded upon the shores which the surges once occupied.” Compared to the partisan responses elicited by *Mac Flecknoe*, *Absalom and Achitophel* and *The Medal*, the attempt of *Religio Laici* to mediate among contending religious factions in a plain-speaking, non-inflammatory manner, in fact attracted neither “admiration nor censure” (Scott’s words). And if for Scott, a little over a hundred years after Dryden’s death, the controversies felt distant, what of the reader 200 years later who finds herself a student in a course titled Major English Writers? Needless to say, the professor who has room for four or five classes on the poet must give short shrift to these longer poems, and he will do this probably by mentioning the relatively famous bits that stand out in them—for example, the opening lines of *Religio Laici*:

Dim as the borrowed beams of moon and stars
To lonely, weary, wandering travellers
Is reason to the soul; and as on high
Those rolling fires discover but the sky
Not light us here, so reason’s glimmering ray
Was lent, not to assure our doubtful way,
But guide us upward to a better day.

—an unlikely “romantic” comparison for Arnold’s classic of an age of prose and reason to be capable of, given exquisite pace by

⁶ But for a recent, eye-opening treatment of how “thought” goes on in poetry, see Helen Vendler’s *Poets Thinking* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004). Her first chapter is about the *Essay on Man*.

virtue of its enjambed lines. Or there is the autobiographical excursus early in *The Hind and the Panther*.

My thoughtless youth was winged with vain desires.
 My manhood, long misled by wandering fires,
 Followed false lights; and when their glimpse was gone,
 My pride struck out new sparkles of her own.

But admiring the sequences from which these lines are taken is rather a different matter from following, in an informed way, the particularities of political and religious dispute in late seventeenth century England of which both poems are full.

Although it is the case—at least for this reader—that one flags in each of the two poems when the explanatory notes at the bottom of pages in the Longman edition move up toward the page's top, the wonder of the versification is often enough to carry one over rough spots. Speaking of *The Hind and the Panther* (though similar claims could be made for *Religio Laici*), Scott wrote of that versification:

It never falls, never becomes rugged; rises from the dignified strain of the poetry; sinks into quaint familiarity, where sarcasm and humour are employed; and winds through all the mazes of theological argument, without becoming either obscure or prosaic.

To my judgment, the finest sequence in *The Hind and the Panther* is from its third and last book, two hundred and some lines known as the Fable of the Swallows. The fable is related, with some malicious intent, by the Panther (representing the Anglican church) to the Hind (the Roman Catholic church) as they discuss matters theological at the Hind's modest domicile. It is "about" the situation of Catholics and Catholic clergy under the present king, the Catholic James II, and the Longman note warns that it presents "a complex challenge to the reader." Instead of meeting that challenge, I wish to point out, with reference to two passages from the fable, the distinguished quality of the versification by which Dryden carries his allegory; since whatever his contemporaries were able to make of it in terms of contemporary issues, the object of our attention is essentially the action of the verse itself as it creates a fully sufficient representation.

The first passage characterizes the swallows' nature; the second

recounts their ill-advised decision to delay too long in their flight south (Catholic laity and clergy are being warned by the Panther not to become overconfident or aggressive under James's reign), else they will meet a sad end. The Panther begins her tale this way:

The Swallow, privileged above the rest
Of all the birds, as man's familiar guest,
Pursues the sun in summer brisk and bold,
But wisely shuns the persecuting cold;
Is well to chancels and to chimneys known,
Though 'tis not thought she feeds on smoke alone.
From hence she has been held of heavenly line,
Endued with particles of soul divine.
This merry chorister had long possessed
Her summer seat, and feathered well her nest:
Till frowning skies began to change their cheer,
And time turned up the wrong side of the year;
The shedding trees began the ground to strow
With yellow leaves, and bitter blasts to blow.
Sad auguries of winter thence she drew,
Which by instinct, or prophecy, she knew:
When prudence warned her to remove betimes
And seek a better heaven, and warmer climes.

