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Neoclassic period in England covers nearly 180 years of art history, beginning with the restoration of Charles II in 1660. It is worthwhile to remember that the term "neoclassical" has several connotations, based on the context in which it is discussed. For example, neoclassicism in Germany refers to cultivation of Greek culture in opposition to Roman values. This essay focuses on the foundations and the salient features of the tradition of

criticism which flourished during the neoclassical period in England. Although the essay focuses on John Dryden (1631-1700) and Alexander Pope (1688-1744), for the purpose of illustration and inquiry, works and ideas of authors such as Joseph Addison (1672-1719), Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) and Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) have also been cited. Generally speaking, Neoclassicists were traditionalist who believed that literature was an art to be perfected by study, discipline and practice. Perhaps the larger objective of the neoclassical age may be summarized through Pope's epitaph to the monument erected in Westminster Abbey in the memory of Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727) memory. It reads:

Nature and Nature's Laws lay hid in Night
God said let Newton be! and All was Light !

The purpose of an author was to carry forward Newton's mission in the domain of literature and describe the eternal truths of nature in the best manner possible. As Pope puts it in *An Essay on Criticism* (1711), it was to represent in words "what oft was thought, but never so well expressed."

Influences and the Secular Ethos

The classical revival in England was triggered by European Renaissance. While Homer, Hesiod, Aristotle, Plautus, Virgil, Horace and Seneca, among others, were studied in both grammar schools and Universities of England, the Neoclassicists borrowed heavily from Italian and French critics' interpretations of 'classical rules.' One of the major influences on English neoclassicism was Pierre Corneille (1606–1684). In 1637, Corneille's play *La Cid* was berated by critics for flouting classical norms. Responding to these charges Corneille wrote a number of plays with a view to showcase his mastery over classical rules and in 1660

produced *Trois Discours sur le poème dramatique* (Three Discourses on Dramatic Poetry), where he argued fervently for the need to attune Greco-Roman values to modern sensibilities. These sentiments were later echoed by Johnson in his "Preface to the plays of Shakespeare." Another major influence on English Neoclassicists was Frenchman Nicolas Boileau-Desperaux (1636-1711) who wrote in the tradition of Horace's *Ars Poetica*. In *Le Art Poetique* (The Art of Poetry, 1674), which was translated by Dryden into English, Boileau offered elaborate instructions to aspiring poets on the question of genre, the centrality of reason in poetry and the place of imagination in art.

Boileau restores Greco-Roman emphasis on reason and nature, as opposed to the dominance of faith and scriptures in literature of the middle ages. In doing so, he was responding to a major concern of his times: a simultaneous questioning of feudal and puritanical beliefs. However, primacy of reason and observation as the most prized artistic faculty does not amount to individual sense perception. It simply serves to reaffirm order and balance as is evident in both nature and society. Similarly, subversion of religious and feudal orthodoxy does not imply endorsement of anarchy or rejection of authority in all its forms. By upholding classical heroes and secular virtues in place of saints and angels, he endeavoured to establish new ideals and fountainheads of authority.

To a great extent, Augustanism was premised on a similar model of secular hero worship. Between the execution of Charles I and the restoration, the institution of monarchy lost its divine aura. Under the changed circumstances, comparison between Charles II and the sacred sources of authority had become untenable. Consequently, propelled by historical similarities and the need to secure legitimacy for the new king, parallels were drawn between Augustus (27 BCE-14 CE) and Charles II. Thus *Pax Romana* became the ideal for *Pax Britannica*.

Dryden as Critic

According to Samuel Johnson, Dryden was the founder of the English tradition of criticism. Dryden defines critics in the tradition of Aristotle and argues that criticism, as it was first conceptualized by Aristotle, was an exercise in judging well and in observing "those Excellencies which should delight a reasonable reader." (*Essay on Dramatic Poesy*, 1668)

However, to the contemporary mind, Dryden's theories of literary criticism appear riddled with contradictions. William Bohn points out that inconsistency in his ideas on the question of genre, translation and definitions of terms such as "fancy", "imagination", "wit" etc. accrue from the pressure to earn patronage by confirming to the shifting taste/morals of his times. Moreover, much of his critical thoughts are scattered across the occasional prefaces which he wrote for his own works. This too, in part, contributes to the contradictions in question. Further, as Latt and Monk point out "It should also not be forgotten that when Dryden was writing, literary criticism, as a formal and distinct discipline, was only just beginning." (Latt, 15).

