

Lecture Series on Contemporary Theories: Introduction Lecture 4

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John Dryden (1631-1700)

John Dryden is rightly considered to be “the father of English Criticism”. He was the first to teach the English people to determine the merit of composition upon principles. With Dryden, a new era of criticism began. Before, Dryden, there were only occasional utterances on the critical art. (e.g. Ben Jonson and Philip Sidney) Though Dryden’s criticism was of scattered nature; he paid attention to almost all literary forms and expressed his views on them.

John Dryden (1631-1700)

Except *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, Dryden wrote no formal treatise on criticism. His critical views are found mostly in the prefaces to his poetical works or to those of others.

Dryden upholds Aristotle's definition of poetry as a process of imitation. It imitates facts- past or present, popular beliefs, superstitions and things in their ideal form. Dryden defends Shakespeare's use of the supernatural founded on popular beliefs. For, it is still an imitation though of other men's fancies. According to him, poetry and painting are not only true imitations of nature but of the best nature (i.e.) a much greater criticism.

John Dryden (1631-1700)

The final end of poetry, according to Dryden is delight and transport rather than instruction. To realize it, it does not merely imitate life, but offers its own of it – „a beautiful resemblance of the whole“.

The poet is neither a teacher nor a bare imitator – a photographer – but a creator. He is one who, with life or nature as his raw material, produces a new thing altogether, resembling the original in its basis but different from it in the super structure – a work of art rather than a copy.

Alexander Pope (1688-1744)

An Essay on Criticism was first published anonymously on 15 May 1711. Pope began writing the poem early in his career and took about three years to finish it.

At the time the poem was published, its heroic couplet style was quite a new poetic form and Pope's work an ambitious attempt to identify and refine his own positions as a poet and critic. It was said to be a response to an ongoing debate on the question of whether poetry should be natural, or written according to predetermined artificial rules inherited from the classical past.

Alexander Pope (1688-1744)

The “essay” begins with a discussion of the standard rules that govern poetry, by which a critic passes judgement. Pope comments on the classical authors who dealt with such standards and the authority he believed should be accredited to them. He discusses the laws to which a critic should adhere while analysing poetry, pointing out the important function critics perform in aiding poets with their works, as opposed to simply attacking them. The final section of *An Essay on Criticism* discusses the moral qualities and virtues inherent in an ideal critic, who Pope claims is also the ideal man.

(Some of the content has been taken from open sources on Internet)