Eliot in his essay contrasts Dryden's verse with Swinburne's, finding that the two bear an antithetical resemblance to one another:

Swinburne was also a master of words, but Swinburne's words are all suggestion and no denotation; if they suggest nothing, it is because they suggest too much. Dryden's words, on the other hand, are precise, they state immensely, but their suggestiveness is often nothing.

The precision of Dryden's words can be seen, in the passage just quoted, by how subtly and firmly it avoids staying in the same key—as any stanza of Swinburne relentlessly does—but registers different kinds of denoting. There are the verbs, given added strength when they initiate a line, as in “Pursues the sun” or “Endued with particles”; there is the neat double-edge—

referring both to the weather and the political climate—of “persecuting cold”; there is the combination of the informal with the poetic—compare the offhand humor of “And time turned up the wrong side of the year” with “Sad auguries of winter thence she drew.” It may be too much to claim about these few lines that they “state immensely,” but the way they state is powerful and assured.

The other sequence occurs near the end of the fable, as the swallows, lulled into false security by Martin, a bold, ambitious bird representing the Catholic party at James’s court, encounter inclement weather that brings disaster. The friendly sun is eclipsed by the moon, to the swallows’ disconcertion:

The crowd, amazed, pursued no certain mark,
 But birds met birds, and jostled in the dark;
 Few mind the public in a panic fright,
 And fear increased the horror of the night.
 Night came, but unattended with repose,
 Alone she came, no sleep their eyes to close,
 Alone and black she came, no friendly stars arose.

What should they do, beset with dangers round,
 No neighbouring dorp, no lodging to be found,
 But bleaky plains, and bare unhospitable ground?
 The latter brood, who just began to fly,
 Sick-feathered, and unpractised in the sky,
 For succour to their helpless mother call;
 She spread her wings, some few beneath ’em crawl,
 She spread ’em wider yet, but could not cover all.
 T’ augment their woes, the winds began to move
 Debate in air for empty fields above,
 Till Boreas got the skies, and poured amain
 His rattling hailstones mixed with snow and rain.

The joyless morning late arose, and found
 A dreadful desolation reign around,
 Some buried in the snow, some frozen to the ground:
 The rest were struggling still with death, and lay
 The Crows’ and Ravens’ rights, an undefended prey.

The horror of the night, magnified by the allusion to *Aeneid* iv, strikingly pervades the whole scene. It’s doubtful, in the face of

such a relentlessly vivid creation, that we remember this is the Panther speaking, with malice in her method; rather we admire the resourceful verse, studded with triplets and alexandrines, that hammers things home. This is as close to a poetry of pure *action*, suggesting nothing but stating immensely (to recur to Eliot's words) as can be found in all of Dryden, and it is a pity so few readers, if they begin *The Hind and the Panther* at all, are likely to reach this section of the third book.

3

All, all of a piece throughout.
—Dryden, "The Secular Masque"

One of Dryden's recent critics, Greg Clingham, on the evidence of Johnson's "Life," notes that Johnson thought Dryden a great poet especially in his translations, an attitude prevalent in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries among such poets and critics as Congreve, Dennis, Pope, Joseph Warton, Churchill, Scott, Wordsworth, and Keats. Dryden's major work after the "Glorious" revolution of 1688 consisted of translations, most notably that of the *Aeneid* and the volume of *Fables, Ancient and Modern* published the year of his death. These, along with such poems as the epistles to Congreve, to Sir Godfrey Kneller, to the Duchess of Ormond and to his cousin John Driden (the latter two both included in *Fables*) are works, Clingham points out, "directly concerned with historicity, the translatability of the past, and political authority in a world in which the individual is open to forces more powerful than the self."⁷ We may add that Dryden's concern for these large issues is compelling and attractive in a manner quite other than is to be found in his previous work, whether celebratory and panegyric (*Astraea Redux, Annus Mirabilis*) or satiric (*Mac Flecknoe, Absalom and*

⁷ Greg Clingham, "Another and the Same: Johnson's Dryden," in *Literary Transmission and Authority: Dryden and Other Writers*, ed. by Earl Miner and Jennifer Brady (New York, 1993), pp. 12–159. See also Eric Griffiths' splendid essay on Dryden and his predecessors, "Dryden's Past," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1994, pp. 113–149.