Critic as a Poet

Since poetry of the neoclassical age was predominantly mimetic and artists were expected to emulate classical dictates, "rules" of judgment became integral to the creative process. In other words, criticism became inseparable from literary imagination. According to Pope, both poets and critics were linked organically in a common pursuit of truth. Further, critics too were expected to possess creativity. This also entailed knowing one's limits. Like Boileau, who advised poets to understand their reaches, Pope argued that critics should be self-reflexive.

With criticism emerging as an important literary activity, tensions often flared up between critics and artists. Taking view of this conflictual relationship, English antiquarian Thomas

Rymer (1643-1713), remarked in the preface to his translation of Rapin's interpretation of Aristotle (1674):

...till of late years England was as free from *Critiks* as it is from Wolves, that a harmless well-meaning book might pass without danger. But now this privilege, whatever extraordinary talent it requires, is usurped by the most ignorant and they who are least acquainted with the game, are aptest to bark at everything that comes in their way.

Pope dismisses this theory of a fundamental antagonism and argues that both were inspired and guided by nature. In the *Essay*, Pope writes:

Both must alike from Heav'n derive their Light,
These born to Judge, as well as those to Write.

The function of a critic was to estimate the worth of a literary work and those who specialised in "fault finding" were dismissed as "false critics" or "little critics." For men of letters, the scope of creative activities moved well beyond poetry and criticism. Poets diversified their field of operation by taking to translation, producing pamphlets and editing journals.

Criticism, Patronage and Partisanship: Whose 'Dog' were the Critics?

In 1736, Alexander Pope gifted Prince of Wales a pup to guard his estate in Kew and engraved the following epigram on its collar:

"I am his Highness' Dog at Kew.

Pray tell me Sir, whose Dog are you?"

The epigram captures the polarised political climate of his times during which being someone's "dog" was the secret to survival and flourish. It was important to have political

masters and affiliations. Often, identities were imposed on unsuspecting and apolitical individuals. In Satire II, Pope laments the fate of unbiased critics in a society which thrived on binaries.

Verse-man or Prose-man, term me which you will,
Papist or Protestant, or both between,
Like good Erasmus in an honest Mean,
In moderation placing all my glory,
While Tories call me Whig, and Whigs a Tory.

Dryden endeavored to negotiate this quagmire by frequently changing his political and religious orientation. In 1682 he wrote "Religio Laici" in defense of Anglican Church and five years later, he wrote *The Hind and The Panther* in support of Catholicism. Similarly, upon the death of Oliver Cromwell in 1658, he paid rich tributes to the Lord Protector in *Heroic Stanzas Upon the Death of the Lord Protector*, while in 1660 he commemorated the restoration of monarchy through *Astrea Redux*. Fortunately, the tradition of patronage was weaning fast and the business of letters was getting tied up with the business of market. Unlike Dryden, who had to oscillate between Catholicism and Anglicanism, Pope could 'afford' to remain a Catholic. In Pope we see the emergence of probably the first commercial author who wrote for publishers, and not patrons. However, crass commercialisation of literature precipitated a number of challenges to Neoclassical obsession with taste, truth and balance. In his mock-heroic satire *Mac Flecknoe* (1682) Dryden laments the "prostitution" of literature by publishers and hack writers. Pope's *An Essay on Criticism* (1611) too attempts to address the general deterioration in literature and criticism.

Essay on Dramatic Poesy: Ancients vs Moderns and English vs French

As pointed out earlier in the essay, to a great extent classical rules interpreted and formulated by the French critics inspired neoclassicism in England. In France, these rules were deduced in a comparative framework and often triggered seething debates regarding the relative merit of the ancients and the moderns. In seventeenth century England, to be 'modern' was to live in contemporary times, without necessarily being biased against the antiquity. In the works of Dryden, the words 'ancient' and 'antiquity' implied olden times of Greece and Rome, while 'ancients' referred to classical writers/men from Greco-Roman period. Unfortunately for England, along with French neoclassical rules, the ancient vs. modern debate got imported too. Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668) is a response to these debates. The *Essay* was occasioned by a public dispute with Sir Robert Howard over the use of rhyme in drama and was written with an objective "to vindicate the honor of our English writers, from the censure of those who unjustly prefer the French."

