

"18th Century Criticism"

John Dryden is called the "Father of English Criticism" as he was the first critic to have taken his subject very seriously and gave to the others, some literary principles. He was gifted with the common sense of justice. Like Dante and Goethe he, among the critics of England, is regarded as the greatest man of letters of his time in this country. Apart from possessing the originality of genius as a critic, Dryden was a poet, a dramatist and a political pamphleteer also. So far as critical treatise is concerned, Dryden wrote only one book that is "An Essay of Dramatic Poesy". Whatever he had to say or write he wrote in the prefaces of his own poetical works or to those of others: Parsons from whom he learnt the manners of critical writing, were Montaigne and Corneille. His important critical writings in

the form of prefaces are "Epistle Dedicatory of the Rival Ladies", "Dedication to Annus mirabilis", "The Epilogue", "The Defence of the Epilogue", "A Defence of an Essay of Dramatic Poesy", "The Apology for Heroic Poetry", "The Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy" and "Preface to the Fables". In "The Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy" he puts forward the Aristotelian theory of tragedy and at the same time examines the achievements of Shakespeare and Fletcher. In the "Preface to the Fables" he appreciates Chaucer.

As it has been ~~the~~ said, Dryden learnt the critical manner from Montaigne and Corneille because it suited his temperament in many ways - (i) it provided him to choose various subjects (ii) it provided him to return to the same subject on other occasions (iii) it gave him scope and liberty to speak on different

Subjects at a time and (iv) it offered an opportunity to him to explain his own practice arising out of the attacks on his works. The criticism of Dryden, though scattered, gives a clear cut idea of what he thought about the functions of poetry and business of criticism. His criticism is a combination of restatement of the precepts of Aristotle and a deviation from him under the influence of Longinus and Evremond. According to George Watson, Dryden's criticism is sometimes marred by "cultural nationalism" but it in no way lowers the value of his criticism. It is a remarkable fact that in spite of his respect for the classical tenets he boldly opined that they can not be a binding in their totality on all nations and their ages. Dr. Johnson called him the 'father of criticism' because according to him he was the man "who first taught us to determine upon

Principles the merit of composition. Dryden brought in a new era of criticism and taught us how to be a great critic.

Joseph Addison's critical papers appeared in the "Spectator". Addison wrote the papers with different end in view. His concern was not for the writer but for the reader - "What books he should like, and how he should like them" in spite of the fact that his concern was for the reader he said nothing which had no bearing on the writer. The purpose itself put a limitation on his range - he wrote only that much and on those topics which he wanted the readers to know, that is true and false wit, fine taste, the imaginative appeal of literature, tragedy and Milton. This brings us to the second point with regard to his criticism - his criticisms are occasional and without planning. The criticisms of Addison show (i) his adherence to neoclassical tendency in relation to

his comments on tragedy and 'Paradise Lost' and (ii) aesthetic tendency when he deals with imagination and critical art. It is said that his criticisms have no depth. This is true because his purpose was to spread critical ideas among those who had no idea of it and, hence, he taught them from the very beginning. He had no plan of propounding any critical theory in the short essays. So what he did was to bring to the readers the existing theories which he considered to be valuable and useful for them so far as their understanding of the literary work was concerned.

Alexander Pope, as a critic, is best known for his "Essays in Criticism" and for none of other critical writings. His works on criticism include "Preface to the Works of Shakespeare", "Art of Sinking", "Imitation of the Epistle of Horace to Augustus" and "Preface to the Translation

of Glanville" modelled on Horace's *ARS Poetica*, Vida's *De Arte Poetica* and Baileau's *L'Arte Poetique*, Pope's *Essays in Criticism*, contains essays which speak of his literary taste and critical theory. It has three divisions. The first part deals with his observation on the art of criticism, the second part points out the causes of wrong criticism and the last part lays down rules for the critic. To Pope criticism is the art of judging a thing or a work in its right perspective. It follows from this that the critic is a born judge. A critic is a gifted man with proper training is well-versed in ancient rules. The application of rules can be done properly by men who have been authors themselves.

Dr. Johnson wrote no critical treatise nor is the quantity of his critical work great but in spite of all this he exerted great influence on his age than any

other critic done so in the past. So far as his critical work is concerned, it consists of about a dozen papers in the 'Rambler', remarks on poetry in 'Rasselas', 'preface to the Plays of Shakspeare', and 'Lives of the Poets'. Now the point to decide is whether Dr. Johnson was a neo-classical critic like Pope, Addison and Dryden or was a deliverer from the bondage of rules. According to Dr. Birdwist Prasad the only answer that we can give to this question is that if neo-classical criticism means prescriptive and legislative criticism, Dr. Johnson was out and out a neo-classical critic but if it means blind reverence to authority, ancient or modern, he was for liberty. Dr. Johnson's criticism is a historical criticism. He is of the opinion that if we have to judge a writer we must have a sound knowledge of the times in which he lived. We must also take into consider-

ration the opportunities and the constraints under which he worked. In the 'Preface to Shakespeare' he says, "Everyman's performance, to be rightly estimated, must be compared with the state of the age in which he lived and with his particular opportunities." He did not only opine, he practised it also. Commenting on the scenes of violence in Shakespeare he says that Shakespeare was under compulsion, he had to cater to the primitive taste of the uncultured audience. The same yardstick he applied to the works of Addison, Pope and Dryden. According to George Watson Johnson is "an unambiguously historical critic, and the true father of historical criticism in English!"

Dr. Johnson is the last critic of the neo-classical school. He has a code for the writer and a code for the critic. The words of Horace form the basis of his critical creed. The poet must know



Page - (09)

"What becomes them well and  
what becomes them ill, what  
is the path of excellence and  
what is the path of error."

The end.

Munir Bhushan Girkar  
Deptt. of English  
S.G. College, Jalgaon