Chapter 1

The Versatile Medium

Poetry is what gets lost in the translation
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An approach to *Religio Laici* from a poetic viewpoint requires first of all proof of its "poeticness," because this poem, paradoxically, does not exactly flaunt its poetics. Verse line layout, rhythm and rhyme indicate that it is a poem, but for Matthew Arnold, for example, this is not enough. He ranks Dryden among the classics "not of our poetry, but of our prose."[7] This view is counterbalanced by T.S. Eliot's remark that Dryden is "one of the tests of a catholic appreciation of poetry."[8] There are, of course, many different kinds of poetry, and not all these kinds necessarily conform to the concept of poetry considered valid today. It is only through an acquaintance with seventeenth century views on poetry, prose, their mutual relationships and their role in contemporary society that the twentieth century reader learns to appreciate Dryden's poetry.

In the poem, Dryden characterizes *Religio Laici* as "unpolish'd, rugged Verse," and declares he chose this style because it is "fittest for Discourse, and nearest Prose" (ll.453-54). And indeed,

[7]Matthew Arnold, "The Study of Poetry," Essays in Criticism: Second Series, ed. S.R. Littlewood (London: Macmillan, 1938) 25.

[8]T.S. Eliot, "John Dryden," Selected Essays (London: Faber & Faber, 1932) 305.

the poem's language is clear, concise, straightforward and unadorned: a language sooner associated with speech or prose than with verse. Consider for example lines 111-14 in a prose lay-out: "For granting we have Sin'd, and that th'offence of *Man*, is made against *Omnipotence*, some Price, that bears *proportion*, must be paid; and *Infinite* with *Infinite* be weigh'd." The increasing tendency in seventeenth century literature towards greater clarity, simplicity, regularity and restraint can be explained in part by pointing at the contemporary rise of rationalist philosophies and the new experimental sciences. But Thomas Sprat's famous recipe for a "close, naked, natural" way of speaking does not so much inaugurate a new kind of language as it articulates a tendency in language and in thought that had been going on for decades.[9] Even during Elizabeth's reign the certainties associated with the Elizabethan world order (i.e. immutable truths, fixed hierarchies, unchallenged authority) no longer stand up to doubt. Man ceases to take truth for granted and argues his way to it, with reason as the only reliable instrument. The language used by Richard Hooker in *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1593) is an early example of the new medium applied not to a scientific topic but to religion.[10] The simultaneous rise of fanatic religious sects with doctrines based on emotion rather than reason

[9] Sprat published his "recipe" in the History of the Royal Society (1667). See George Williamson, "The Restauration Revolt against Enthusiasm," Seventeenth Century Contexts (London: Faber & Faber, 1963) 230.

[10] A sample of Richard Hooker's text is reprinted in M.H. Abrams et al., eds., The Norton Anthology of English Literature, 5th ed., 2 vols. (New York: Norton, 1986) 1:1034-43.

provides a counterdevelopment. A dichotomy comes into existence in which general truth, attained through the exercise of reason, opposes private truth achieved through emotion and *enthusiasm*. After the Civil War, which hastens the definitive collapse of the Elizabethan world view, this dichotomy is more prominent than before. Anglicans associate Nonconformism with revolution, regicide, subversion and excessive zeal.[11] *Religio Laici* may focus on religion, but its Preface is quite unambiguous as to where Dryden stands politically. The poem, too, attacks the dissenters, but in the Preface the poem's religious theme is expanded with its political consequences: "the Fanaticks," says Dryden, "have detorted those Texts of Scripture, which are not necessary to Salvation, to the damnable uses of Sedition, disturbance and destruction of the Civil Government," and the horrors of the past may come again in the future, "if the Conventiclers be permitted still to scatter" (102:31-35, 103:30-31). Dryden's open hostility towards the dissenters fits in with the typical Anglican attitude that regards all things extravagant and irregular with suspicion because they are considered dangerous to Church and Nation. In society, this means the issue of restrictive acts to curb and control the potential power of nonconformists, including papists, as Dryden confirms in his Preface (103:1-5).

Disciplinary measures taken in political and religious matters find their parallel in literature. The "reason vs. emotion" dichotomy for instance is applied to poetry. Metaphysical poetry with its obscurity, boldness and extravagance is thought of as "too wild"

[11] See Abrams, Norton 1:1766; Williamson, Restoration 223.

