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THE REVIVAL OF CLASSICAL ENGLISH LITERARY CRITICISM:A STUDY OF SIDNEY,DRYDEN,AND JOHNSON

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Abstract

This research investigates the transformation of English literary criticism through the works and ideals of Sir Philip Sidney, John Dryden, and Samuel Johnson. It aims to revisit the concepts of Plato, Aristotle, and Longinus with a neoclassical lens rooted in a different political, social, cultural and societal era. This research is qualitative in its nature. The primary texts used for the research are Sidney's An Apology for Poetry, Dryden's *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, and Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare* and *Lives of the Poets. However, various scholarly articles and analyses are used as a secondary text to supplement the aim of this research. The objective of this research can be divided into three parts. The first one deals with the analysis of Sidney's, Dryden's and Johnson's ideals of poet, poetry, mimesis and imagination. The second one draws on to the comparative analysis of Classical and Neoclassical English literary criticism. While, the third one focuses on creating a literary space for analyzing how all these critics together helped in shaping the English literary criticism of the modern times. This research highlights that instead of being a slavish conformist to the ideals presented by the Classics, the neoclassical critics dared to challenge their notion and presented their own works while keeping the roots of English literary criticism intact, thus, revealing the enduring and fluid nature of the subject.*

Keywords: English Literary Criticism, Poet, Poetry, Mimesis, Imagination, Sir Philip Sidney, John Dryden, Samuel Johnson

1. Introduction

The field of literary criticism has been enquiring polarities of different ages in the history of English literature. It is a profound field of showing the endeavours made by artists who have been marginalized at the fringes by the hegemonic power of rulers throughout the years. Poets as critics, as zulfiqar Ghose called them, throughout the history have been juggling with the idea of proving the independent autonomy of poetry as a field. They have been answering impositions and objections which were raised against poetry time and again, sometimes systematically like Aristotle's *Poetics* and Philip Sidney's *The Defence of Poesy* and sometimes unsystematically, indirectly posing observations in defense of poetry like Samuel Johnson's prefaces. Through their statements all are posing to debate about the basic argument of truth and its manifestation, adding on to the dynamic and continuous process of mimesis.

The English literary criticism has witnessed a remarkable evolutionary process. This process is a classic mix of tradition and innovation. The ideals of Plato, Aristotle and Longinus have been critically scrutinized by their successors Sidney, Dryden and Johnson. The successors have respectfully incorporated the nuances of their predecessors in their views, however, they have not shied away from diverting and discussing the points of contention as well in their respective works. The reformation and reanalysis of the Classical thought and ideals has met with the political, economic, cultural, and societal circumstances of the eras that followed. Poetry, mimesis, truth, and imagination have always remained a vital part of English literary criticism. Therefore, this paper attempts to analyze these concepts from classical and neoclassical lens, where the points of convergence and divergence among the critics and scholars are met with scrutiny and analysis. Therefore, creating a literary space for the modern critics to further expand upon the topic.

2. Critical Perspectives of Sidney, Dryden and Johnson

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Sir Philip Sidney, a Renaissance man, statesman, warrior and the most eminent writer brings forth with the "zodiac of his wit" (Leitch 330) the philosophical debatable issues of the "ideal truth" (Aristotle 3) and "imitation" (Aristotle 2). Through his wit he has put forward a case in order to defend poetry as an art and the poet as an artist. In his writings and observations, he has assimilated the Classical and the Italian fiction and transliterated in English language. Sidney's views have renewed the confidence in the ability of human beings to determine things for themselves, as proposed by Aristotle long ago. Being systematic in approach, his treatise *The Defence of Poesy* became a standpoint to support his renaissance impulses; posing and struggling for the replacement of theological world view, focusing more on to the humanist vision (Habib 79) and individual talents. In its essence, this treatise has shown the effective importance of poetry as a "first light giver and nurse to ignorance" (Leitch 327); it fuses historical facts and philosophical aspects together in a compact and in an intricate manner.

However, through the treatise Sidney has conveyed classical theory in his own language to the people of England. He has explained the classical aspects in the socio-political light of his time. Reacting against the scholastic teachings, Sidney has impulsively defended poetry as a field of delivering literary content through the use of certain form. *The Defence of Poesy* can be sub-divided into exhibiting Sidney's theory of imitation, his views on style and forms he adapted from his classical predecessors and his sub-divisions of poetry based on their roles they play in the society. Sidney's theory of imitation incorporates both the Platonic and Aristotelian views, where he talked about style and form, later, Longinus revisited these ideas through his views. According to him, though the subject matter of poetry has divine inspirations, but poet being a "foreseer" should conjoin the words and subject with the aid of his creative impulses into something which can simultaneously "teach and gives delight." Though the manifested idea has its agency in nature, but it must not be the result of the "infected will" (Leitch 331).

