

CHATTERTON LECTURE ON POETRY

Dryden's Past

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WELL then; the promis'd hour is come at last;
The present Age of Wit obscures the past:
Strong were our Syres; and as they Fought they Writ,
Conqu'ring with force of Arms, and dint of Wit;
Theirs was the Gyant Race, before the Flood;
And thus, when *Charles* Return'd, our Empire stood.
Like *Janus* he the stubborn Soil manur'd,
With Rules of Husbandry the rankness cur'd:
Tam'd us to manners, when the Stage was rude;
And boistrous *English* Wit, with Art indu'd.
Our Age was cultivated thus at length;
But what we gain'd in skill we lost in strength.
Our Builders were, with want of Genius, curst;
The second Temple was not like the first:
Till You, the best *Vitruvius*, come at length;
Our Beauties equal; but excel our strength.¹

DRYDEN WAS SIXTY-THREE in 1694 when these opening lines of his 'To my Dear Friend Mr. Congreve, On His COMEDY, call'd The Double-Dealer' were published. Congreve was twenty-four. They had been full years, the years between 1631 when Dryden was born and Congreve's first appearance on the world's stage in 1670. The time between them speaks in the 'at last' and 'at length' of this passage, the passage of those years. Those years mould tone in the poem's first words, 'Well

Read at the Academy 12 March 1992. © The British Academy 1994.

¹ I quote Dryden's poems from the edition of James Kinsley (Oxford, 1958), 4 vols. References are given to volume and page number followed, after a semi-colon, by line-numbering. Thus, for this case: II, 852; 1–16. Later references to this edition are given in the body of the text immediately after a quotation.

then'. It starts out airily, as with a light, amicable concession ('Well then, if that's how you feel about it'), but comes when we hark back to the words to sound more impressive, more weighed upon; the 'well' asks whether all in the preceding silence from which the voice arises was well done, the 'then' grows more remote, a long ago where Dryden's writing first began, not only a prompt response to what has just now happened or been said. The poem responds immediately to the happening of a form of speech — Congreve's *The Double-Dealer* — but reaches beyond that occasion to the time such an achievement took coming. That time creates the placid depth of pause between the stilled, unscannable words 'Well then' and what follows when a recognisably iambic pulse sets in and on — 'the promis'd hour is come at last'. The line goes reflectively into a time which is not only metrical and comes out with itself, a timely arch.

Dryden did not only survive the thirty-nine-year interim between himself and his dear, younger friend; he partly made it. At the start of his biography of the poet, Sir Walter Scott writes: 'The Life of Dryden may be said to comprehend a history of the literature of England, and its changes, during nearly half a century.'² The tribute is so grandly ample as to be ambiguous. There are slight problems with 'Life' and with the chronology because Dryden lived for more than 'half a century', and his writing life (as Scott knew) extended from at least 1649 to the *Fables* of 1700. Let us not haggle over dates. A nicer and more venerable question hinges on the referent of 'its': are the relevant changes those of English literature alone or of England itself along with its literature? Scott's plain, deep praise has the virtue of prompting thought about what a writer does when he 'comprehend[s] a history'. He may comprehend a history by the fact of spanning it, or his span may also convey a form of understanding; he may grasp what he compasses. Dryden, actually, did both, and does both in his friendly poem to Congreve. Two lines in the passage begin to suggest how he managed this, and what his managing involved: 'Strong were our Syres; and as they Fought they Writ' and 'But what we gain'd in skill we lost in strength'. Both lines mention strength, a mention each line gives high relief, as the first word of 'Strong were our Syres' and as the last word of 'we lost in strength'. Dryden was alert to something else the lines have in common: they both consist entirely of monosyllables.

² *The Life of John Dryden* (1808). I quote from Lockhart's 1834 edition of the text (repr., Lincoln, Nebraska, 1963), p. 1.

These two features went together in Dryden's ear; in his verse, strength, various as it is and with many values, summons monosyllabic words to itself, and the monosyllable evokes strength. Weird though such a deliberated conjunction of a linguistic contingency with a massive, rangey concept like 'strength' may seem to post-Saussureans, the conjunction is not an idiosyncrasy of Dryden's; a century of English linguists and prosodists thought as he did. We might call this attitude to monosyllables a collective superstition; we might also recognise that some tenets of modern linguistics, such as that of the arbitrary relation of signifier to signified, have their superstitious acceptations, though these are the fetich of a different tribe.