The *Essay* is composed as a debate between Eugenius, Crites, Lisideius, and Neander. It is conjectured that Eugenius or the "well-born" may be Dryden's patron Charles Sackville, Crites or "critic" represents Sir Robert Howard (Dryden's brother-in-law), Lisideius refers to Sir Charles Sedley, and Neander or the "new man" is Dryden himself. The first of these debates follows Crites lamentation wherein he describes the decline in public estimation of poetry as a result of progressive divergence from classical rules. Dryden expands the scope of analysis by first comparing authors within the English tradition, followed by comparisons with the French and the ancients. Given the objective of the *Essay*, it is easy to guess who Dryden sympathized with. Speaking for moderns, Eugenius argues that since modern drama was based on lively imitation to both nature and life, it was possible that compared to the ancients, it may have "hit some airs and features which they have missed." On the question

on unities too he points out that these were unknown to the Greeks and were established much later during the time of Horace. This debate is followed by Neander's defense of English drama against the French. Dryden argues that the French faulted in being too faithful to the ancient precepts. Consequently, the beauty of French drama is "the beauties of a statue, but not of a man because not animated with the soul of Poesy, which is imitation of humour and passions". He goes on to praise tragicomedy as "a more pleasant way of writing...than was ever known to the ancients or moderns of any nation..." On the use of rhyme in drama Neander points out that rhyme has an advantage over blank verse since the former makes imitation more lively and artful. This, according to Dryden, is closer in spirit to Aristotle's precepts on dramatic language in *Poetics*.

Arguing after Corneille, Neander also suggests that ancient precepts have always been stifling. But more than English opposition to the ancients, the debates in the *Essay* foreground Dryden's opposition to the French. Based on the discussions, it may be surmised that Dryden found French assessment of classical rules as problematic. However, this is rather ironical considering that he himself was inspired by Corneille and Boileau.

Essay on Criticism

Essay on Criticism was first published by an anonymously publisher. It is written as a manual for those aspiring critics who hope to rise above prejudice and pride. Pope revised the work in 1736 and divided it into three sections: the first section deals with the injury inflicted on poetry by bad criticism, the second identifies pride as the source of fallacy in criticism and the final section suggests ways of refining criticism.

Pope begins by asking critics to abide by nature since it is the only constant in the universe.

First follow NATURE, and your Judgment frame

By her just Standard, which is still the same:
Unerring Nature, still divinely bright,
One clear, unchang'd, and Universal Light,
Life, Force, and Beauty, must to all impart,
At once the Source, and End, and Test of Art.

John Dennis, in his infamous attack on Pope titled "Reflections Critical and Satyrical, upon a late Rhapsody, call'd, An Essay upon Criticism"(1711), alleges that Pope confounds "Nature" and "Rules" without defining either. It must be emphasised that Pope's Nature is different from the pantheistic idea of nature in the Romantic literature. It represents all aspects of the visible world: nonhumans, inanimate and the humans. In a sense, it is the entire cosmic order and the organising principle behind that order.

According to Pope, bad criticism stems from prejudice, excessive reliance on bookish knowledge, limited acquaintance with the poet under study and pride. To a devout Catholic like Pope, pride was nearly satanic. In *An Essay on Man* (1733-34), he identifies pride as the "original sin" since it clouds man's judgment and turns him against nature. To overcome prejudice, Pope recommends an intimate familiarity with the poets' background.

Fable, Subject, Scope in ev'ry Page,
Religion, Country, Genius of his Age:
Without all these at once before your Eyes,
Cavil you may, but never Criticize.
Further, poet is advised to conside

Similarly, as a remedy to the pride of disdainful critics he recommends humility, self-reflexivity and a "knowledge of both books and humankind." Condemning those who are hasty in judgment and lack self-restraint, Pope writes "Fools rush in where Angels fear to tread, Distrustful Sense with modest Caution speaks." Transposing the language of theology on literary criticism and reiterating the fine points of Erasmus' humanism, Pope appears to stress that an ideal artist must abide by primary attributes of humanity and aesthetic humility in the same measure as he observes balance, proportion and reason.

Essay offers a historical survey of literature from Greco-Roman period to Pope's own times. He equates the classical tradition with nature, describes Renaissance as the "Golden age" and holds socio-political corruption accountable for the literary corruption of his own times. Pope writes:

In the fat Age of Pleasure, Wealth, and Ease,
Sprung the rank Weed, and thriv'd with large Increase;
When Love was all an easie Monarch's Care;
Seldom at Council, never in a War . . .