Like Aristotle, Sidney was also against the servile imitation of a subject. He was of the view that a good writer, through his skills and intuition improvise the matter and create a "speaking picture." (Leitch 331) For instance, in Astrophel and Stella, Sidney has philosophized the conventional notion of love. In this love song, by infusing mythical and natural imagery he has debated upon the philosophical, historical and religious notions like virtue, sin, beauty and truth. However, this love sequence also undermines Sidney's views on poetic diction and style, which he has advocated in the later part of the treatise as well. Through Astrophel, Sidney is shading over the criteria of an ideal poetical composition. Hence, for Sidney, a good writer has to turn over the "leaves", which is to emulate with the great writers of the past so they would offer inspirations for the "sunburnt brain" of the poet, who combines with his wit "not with any law, bestow the colors which is fittest for the eye to see" (Leitch 332).

Poet, for Sidney, being a "monarch" (Leitch 340), unlike the scientists can experiment with the forms and structures of poetry to create something that can "entice the reader" (Sidney 340). Considering Astrophel and Stella, as a "speaking picture" for the proposed concepts of Sidney on poetry, we can observe that in that love sequence, Sidney being a poet has taken Petrarchan form of sonnet to the next level. With the progression of sonnets, the idea of divine love has been exchanged with the worldly passions and desires. Interestingly, with this progression, the sonnet structure has been let loose and it became uncertain and vague like the Astrophel's mind. Moreover, here another disposition of Sidney' lies; those poets who forgets their predecessors and stick onto their narrow worldly desires and subject; out of necessity throughout their lives, kept on buzzing around the "fleshy" (sonnet 15) subjects. Whereas, the great writers, who were men of great 'moral conception' like Aristotle, Longinus and Chaucer, have refined themselves, by being conscientious in their approach and being proportioned in

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their use of diction and style. Most importantly, they revered the antiquities and invoked them as a muse, by making a "matter out of conceits" (Leitch 335), thus, have immortalized themselves by 'art, imitation and exercise' (Leitch 346).

However, Platonic and Sidney's ideas on poet, poetry and mimesis call for a thorough analysis. In the tradition of ancient Greek, poetry has always served the purpose of delivering and conveying moral messages to the public. Poets were considered to be highly philosophical and knowledgeable, therefore, their advice and teachings were highly valued. In *Apology,* Plato himself admitted to seeking help from poets when needed, he states, "For after the public men I went to the poets, those of tragedies, and those of dithyrambs, and the rest, thinking that there I should prove by actual test that I was less learned than they" (Plato, Apology of Socrates, 22 a-b, cit. in Jowett). Even though, Plato admits the high stature of poets when it comes to philosophy and knowledge, he had his reservations as well. Plato dismisses the public of his ideal state to take on the "value and moral system" of the poets, as his ideal state, "the Republic", has already established "the ultimate moral norm and value" towards which people are bound to show allegiance as it is "dominated by rational thought" (Eliopoulos 3). Moreover, Plato "banishes" poets from his "law-abiding state" for he wants education to be "scientific" rather than "poetic or artistic". Plato does not consider poetry or art for that matter as a decent "educational tool. In his *Republic* Book II, Plato talks about the significance of gods and expresses his concerns over poets representing them with "flaws and defects" thus, "misleading the people (Eliopoulos 3).

Sidney, on the other hand, holds different opinion on poets. He denotes various terms to poets in order to demonstrate the important position a poet holds. Sidney discusses that in Greek, the word poet means the one who "creates". While, in Latin it is "vates", also known as "prophet", thereby, signifying the importance of poets in different traditions and languages. Sidney is of the view that a poet either magnifies what is already present in nature, or "creates" something that does not exist in nature. Therefore, a poet is not a slave to nature or its forms, rather, a poet flourishes and thrives in his "own creative spirit" (Eliopoulos 4). Thus, awarding a higher status to poets than philosophers, a point of conflict between Plato and Sidney. For Sidney, a "mimetic poet" is divided into three categories. The first one is he who attributes "the excellence of divine existence", for instance, David in Psalms. The second is the one who "deals with philosophical issues". The third one "teaches and entertains" side by side. Thus, the precedence of a poet to a philosopher lies in his ability to teach "virtue" with practical examples. While, a philosopher utilizes "abstract" ideas in order to guide and teach the public (Eliopoulos 4). Moreover, in Sidney's opinion, poet exceeds the philosopher in another aspect as well. Poetry is not confined to limited meaning or "interpretations". Rather, it is a thread of coherent ideas weaved together in an intricate, "meaningful and harmonious" way awarding it "purpose and musicality" (Eliopoulos 5). Even though, the concepts of Plato and Sidney find harmony in discussing the significance of a poet, poetry and mimesis, but their approach to it and pitting a philosopher and a poet against each other make way for incongruity between the two.