Monosyllables were felt to be quintessentially English because they were thought Saxon as contrasted with the mimsy, invasive polysyllables of the Romance languages: 'our naturall & primitive language of the *Saxon English* beares not any wordes (at least very few) of moe sillables then one (for whatsoever we see exceede commeth to us by the alterations of our language growen upon many conquestes and otherwise).'³ The short word concentrates the essence of this nation: heart of oak, roast beef, strong lines, plain speech. George Gascoigne recommends adding monosyllables to compositions as enrichments of ethnic flavour, stock-cubes: 'the most auncient English wordes are of one sillable, so that the more monasyllables that you use the truer Englishman you shall seeme . . .'.⁴ Such Tudor savouring of the language continues on and off into the nineteenth century, when it is given new verve by the philological work of that time and its rediscovered placing of 'Anglo-Saxon attitudes'. When Hopkins praised Dryden — 'What is there in Dryden? Much, but above all this: he is the most masculine of our poets; his style and his rhythms lay the strongest stress of all our literature on the naked thew and sinew of the English language' — he continued to speak in terms such as those in which Rymer explained why English was superior to French for some literary purposes because 'The *French* wants sinews for great and heroick Subjects.'⁵ A dilute

³ George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* . . . (1589), in G. Gregory Smith (ed.), *Elizabethan Critical Essays* (Oxford, 1904; repr., 1937) 2 vols., here vol. II, pp. 71–72.

⁴ George Gascoigne, *Certayne Notes of Instruction concerning the Making of Verse or Ryme in English* . . . (1575), in Gregory Smith, op. cit., vol. I, p. 51.

⁵ Hopkins' letter to Bridges, 6 November 1887, in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Selected Letters*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford, 1990), p. 265; Rymer, 'The Preface of the Translator' to Rapin's *Reflections* . . . (1674), in J. E. Spingarn (ed.), *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford, 1908), 2 vols., here vol. II, p. 167.

version goes on in the writing of some current poets, notably our Poet Laureate whose appetite for an aroma of linguistic Saxonry remains unabated by the years.

Verse made out of monosyllabic tokens of nationhood might be staunch but would never be searching; it could deliver a parade of cultural identity but not enquire within itself how a communal order had been achieved, nor how its own verbal orderliness stood in relation to the actual nation. But affection for these clipped vocables did not mean they were regarded as the necessary badges of a true 'England supporter', of a raucously unquestioning national self-possession. The essential quality of the monosyllable was not its unalloyed Englishness but rather its being a relic of an early, occluded, but still persistent state, the state of not having been conquered: 'The ground of our owne [language] apperteyneth to the old Saxon, little differing from the present low Dutch, because they more then any of their neighbours have hitherto preserved that speech from any greate forrayne mixture. Here amongst, the Brittons haue left diuers of their wordes entersowed, as it weere thereby making a continuall clayme to their Auncient possession.'⁶ The 'Brittons' and their language antedate 'our naturall & primitive language of the *Saxon English*'; they are the chthonic Celts who were in these islands before even the inroads of Rome. The 'continuall clayme' heard in the monosyllable is not primarily ethnopolitical but metapsychological. The short word stands as and for unre-fined individuality, a stark voice much overlaid by successive conquests, each brutal in itself and yet a stage in advancing civility. And so the monosyllable sounds in the language as Freud imagined pre-civilised strata of psychic life surviving in the citizen, for 'in mental life nothing which has once been formed can perish'.⁷ Indeed, for the linguists and prosodists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the monosyllable speaks of *das Unbehagen in der Kultur*. Thus it must be carefully deployed by a poet; it is both a specially genuine word and also unregenerate, both an opportunity for creation and an obstacle to decent fashioning. It must be, in Richard Carew's expressively hybrid word, 'entersowed' in his lines along with more civilised sounds.

⁶ Richard Carew, *Epistle on the Excellency of the English Tongue* (?1595–6), in Gregory Smith, op. cit., vol. II, p. 289.

⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (1930), trans. as *Civilization and its Discontents* by Joan Riviere and James Strachey (1963), p. 6. Compare Scott on Dryden's style: 'Although Dryden's style has nothing obsolete, we can occasionally trace a reluctance to abandon an old word or idiom . . .', *Life*, p. 445.