(Abrams, Norton 1:1775). The extravagance and irregularity of the imagination, product of the passions, has to be curbed by rational judgement. Only the appropriate is felt to be effective.[12] Ancient prescriptions (Aristotle, Horace) and models (Homer, Virgil, Ovid) are translated into sets of rules that lay down the genres and their appropriate subjects, language, style, tone and figures. This emphasis on the appropriate is reflected in *Religio Laici*'s epigraph: "The subject refuses to be ornamented, it is content to be explained" (Swedenberg 350). In the Preface Dryden elaborates this statement as follows:

> The Expressions of a Poem, design'd purely for Instruction, ought to be Plain and Natural, and yet Majestick: for here the Poet is presum'd to be a kind of Law-giver, and those three qualities which I have nam'd are proper to the Legislative style. The Florid, Elevated and Figurative way is for the Passions; for Love and Hatred, Fear and Anger, are begotten in the Soul by shewing their Objects out of their true proportion; either greater than the Life, or less; but Instruction is to be given by shewing them what they naturally are. A Man is to be cheated into Passion, but to be reason'd into Truth (109:10-19).

If there is a seventeenth century distinction between prose and poetry, it is not the opposition prose = reason = truth versus poetry = emotion = "untruth." For Dryden, as the above quotation shows, not

[12]William K. Wimsatt Jr. and Cleanth Brooks, Literary Criticism: A Short History, 2 vols. (Chicago: U of Chicago P-Midway Rpt, 1983) 1:230.

all poetry is a lie. With *Religio Laici*, he clearly intends to reason his audience into truth, a purpose for which a poetic manner is apparently available.

From the point of view of manner, then, *Religio Laici* comes closer to our twentieth century view of prose than that of poetry. It is prose, not poetry, that uses ratiocinative methods and avoids poetic ornamentation when it aims at the truth. In the words of R.L. Sharp: "Prose, as distinguished from poetry, is primarily the language of statement. Poetry, however, we normally expect to be something else."[1] But, as Hamilton points out, "our" expectations regarding the nature of poetry "may imply distinctions between poetry and prose which the seventeenth century did not hold" (Harmonies 8). Seventeenth century poetry may well be a medium more versatile than a twentieth century reader supposes when he judges the restrictions imposed on poetry then with criteria valid today. For Dryden, the verse form of *Religio Laici* does not need justification; in his Preface he justifies the manner of the poem, relating it to the seriousness of its subject and its instructive aim, but he apparently does not feel the need to justify the poetic form itself. He deliberately discards a too poetic style as it does not suit his purpose, but he obviously does not relinquish all poetic possibilities. In other words, there is more to Dryden's "poetry of statement" than the statement alone.[2]

[1] Quoted in Kenneth Gardiner Hamilton, The Two Harmonies: Poetry and Prose in the Seventeenth Century (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1963) 8.

[2] *Poetry of Statement* is Van Doren's term, discussed in Hamilton, Harmonies and in Maynard Mack, "'Wit and Poetry and Pope': Some Observations on his Imagery," Eighteenth Century English Literature: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. James L. Clifford (Oxford: OUP, 1969) 21-41.

According to Wimsatt Jr., the plain style of Royal Society prose is "plain throughout," whereas Dryden's plain style is "superficially plain," because Dryden's poetic practice "escaped the rigour of the scientific mood (...); (he) used the guise of an apparently level and rationalized, even prosaic discourse, to accomplish poetic expression of a certain character" (233, 244). Mack describes this "certain character" as "submerged": poetry of statement submerges "the multiplicities of poetic language just beneath the singleness of prose" (39). What poetry does to the statement can be illustrated by comparing *Religio Laici* with its Preface. A tentative comparison, because although in both texts the subject matter is similar, the treatment it gets definitely is not. After all, the aims of the prose text and the poetry are radically different. The Preface wants to defend the poem and expand its religious message to a broader political context, whereas the poem aims at influencing public opinion on matters of faith. Therefore, the Preface is no mere prose paraphrase of the poem, although there are parallels worth mentioning. Compare, for instance, these passages:

> So that we have not lifted up ourselves to God, by the weak pinions of our Reason, but he has been pleased to descend to us (Preface 100:20-22).
>
> See God descending in thy Humane Frame (1.107).

The rational argument of the prose passage is turned into drama in the poem. This is reinforced by the use of the imperative "see", the solemn diction ("thy"), and above all, by the fact that the poem *acts*

out what the Preface describes. The dramatic force of the verse paragraph from which this quotation has been lifted (ll.99-110) is considerable, yet the argument that is put forward (i.e. God, not man, is the ultimate authority) is as rational, clear and concise as it is in the Preface. The directness of the poetry variant, however, makes the argument more tangible, more alive, than the prose passage. Here is another close textual parallel:

> And indeed 'tis very improbable, that we, who by the strength of our faculties cannot enter into the knowledg of any *beeing*, not so much as of our *own*, should be able to find out by them, that Supream Nature, which we cannot otherwise define, than by saying that it is Infinite; as if Infinite were definable, or Infinity a Subject for our narrow understanding (Preface 100:28-33).
>
> How can the *less* the *Greater* comprehend?
> Or *finite Reason* reach *Infinity*? (ll.39-40)