John Dryden, a celebrated critic and a renowned poet dominated the literary age of Restoration of England and has carried forward the legacy of Sidney and the neo-classical tradition. Dryden occupies an interesting timeline and stands at a threshold of two significant literary ages namely Elizabethan Romanticism and Classicism. Between these two periods lie a transitionary phase, the neo-classicism which embodies the work and literary criticism of Dryden and his contemporaries. Dryden, while drawing inspiration from the works of his predecessors did not shy away from digressing from their ideals or presenting them through a new lens. During this period, Dryden wrote various essays, poetry and criticism that reflected his existence as well as his ideas being stationed in a transient. Balance is a great feat of Dryden,

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in his critical work, An *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, Dryden skillfully juggles between the Renaissance and Classical ideals. Dryden is considered a genius when it comes to adaptability. Holding onto the ideals of his predecessors, structuring his ideals on it, yet presenting them with his own touch that aligns with his era, is a skill that Dryden masters. Thus, Dryden is known for oscillating well between tradition and innovation and this research aims at analyzing the grey areas of coherence and the sharp demarcations of incongruity between the classics and their successors.

Tragedy, its style and purpose has always remained a debatable topic among the critics of different ages. George R. Noyce, in his article "Aristotle and Modern Tragedy" gives a befitting comparison between neo-stoics and the sentimentalists and has positioned Dryden tilted towards the sentimentalists who have paid more significance to the emotion of pity than fear. Aristotle, in his Poetics, has assumed pity and fear to be the proper emotions of a tragedy (Noyce 7). However, Dryden believes in the "widening" of emotions and passions in the Modern drama (Noyce 9). Dryden in the Essay of Dramatic Poesy has defined play as "a just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humors, and the changes of fortunes to which it is subject for the delight and instruction of mankind" (Noyce 9). Dryden, unlike Aristotle does not resort to the idea of limiting the dramatic emotions and writes, "All the passions, in their turns, are to be set in a ferment [by tragedy]" (Noyce 9). Dryden, through his criticism re-invented his predecessors and has laid emphasis on a range of emotions and passions to be aroused by literature and not only pity and fear.

Moreover, Dryden has shown immense curiosity in imagination and has tried to decipher it by presenting various explanations. John M. Aden, in his article "Dryden and the Imagination: The First Phase" has highlighted Dryden's views on imagination and how they stand in coherence or incongruity with his predecessors and contemporaries. Dryden's views reflect the theory of tripartite mind with "specialized function" (Aden 29). Dryden talks about "fancy" that registers the images to be stored in the memory and are "recalled" by "reproductive imagination" and put to the test of "judgement" (Aden 29). For Dryden, imagination is the "faculty of perception" hence, prone to errors. This concept stands in congruous with the Stoic and Platonic viewpoints that regard perceptive faculty as "deceptive" (Aden 29). Therefore, judgement or reason being the direct observer of nature is revered as the most "reliable guide to its appropriate representation" (Aden 29).

According to Aden, Dryden's "fancy" is "threefold" (Aden 30). Dryden has assigned three functions to fancy; perceiving, reproducing and shaping. The third function of shaping also hints upon Dryden's idea of mimesis which he presents in his first essay. Evidence from his essay points towards a concept of "imitation as a simple representation, if not mere copy" (Aden 30). Aden has also added some excerpts from Dryden's essay to further expound upon Dryden's idea of imitation. Dryden writes, "the poet examines that most, which he produceth with the greatest leisure, and which he knows must pass the severest test of the audience, because they are aptest to have it ever in their memory…." (Aden 30). Therefore, according to Dryden, imitation is reproductive in nature, but the artist's fancy or imagination is entitled to arrange his images dramatically. Hence, greater emphasis is laid upon the faculty of reasoning and judgement of both the artist and the spectator while focusing on the concept of imitation.