Achitophel) or discursive (*Religio Laici, The Hind and the Panther*). The new manner is predominately retrospective, elegiac, self-deprecating, sometimes self-exculpating—one appropriate to a writer entering his seventh decade and, with the accession of William putting an end to the Stuart reign, a writer who has lost his positions as Poet Laureate and Royal Historiographer.

This manner can be felt in Dryden's prose, as in the sentence Arnold quoted from the postscript to the *Aeneid* about the adverse conditions under which the poet wrote ("struggling with wants, oppressed with sickness, curbed in my genius"). As a single illustration of Dryden's prose excellence, I would select the passage from his preface to *Fables*, in which humorous detachment and passion movingly combine. He hopes the mixture of translations (Chaucer, Boccaccio, Ovid, Homer) and original poems of his own will not be condemned by his readers:

But if they should, I have the excuse of an old gentleman who, mounting on horseback before some ladies, when I was present, got up somewhat heavily, but desired of the fair spectators that they would count forescore and eight before they judged him. By the mercy of God, I am already come within twenty years of his number; a cripple in my limbs, but what decays are in my mind the reader must determine. I think myself as vigorous as ever in the faculties of my soul, excepting only my memory, which is not impaired to any great degree; and if I lose not more of it, I have no great reason to complain. What judgment I had, increases rather than diminishes; and thoughts, such as they are, come crowding so fast upon me that my only difficulty is to choose or to reject, to run them into verse or to give them the other harmony of prose.

The volume appeared some weeks before he died, but no passage from it is more redolent of life.

The elegiac mode was of course congenial to Dryden from the beginning of his career, with "On the Death of Lord Hastings" and the *Heroic Stanzas* on Cromwell. It reached greatness in the poem memorializing Oldham, and if there is anything to be said against that poem ("From the perfection of such an elegy we cannot detract," wrote Eliot), it might be that the classicizing, beautiful as it is, wears itself somewhat self-consciously:

Once more, hail and farewell; farewell thou young,
But ah too short, Marcellus of our tongue;

Thy brows with ivy, and with laurels bound;
But fate and gloomy night encompass thee around.

This is done very much after the high Roman fashion, with Catullus and Virgil strongly on display. Two years later, in the Pindaric ode “To the Memory of Anne Killigrew,” the concluding stanza pulls out all the stops by wielding triumphant echoes of the famous words from I Corinthians about the last judgment when the trumpet shall sound and the dead raised incorruptible:

When in mid air the golden trump shall sound
To raise the nations under ground;
When in the valley of Jehosaphat
The judging God shall close the book of fate,
And there the last assizes keep
For those who wake and those who sleep . . .

The tone is pure exultation and fervor; as with the Oldham elegy, there is no room for less exalted contemplation.

But as seen in the prose passage above quoted from *Fables*, wit and seriousness may go hand in hand (their co-presence is felt in the Fable of the Swallows from *The Hind and the Panther*), and they do so effectively in a number of instances from Dryden’s last decade. When he returned to the stage after an absence of some years with *Don Sebastian* (1689), he informed readers in his preface that “the English will not bear a thorough tragedy; but are pleased that it should be lightened with under-parts of mirth.” George Watson glosses “thorough tragedy” as a play that observes the three unities; but it may also suggest that Dryden is less interested in providing simple “admiration,” as with the heroic poem, than in cultivating a more mixed mode of response. Since as he remarked famously in the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, Shakespeare had the most “comprehensive soul” of all writers, a way of achieving comprehensiveness and inclusiveness would be, like Shakespeare, to write tragicomedy—to include “under-parts of mirth” in the tragedy.