Pope links literary debasement with commercialisation and political corruption. Like Dryden, he holds Charles II, the "easie Monarc" responsible for the degeneration. It must be stressed that Criticism for the Neoclassicists was inseparable from society; an idea which has gathered greater acceptance in contemporary times.

Mimesis or Phantasia

The entire neoclassical age witnessed polarisation over two cardinal aesthetic assumptions: imitation and imagination. Equally divisive were the ways in which these two concepts were

defined. Should the artist imitate or should imagination be the defining principle of art? What are the proper subjects of imitation and what is the admissible expanse of artistic imagination? Imitation of the classical Greco-Roman writers was mostly a question of style and genre. As to what should be the subject of that imitation, many like Dryden turned to nature. Thus Dryden chose to define drama as a "lively imitation of nature." Many others dismissed the use of rhyme in drama on the grounds of verisimilitude and argued that since speech pattern of people in the real world is unrhythmic, such must be the language of characters in a play. But the emphasis on realism was not restricted to neoclassical opposition to rhyme. Boileau advised a close imitation of everyday speech pattern which makes further provisions for gender and age-related inflexions. He advises the poets to "Let young men must speak like young, and old men like old."

Neoclassical prioritisation of realism offers a sharp contrast to the mystical and wonder ridden world of the medieval literature as well as to mythical utopias like Blake's Jerusalem during the Romantic era. Perhaps this contrast can be explained through the phenomenon of novel which arrived with aplomb in the 18th century. With novel becoming the taste of the era, as Gary Day argues, the emphasis begins to shift "from the moral effects of art to its representation of reality." (Day, 158). The defining difference between literature of the preceding era and the 18th century novels was the latter's preoccupation with being factually verifiable. Novelists claimed that they did not exaggerate, never invented that which wasn't manifest in the nature, their histories were primarily eyewitness testimonies and their accounts of human behaviour were accurate to the point of being voyeuristic as the readers were allowed access to private letters of the characters in a novel. For example, in *Oroonoko; or The Royal Slave. A True History* (1688) Aphra Behn (1640–89) argues that she was indeed 'an eye-witness to a great part of what [is] here set down.' Describing *Robinson*

Crusoe (1719), Daniel Defoe points out that "the Editor believes the thing to be a just History of Fact; neither is there any appearance of Fiction in it."

Did the Neoclassicists Outlaw Imagination?

Neoclassicists felt that imagination must be kept subordinate to reason and judgment. Reason and judgment, in turn, drew sustenance from the true nature of things. Put differently, a nexus between reason, reality, mimesis and judgment, as opposed to imagination, invention and fantasy, was projected as the desirable quality in art.

But this preoccupation with wasn't always crippling as the return to Greco-Roman standards wasn't uncritical. Samuel Johnson, who is best remembered for his two volume *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) and *The Lives of English Poets* (1783), argued that a poet need not be uncritical in his fidelity to classical rules and that for advancement of reason and eternal truths, liberties may be taken. In the tenth chapter of *The History of Rasselas* (1759), Johnson, speaking through a character named Imlac, points out that wherever he went, "poetry was considered as the highest learning...in almost all countries, the most ancient poets are considered the best." However, he immediately undercuts conventional neoclassical values by suggesting that "no man was ever great by imitation." He further argues that while poetic excellence can be attained by return to nature, "knowledge of nature is only half the task of a poet; he must be acquainted likewise with all the modes of life."

Pope too was of the opinion that while one must remain faithful to nature, it is equally desirable that the artist moves beyond it and whenever possible, improves upon it. This enabling paradox can be adequately summarised through the phrase "artful wilderness." The expression appears in the poem *Epistle to Burlington* (1731) through which Pope advocates observance of neoclassical values in landscape gardening. In the 18th century England, the opulent British aristocracy began to invest in development and remodeling of their estates.