Samuel Johnson, a celebrated English writer and a critic is touted as the last defender of the neo-classical tradition. Johnson, carrying forward the legacy of his contemporaries based his arguments on the ideas of his predecessors, but was not a slavish conformist to the rules they had laid down. Johnson is esteemed as a critic with a sturdy and stout mind. Johnson has been established as a moral critic. He never judged literature on aesthetic grounds only and for him life and literature are inseparable. Johnson was a great proponent of the idea that poetry and literature in general should provide utility and pleasure. His works support the idea of

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universality and how truth and nature must work in tandem with each other in order to create universality. Although he viewed clarity and reason should form the basis of art and literature, yet was a strong advocate of art having the ability to arouse emotions in the receiver. He derived his theories and ideas related to art from the works of his predecessors, yet made sure to work on the merits and tweaked the demerits to his advantage. Through adopting a balanced approach, Johnson was able to leave behind a rich legacy in the field of criticism for his successors and disciples to explore and excavate from.

Johnson, like Dryden considered imagination as a purely mechanical faculty that has the propensity of being flawed. Donald O. Rogers, in his article "Samuel Johnson's Concept of Imagination" points out Johnson's distrust in imagination that stands apart from the views of Romantics. According to Johnson, imagination is based on "sensual data" and has limitations in the reproduction of images as well as the ordering of images in various combination (Roger 213). Johnson believes imagination lies closely in link to "escapism" and "falsehood" and is associated with "novelty" in literature, politics and religion which he does not approve of (Roger 213). However, Jean H. Hagstrum has argued that imagination has an important role to play in Johnson's poetics. Johnson's view of poetic genius propels the need for a combination of imaginative and rational faculties which not only complement but also oppose each other (Roger 214). While Johnson was skeptical towards unbridled imagination may lead towards the deformation of truth. However, if controlled properly and used within the accepted bounds, imagination combined with logic, reason and rationality possesses the power to stir and arouse human emotions, thus enhancing audience engagement.

Two important concepts that form an indispensable part of Johnson's criticism are "generalizing" and "moral" imagination (Roger 214). In order to understand how imagination can bring one closer to reality, one needs to look at Johnson's idea of poetic imitation. In his Preface to Shakespeare, Johnson talks about how "general representation" can bring pleasure as well as instruction and how a poet's business is to capture the "general properties" of nature and not to count the number of "streaks on the tulip" (Roger 215). Furthermore, Johnson also insists upon morality in literature. Revisiting the Aristotelian ideals, where direct morality is not emphasized, Johnson and Dryden both advocates the idea of utility of literature. According to Johnson, Shakespeare's "first defect" is that he focuses more on pleasing than in instructing (Roger 216). The purpose of literature is not just limited to arousing pleasure in an individual, rather, it also carries a responsibility of teaching and instructing and individual. Although, he praises Shakespeare's "imaginative adherence to general nature", yet he believes that general imaginative must serve moral ends (Roger 216). Morality occupies a central place in the works of neoclassical critics who do not box literature to the confines of pleasure, but believe it to have greater purpose and have explored various arenas in this regard.

Universality forms a crucial part of Johnson's literary criticism. According to Johnson, only universal concepts and ideas have the ability to resonate with the masses. Johnson has always remained a strong advocator of pragmatism in art and literature. Therefore, the idea of drawing art around personal views and opinions has been rejected by him. Art that is "too personal" can only satiate the "needs and interests of a small group of people" (Wu 179). Moreover, deviating away from the Aristotelian concept of 'three unities', Johnson presents his views and rationality against it. Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, states three unities; unity of time, unity of place and unity of action. In contrast, Johnson presents a rebuttal where he states that the employment of these unities limit the artist and take away the notion of relatability and universality from the audience, thereby, decreasing the rate of receptibility among the audience. According to Johnson, the unities of time and place are not essential to just drama, that though they may sometimes conduce to pleasure, there are always to be sacrificed to the nobler beauties of variety and instruction" (Martin 368-369).

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3. Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion on different critical views of the critics and writers under consideration, it can be deduced that poetry portrays the imaginative impulses, universal passions and truth for the betterment of the readers. However, the irrational nature of emotions and subjectivity can corrupt the universal moral excellence. The renaissance and neo classical writers have reestablished the classical principals, truths, notions and forged them to pave the way for more literary writings full of plentitude and based on intuitive skill of imagination, looking forward to self-disposition instead of adhering to scholastic teachings which has drawn them into the pit of passiveness as reflected by the Classics. Through the short account of renaissance and neo-classical insights, it can be observed that these ages are 'amidst the bewilderment', self-conscious re-interpretation of classical values which have focused on the man's creative endeavor (Atkins). The transformation of the literary criticism was not an intellectual feat, rather it was the cultural need of the hour. the neoclassical critics Sidney, Dryden and Johnson have worked tirelessly to fill the gaps between pas and the present, while adhering to the classical nuances where necessary. Thus, their work highlights the fluid and durable nature of the English literary criticism and has opened avenues for the modern critics to freely take up the subject and work on its refinement.

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