The poem of Dryden where comprehensive soul is most fully and beautifully achieved is one for which my fondness and admiration have grown to the extent that I may claim too much on its behalf for Dryden generally. No matter, since it is such a

shining example of human nature, of the mellowing years producing their autumnal harvest. "To My Dear Friend Mr. Congreve" has been used by Walter Jackson Bate to illustrate what he calls "the burden of the past," felt as Dryden looks back early in the poem to "the giant race before the flood," those dramatists from the early seventeenth century who produced the strong but rude poetry that the Restoration wits, himself included, both refined and diluted: "Our age was cultivated thus at length, / But what we gained in skill we lost in strength." We are invited to believe that the coming of Congreve, whose second play *The Double Dealer* was about to be produced, meant the rectifying of any loss and the flowering of a new poetic age:

In him all beauties of this age we see:
 Etherege's courtship, Southerne's purity,
 The satire, wit, and strength of manly Wycherley.

One can as I do admire Congreve's work, especially his yet to be written *Way of the World*, published the year Dryden died, yet feel that Dryden is laying it on pretty thick here—that Congreve's slender shoulders can hardly bear the weight of ideal significance placed on them by the poet who imagines him as the true descendant and inheritor of his own (Dryden's) genius.

Absorbing as is the literary-historical scenario of the poem's first half, it grows into something even deeper and more affecting. Dryden wishes his own "laurel" had descended to Congreve instead of to the Shadwell he had mocked in *Mac Flecknoe*. He attempts the long, futuristic view:

Yet this I prophesy: thou shalt be seen
 (Though with some short parenthesis between)
 High on the throne of wit; and seated there
 Not mine (that's little) but thy laurel wear.
 The first attempt an early promise made;
 That early promise this has more than paid.
 So bold, yet so judiciously you dare,
 That your least praise is to be regular.
 Time, place, and action may with pains be wrought,
 But genius must be born, and never can be taught.

This is your portion, this your native store;
Heav'n that but once was prodigal before,
To Shakespeare gave as much; she could not give him more.

Here is the consummation of the familiar style as practiced by Dryden, and Ben Jonson's presence is so much felt in it that Eliot's calling Dryden "a poetic practitioner who had learned from Jonson" seems if anything an understatement. The passage evokes Jonson the epistolary and elegiac poet generally but especially the tone and passion of his great poem to Shakespeare. Near that poem's end, Jonson emphasizes the importance of both nature and art, native genius and hard work, in producing a poet worthy of the laurel:

For a good poet's made as well as born;
And such wert thou. Look how the father's face
Lives in his issue: even so, the race
Of Shakespeare's mind and manner brightly shines
In his well-turnéd and true-filé lines.

Dryden's own well-turned and true-filed lines quoted above are less the mark of "genius" than of the artful adaptation of a speaking voice so as to produce maximum nuance and implication. One notes the two parenthetical insertions, one of them acting out the very "short parenthesis" it predicts Congreve will surmount; both of them enriching the tone and flexibility of speech. That tone grows warmer, more insistent, in the triplet concluding with Shakespeare: its repeated urgings ("This is your portion, this your native store") are followed by the satisfying stress on the next line's first word—"Heav'n that but once was prodigal before"—then an enacting of that prodigality with the alexandrine completing the triplet by way of demonstrating Shakespeare's (and Congreve's) amplitude:

This is your portion, this your native store;
Heav'n that but once was prodigal before,
To Shakespeare gave as much; she could not give him more.

Dryden's magnanimity comes through here, and if magna-

nimity is too strong a word for the impulse that fills the poem (is “urbanity” a better one?), it may still be distinguished from the comparative lack of such quality in Dryden’s great successor. Pope’s “Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot” is admittedly a very different poem from the one to Congreve, but—and at much greater length—it performs the retrospective taking stock of a career, a clearing of the decks with respect to friends and enemies that bears some similarity to Dryden’s. The most memorable things in “Arbuthnot” are the devastating, in their different ways, portraits of Atticus and Sporus, along with the poem’s brilliant opening, with its creation of the beleaguered poet, harassed by bad writers and bores of all sorts. But when Pope, responding to the admittedly nasty attacks on him, turns to self-justification, a note of advertised self-righteousness—sometimes to the point of shrillness—is heard:

Not Fortune’s Worshipper, nor Fashion’s Fool,
 Not Lucre’s Madman, nor Ambition’s Tool,
 Not proud, not servile, be one Poet’s praise
 That, if he pleas’d he pleas’d by manly ways;
 That Flatt’ry, ev’n to Kings, he held a shame,
 And thought a Lye in Verse or Prose the same:
 That not in Fancy’s Maze he wander’d long,
 But stoop’d to Truth, and moraliz’d his song.