The two verse lines capture the argument of the prose passage in two antithetical rhetorical questions that, for all their simplicity and conciseness, accomplish the complex feat of showing the limitations of reason by the exercise of reason. The maxim-like statement in line 40 gains force from sound similarity (finite-Infinity), while both lines exploit the short pause of the mid-line caesura to emphasize the contrast between the oppositions less-Greater and finite-Infinity.[15] As far as textual content goes, the prose quotation is a

[15]The typography in Swedenberg emphasizes this contrast in the lower and upper case oppositions l - G and f - I.

plausible paraphrase of the two verse lines. It was of course never intended as a paraphrase, so it is unfair to compare its carefully structured, melodious prose with the powerful simplicity of the poetic statements. The prose sentence, however good its prose, never captures or reflects the effects of rhythm and rhyme that contribute to the effectiveness of the poetic statement. The difference in effect is enormous. Obviously, with Dryden's purpose of swaying public opinion in mind, it stands to reason that it is the maximum effect that he is after. Opting for the verse essay means that in a single medium he has not only the qualities of prose at his disposal, but also the resources of poetry. Poetry of statement may seem a contradiction in terms but in fact it is a fusion of oppositions which offers the poet "the best of both worlds."[16] The right balance between the two constituents of the fusion is achieved through discipline. The focus of attention is always on the statement, while poetic devices influence it. They control it without attracting (undue) attention to themselves. In other words, if the statement is controlled by poetic devices, these devices are themselves used in a controlled way. They are allowed to fulfill their purpose if they do not blur the precision and clarity of the statement (Hamilton, Dryden 8). The famous exordium (ll. 1-11) demonstrates how a very poetic passage can be first and foremost a serious statement. A typical example of a strong opening, this passage is the most strikingly poetic of the poem, but there is plenty of poetry to be found in the

[16]Kenneth Gardiner Hamilton, John Dryden and the Poetry of Statement (St. Lucia: U of Queensland P, 1967) 9.

argument that follows. For example in the implications of imagery and diction in "The tender Page with horney Fists was gaul'd" (1.404), where the contrast "tender" - "horney" and connotations of brutish cruelty underline the speaker's disapproval of the too free interpretation of the Bible by the ignorant and the uneducated. "Then for the *Style*; *Majestick* and *Divine*; / It speaks no less than God in every line" (ll.152-53). In this couplet, the first verse line defines the style of the Bible, followed by a line effectively capturing that style in a remarkably simple and concise phrase. Earlier argumentation has established God as the sole authority and identified the Bible as His message to mankind (ll. 66-67 and 125). This view is now consolidated, not by further arguments but through a stylistic imitation that focusses on the supernatural origin of the Bible. The use of an impersonal subject, aptly expressing the non-human status of the Maker of the Bible, increases the distance between God and the awe-struck speaker. This construction is infinitely more appropriate than its direct variant, "God speaks in every line." Too direct and therefore too human, this paraphrase fails to convey God's majesty. Besides, since it lacks the emphatic "no less than" formula, it does not express God's superiority over man. By contrast, Dryden's equally simple verse line successfully imitates the style it discusses. Without drawing attention to themselves, his subdued poetic devices enhance the statement.

The presence of a constant, significant poetic (under)current in the text justifies, or rather demands, a poetic approach to *Religio Laici*. It is therefore rather disconcerting to note that for Dryden's

contemporary audience the poetics of his argument are apparently of little import. As Hamilton puts it, audience reactions (to, for instance, *Absalom and Achitophel* or *The Medall*, works published in the same timespan) demonstrate little concern "for the goodness or badness of the poem as poetry, only for the rightness or wrongness of the cause" (Dryden 160). This, however, never deterred Dryden from making his statements poetic. In fact his argument derives a lot of its power from the poetry of his statements. Poetry, for Dryden, is an excellent medium for persuasion, because it has a didactic purpose that goes beyond the possibilities of prose. Plain prose may instruct, but poetry instructs the better because it also, and primarily, delights. The view of poetry as a medium with a twofold aim is an old one, formulated in Horace's *Ars Poetica*.[17] Dryden's combination of instructive statement and delightful poetry is a fruitful compromise for the sake of persuasion. It testifies to Dryden's essentially rhetorical attitude to poetry.

[17]Horace, Ars Poetica, or, Epistle to the Pisones, Satires, Epistles and Ars Poetica, tr. H.Rushton Fairclough (London: Heinemann, 1961) 479:1.333. Discussed in Wimsatt Jr. 92.