

## Eighteenth Century Criticism

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The exiles returning from France with Charles II swung England into line with continental criticism with took its bearings from the **Poetics** of Aristotle and the **ArsPoetica** of Horace. French critics from Boileau to Bossuet had built up a system of abstract rules which claimed to be authoritative with respect to each several form of literary work, a poem or play being good or bad in virtue not of its intrinsic qualities but of its fidelity to the nature of its “kind”. Example of each ‘kind’ for guidance were to hand from classical literature.

*Learn hence for ancient rules a just esteem*

*To copy nature is to copy them.*

**Pope : Essay on criticism.**

**John Dryden** was the first notable exponent of the neo-classical doctrine in England. His critical opinions are to be found in his **Prefaces**, his **Essays**, his **Prologues**. Dryden in his early play **The Rival Ladies**, decided to use rhymed verse, thus cutting himself adrift from the blank verse traditions of the Elizabethan and their followers and brought the drama close to the French tradition established by Moliere, Corneille and Racine. In defence of his rhymed verse he delivered an astonishing judgement : “Blank verse is acknowledged to be too low for a poem”. He worked out his views more fully in his **Essays of Dramatic Poesie**. It is in the form of a discussion between four writers of Dryden’s circle including Dryden himself, using the disguise of Latin names. His **Annus Mirabilis**, is the poem describing ‘the year of wonder’, 1666. Declaring that the composition of all poems is or ought to be of wit”, he goes on to define, “wit”, or “wit-writing”, as no other than the faculty of imagination in the writer. The other important critical pronouncements of Dryden

are **Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy** and the **Preface to Fables, Ancient and Modern**, containing the excellent appreciation of Chaucer.

As a critic Dryden towers above all his predecessors in England. His greatness can be well quoted in the words of T.G. Williams “His independence of Judgement, his refusal to condemn our authors to lie on the Procrustean bed of categories, his insistence on the place of imagination and his conception of poetry as existing for men’s delight, saved our literature from too complete a subjection to a code”. At the same time, he was so far a lower of order that he searched in the poets themselves for organic principles, and thus put criticism on the right path.

**Dr. Samuel Johnson** was another greatest critic, who in **The Lives of the Poets**, produced one of the greatest works of criticism in the English language. He disliked anything archaic, had little taste for any writers, Shakespeare excepted, earlier than Dryden, and was capable of such dubious estimates as that on the Spenserian stanza, which he found at once difficult and unpleasing; tiresome to the ear from its uniformity, and to the attention by its length”. His judgement on the sonnet is general and equally dogmatic : “The fabric of a sonnet, however adapted to the Italian language has never succeeded in ours”. To the core of his being he was a creature of his own time. The **Lives** are concerned for the most part with the poets of the period beginning in the middle of 17th century, and he is at his best when dealing with those wrote in a style congenial to him, example, Dryden, Addison, Pope. His comparative study of Dryden and Pope is a model of this kind of criticism. On the other hand, he allowed his pronounced Tory-Anglian principles to influence some of his literary judgements, as in the case of Milton and Gray. Johnson was the master of the biographical critical method. With him ends the criticism who supported the Ancients versus Moderns, and allowed merit to the Moderns only occasionally, by way of a concession reluctantly granted. The exponents of this school urged the need for objective standards, and condemned the kind of literary criticism who rested only on the shifting base of subjective preferences.

**Joseph Addison**, the next figure in the development of literary criticism, was not an innovator. His achievement was to give expression in a clear, attractive style to the ideas which were forming in the best minds of the day regarding the “obvious things that every man have use

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for” (Tatler, no. 18). Among these was literature, now the main theme of good conversation in the coffee-houses.

The **Spectator**, in a series of critical papers, comments on three principal topics : wit and judgement, Milton and Paradise lost, and the pleasures of the imagination. Addison’s general outlook on these matters is that of one who, while loving correctness, yet recognizes that there must be scope for a free play of the mind. He considered that all good style in art has an element of spontaneity, and that criticism is more than an account of “beauties” and “faults”, measured by external standards. He was an apostle of Good sense, applying to literature and to the arts in general, the new rational spirit popularized by John Locke.

The apogee of eighteenth century “correctness” is represented by AlexanderPope. He was a conscious artist : “I corrected because it was as pleasant to me to correct as to write” (Preface to works, 1717). His own question “Why did I write?” he answers in the **Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot**, being the Prologue to the Satires. His views on the art of poetry are contained in two poems : the **Essay on criticism** and the **Imitation of the Epistle of Horace to Augustus**.

An important part of Pope’s argument in the **Essay on criticism** is contained in the lines—

**Those rules of old discovered, not devis’d  
Are Nature still, but Nature methodis’d  
Nature like liberty, is but restrain’d  
By the same laws which first herself ordain’d.**

That is to say, the rules which the ancients followed were based on nature and poet who would follow nature.

At once the source, and end, and test of Art, can only proceed by imitating the ancients—

**Learn hence for ancient rules a just esteem;  
To copy nature is to copy them.**

Although Pope puts the matter here so positively, he is forced to admit that the rules are not all-comprehensive.

**Some beauties yet no percepts can declare  
For there’s a happiness a well as care  
Music resembles Poetry; in each  
Are nameless grace who no methods teach.**

It might be argued that Pope thus contradicts himself. The “happiness” which is produced by “nameless graces” comes near to summing up the Romantic manner.

**Books referred to :**

1. Williams T.G. —English Literature A critical survey, Pg. No.-266-270.
2. Rickelt Arthur Compton —A History of English Literature, Pg. No.-206-214.