More than being symbols of wealth and luxury, these estates were meant to mirror the power of the British empire¹. To them, Britain was the new Rome and consequently, it was only fair that the architects of these sprawling castles and villas looked back at Greece and Rome for inspiration. The centrepiece of these estates were the landscape gardens. The orderliness of these gardens became a metaphor for the owner's morality and for the harmonious reign of Queen Anne, during which peace and order were restored after a protracted period of political uncertainty. Although Pope himself was an avid gardener, being a Catholic, he could not purchase property in London. His garden at Twickenham, which was located just outside London, became an epitome of Augustan style. Pope drew upon Greco-Roman architecture to marry elegance with simplicity, harmonise formal strictness with invention and to strike a balance between the ordering hands of the gardener and the natural topography. His ideas about gardening and landscaping reinforced the harmony he sought in poetry between imitation and invention. The following lines from the *Epistle to Burlington* offer a succinct summary of Pope's views on the relationship between nature and the artist. He writes:

let Nature never be forgot.
But treat the Goddess like a modest fair,
Nor over-dress, nor leave her wholly bare

Nature, as Pope points out, must not be eclipsed by poetic invention or the ordering skills of the gardener. However, the landscape should not be left unattended either. A good gardener/poet harmonises the elements of nature with culture and improves upon the landscape/nature that he sets out to work with. Further, even as the poet/gardener strives for balance and proportion, he must also seek to surprise through variety and "artful wilderness

¹ The wealth of the English landed gentry accrued from two major sources: colonialism and trade

to perplex the scene." To achieve this variety, as Johnson argues in *Rasselas*, a poet must store up "images and resemblances" culled from his varied experiences and through his familiarity with different kinds of knowledge.

Who is Afraid of Classical Precepts?

On the question of adherence to classical formulations, Augustans showed remarkable flexibility. Like Corneille, Johnson dismissed the "arbitrary edicts" of self-appointed legislators of classical values and argued that rules should be guided by both reason and precedence. In his celebrated preface to *The Plays of William Shakespeare* (1765), he questions the notion of generic purity by praising the mixed genre of 'tragicomedy.' Johnson argues that plays of this variety do not contravene reason, nor do they undermine the essential function of drama. As M.A.R Habib points out, "there seems to be an admission here, not that the foundations of classical precepts – adherence to nature, reason, and truth – were wrong, but that some rules have not been truly derived from these foundations." (Habib, 305). Even as Johnson upholds classical virtues of reason and nature, his preface appears more concerned with the significance of experience in poetry and a poet's relationship with his posterity. To this end, he introduces new criteria for the assessment of poetic virtue. According to Johnson, Shakespeare had acquired the "dignity of the ancients" when judged by his "length of duration and continuance of esteem."

What added further to this general fluidity in neoclassical taste was the fact that many of the conceptual terms and classical precepts, which were central to the 18th discourse of neoclassical criticism, were loosely defined. The case of Dryden illustrates this point well. Dryden used 'fancy' for 'judgement' while John Sheffield (1647-1721) uses it for 'imagination.' Likewise, no standard definition of 'wit' was available. From 'divine wisdom'

to human intelligence, from repartee to the copious imagination of an urban conversationalist and from the capacity to bring together unrelated ideas to writing elegantly with clear expressions; a variety of connotations were ascribed to the term. To add to the confusion, poets and playwrights (Rochester, Dorset, Etherege) who excelled in producing witty and urbane conversations were referred to as "wits." In 'Ode of Wit' Abraham Cowley (1667) describes wit as a mysterious force whose origins are unknown and which produces endless surprises. Cowley writes:

Thousand different shapes it bears,
Comely in thousand shapes appears.
Yonder we saw it plain; and here 'tis now,
Like spirits in a place, we know not how.

But to many like Joseph Addison, John Locke and Pope 'wit' was a negative quality, associated with distortion of truth, corruption of imagination, subversion of "nature" and therefore highly undesirable in both poetry and criticism. By dismissing wit as shallow when compared to the limitless possibilities which art opens up, Pope posits an oppositional relationship between art and wit. In the *Essay on Criticism* he argues:

Nature to all things fix'd the Limits fit,
And wisely curb'd proud Man's pretending Wit;
...One Science only will one Genius fit;
So vast is Art, so narrow Human Wit

Dryden, by contrast, thought highly of “wit.” In *Heroic Poetry and Poetic License* (1677), Dryden describes wit as "propriety of thoughts and words elegantly adapted to the subject."

In the tradition of Ben Johnson, Dryden considered the comedy of wit as superior to the comedy of humour (*Mac Flecknoe*).

Postscript

This essay has tried to define neoclassical criticism by examining the historical/philosophical/aesthetic foundations of the neoclassical precepts and by problematizing some of the assumptions about both literature and critics of the period.

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