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"17th Century Criticism"
"It is not good to stay too long in the theatre!" According to Rickett, this remark of Bacon may serve us a hint for his critical work. His 'Essays' have no importance so far as criticism is concerned. It is in his 'Advancement of Learning' that we get his comments on some of the writers. He criticizes the Renaissance writers for their love of words and says that they valued words more than the matter. The Renaissance writers were ~~concerned~~ hunting "more after words than matter, more after the choiceness of phrase, and the roundness and clear composition of the sentence and the sweet falling of the clauses than after the weight of the matter, worth of subjects, soundness of argument, life of invention, or depth of judgement!" According to him Science is the be-all of all things. To him poetry is a pleasant solace it is a comforting drug. He is

interested in form. He has ~~said~~ said this to justify his own style. His dry imagination reminds us of Newton who had called poetry an "ingenious nonsense".

Two great critics of the period are Ben Jonson and John Dryden. The position of Dryden in the history of English literature is peculiar. Historically he is a man of the seventeenth century but as a writer he has always been considered in the eighteenth century. This is simply because the trend that runs through the eighteenth century had emanated from him. Hence, with regard to dates and his span of life, he belongs to the seventeenth century but as a literary man he belongs to the 'classical period'. His age is better known as the 'Age of Dryden'. Hence, we are left with Ben Jonson only in the field. Ben Jonson's greatness as a dramatist may be debatable

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But so far as criticism is concerned, his greatness is beyond any dispute. He is the first great Renaissance critic with a classical outlook. He has written no regular critical treatise, but we find critical comments in almost everything that he wrote such as in 'The Poetaster', in the prefaces and the dedication to his plays, in his 'Conversations with Drummond' and in 'Discoveries'. A well-read man in classics he tried to mould literature along the same line. Unlike Sidney there is no difference between his precepts and practice. So far as criticism is concerned his masters are Aristotle and Horace and the Latin writers of the 'Silver Age'. Of the writers of the 'Silver Age', his favourite was Quintilian whose observations on art and rhetoric he has applied in poetry and drama. His most valuable utterances have been contained in

The 'Discoveries' which was published four years after his death in 1641. It is a collection of notes which Jonson made from time to time. It is not a classified criticism. The notes contained in the book deal indiscriminately with the topics that interested Jonson - morality, politics and literature. Jonson follows the Greeks so far as the formulation of principles, order, restraints and harmony are concerned. He was teaching order and restraints in an age of licence and riotous living. In a way he warns the writers of the age against going to the extremes of romantic enthusiasm. He preached proportion and the need to take the middle path. His master is Aristotle. Jonson defines epic, drama, meaning of plot, unity of action and its dimensions. Like Dante, he believed poetry to be an "elaborate and painful toil". It follows from this that he does not believe in

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the spontaneity of thought and utterances but takes poetry to be a conscious art, a product of deliberate effort and constant practice. According to him, a poet must be a well-read man. He opined that poets should be fettered in a set of laws and that the faculty of a poet should be judged by poets alone, "to judge of poets is ~~an~~ only the faculty of poets". He himself was a poet and his experience had taught him that adherence to rules and regulations can not produce good and great works. Thus, we see that Jonson the poet over-rides Jonson the critic. As a classical critic he wants rules and regulations but as a poet he is not in favour of any restraint. Whatever be the contradictions, he stands for order, uniformity and classicism in literature. Jonson is the precursor of Dryden.

The end.

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