Near the end of the poem, Pope rises to impassioned defenses of his dead father and soon to die mother: one couplet addresses James Moore Smyth, an enemy, as follows:

That Harmless Mother thought no Wife a Whore,—
 Hear this! and spare his Family, *James More!*

Clearly the Arbuthnot epistle doesn’t worry about decorum.

By contrast, the poem to Congreve ends with a relatively quiet series of declarations behind which one feels a lot stirring:

Maintain your post; that’s all the fame you need,
 For ’tis impossible you should proceed.

Already I am worn with cares and age,
 And just abandoning th'ungrateful stage:
 Unprofitably kept at heaven's expense,
 I live a rent-charge on his providence:
 But you, whom every Muse and Grace adorn,
 Whom I foresee to better fortune born,
 Be kind to my remains; and O defend,
 Against your judgement, your departed friend!
 Let not th'insulting foe my fame pursue,
 But shade those laurels which descend to you;
 And take for tribute what these lines express:
 You merit more; nor could my love do less.

It's useful to think again of Jonson in his farewell "Ode to Himself" ("Come, leave the loathéd stage / And the more loathsome age"), also of the dying Hamlet's request to Horatio that he absent himself from felicity awhile in order to tell the world Hamlet's story. But really the sequence of lines is so complete, its assured breadth of statement so final, that we are moved simply to take them in, registering the moment rather than criticizing it. In *Practical Criticism*, I. A. Richards remarks about one of the poems he gave out to his students for comment—Donne's sonnet "At the Round Earth's Imagined Corners"—that "It is in the nature of some performances that they leave the spectator feeling rather helpless." By comparison with Donne's evocation of the last judgment and his supplication to the Lord, Dryden's conclusion seems to be hardly a performance at all. Yet there may be a similarity felt in the spectator-reader's sense that there is no more to say.

To treat the end of the Congreve poem as Dryden's final note to his career as poet, playwright and man of letters is a premature attempt at closure, since he would go on to write the poem to Kneller, the lovely ode on the death of Henry Purcell, "Alexander's Feast" (which Dryden thought his best work), the translations of Virgil, the *Fables*, and the century-ending "Secular Masque" ("'Tis well an old age is out / And time to begin a new"). In particular, the achievement of the *Fables* is such as to demand book-length treatment.⁸ This essay will be content rather with

⁸ It has received it in Cedric D. Reverand's *Dryden's Final Poetic Mode: The Fables*. (Philadelphia, 1988).

quoting some sentences from a letter Dryden wrote two years before he died, one of the small collection of seventy-seven letters a twentieth-century editor put together decades ago. The most attractive ones are from near the end of his life when he addressed his twenty-six-year-old married cousin, Martha Steward, in a manner combining gallantry, flirtation, and humor. Gout-ridden—elsewhere he refers to himself as “an old cripple”—Dryden says he and his son, also indisposed, are going to try the waters at Bath:

In the meantime, betwixt my intervalls of physique and other remedies which I am useing for my gravell, I am still drudging on: always a Poet, and never a good one. I pass my time sometimes with Ovid, and sometimes with our old English poet, Chaucer; translating such stories as best please my fancy; and intend besides them to add something of my own: so that it is not impossible, but ere the summer be pass'd, I may come down to you with a volume in my hand, like a dog out of the water, with a duck in his mouth. As for the rarities you promise, if beggars might be choosers, a part of a chine of honest bacon wou'd please my appetite more than all the marrow puddings; for I like them better plain, having a very vulgar stomach.—

“Dryden was not one of the *gentle bosoms*,” said Dr. Johnson, memorably. Fifty years’ worth of ungentle drudging, without flagging, produced a body of work full of surprises and discoveries for a twenty-first-century reader determined to seek them out.