The short word withstands polysyllables as our ancestors withstood invasion, and is to that extent admirable, but the Roman and French conquests of these islands brought us the polite arts, and thus the short word is a mark of our resistance to civility. Hearts of oak are backwooden. For example, the prevalence of monosyllables in English was thought to hinder English poetry from classical achievements. Sometimes, as in the case of Campion's hopeless plans for a pseudo-quantitative English prosody, the discontent with the failure of this language to fill the hexameters of Graeco-Roman prosody seems a merely pedantic repining: 'both the concourse of our monasillables make our verses unapt to slide, and also, if we examine our polysyllables, we shall finde few of them, by reason of their heavinesse, willing to serve in place of a *Dactile*.'⁸ King James VI of Scotland gave, some time before Campion, a more practically convincing reason to be worried about the monosyllable as a unit of verse:

Ye aucht likewise to be war with oft composing your haill lynis of monosyllabis onely (albeit our language have sa many as we can nocht weill eschewe it), because the maist part of thame are indifferent, and may be in short or lang place, as we like.⁹

Though muffled in the language of classical prosody ('indifferent . . . short or lang place'), this is sharp-eared about English verse. King James's point is that wholly monosyllabic lines can turn out rhythmically indeterminate in English, because our sense of rhythm in verse relies so heavily on the fixed accentuation of our polysyllables that without them we find ourselves at a loss. How, for example, should we scan 'But what we gain'd in skill we lost in strength'? I think it has ten even stresses, and is one of the longest and strongest lines in English poetry, for, as Campion said, 'our English monasillables enforce many breathings which no doubt greatly lengthen a verse . . .',¹⁰ an enforced breathing such as can be heard in the celebrated line 'And in this harsh world draw thy breath in paine'.¹¹ Somebody who said that Dryden's line was an iambic pentameter would seem to me to have a tin ear, or something worse than that, for tin has its uses, but disagreement is possible. Disagreement would vanish if we wrote in some disyllables:

⁸ Thomas Campion, *Observations in the Art of English Poesie* (1602), in Gregory Smith, op. cit., vol. II, p. 333.

⁹ *Ane schort Treatise, conteining some reulis and cautelis to be observit and eschewit in Scottis Poesie . . .* (1584), in Gregory Smith, op. cit., vol. I, p. 215.

¹⁰ Campion, loc. cit., vol. II, p. 335.

¹¹ *Hamlet*, V. ii. 353 (Folio text).

'But, gaining skill, we lost our fathers' strength', for instance, supplies at least the common aural ground of the trochaic 'gaining' and 'fathers'. Just the possibility of disagreement seemed to James VI risky in the monosyllabic line. The monosyllable is 'indifferent' and can go 'as we like'. Given what his descendants were to suffer, he showed prescience, as well as a good ear, by warning about the dangers of what might happen when the English started doing or going as they liked. Which is not to say that the rhythmic, and hence tonal, indeterminacy of mostly or wholly monosyllabic lines may not also be a resource for the poet.

When Hobbes considers English in relation to classical verse, he speaks his mind with the flat assurance of someone stating a fact, because the consensus on this matter has become so firm: compared with Greek, Latin is 'apter to dispose it self into an Hexameter Verse, as having both fewer Monosyllables and fewer Polysyllables'; the English admire but do otherwise: 'In stead of which we use the line of ten Syllables, recompensing the neglect of their quantity with the diligence of Rime. And this measure is so proper for an Heroique Poem as without some losse of gravity and dignity it was never changed.'¹² This function of rhyme as a compensating strictness which will mark the integrity of a verse-line otherwise organised only by counting up to ten is one reason why in this period the disyllable rhyme fell from favour, began to be heard as debilitated or comic, or, to put it bluntly, Italian and Spanish (the terms of prosodic theory at this time are intensely nationalistic). The monosyllabic rhyme was much to be preferred: 'Our Saxon shortnesse hath peculiar grace/In choise of words, fit for the ending place . . .', as Sir John Beaumont put it in his poem 'To his late Majesty, concerning the true forme of English poetry'.¹³ English versification shaped itself through a perpetual comparison of the vernacular with classical precedent, not only in prosodic theory but in practice, for translation of these venerated models was the main route to national self-discovery, and this was richly and minutely consequential for the character of our poetry.

In Dryden's case, it resulted in his hearing his own verse as a long time-tunnel, extending back to Latin and Greek avatars, and bearing even in its finish the historical process of its own becoming. He

¹² 'The Answer of Mr Hobbes to Sr. Will. D'Avenant's *Preface* before *Gondibert*' (1650), in Spingarn, op. cit., vol. II, p. 57.

¹³ Beaumont, in *The Shorter Poems of Sir John Beaumont*, ed. R. D. Sell (Åbo, 1974), p. 123, lines 139–40.

expressed this sense often by contrasting the classical languages with 'the Barbarity, or the narrowness of modern Tongues', and the most notable sign of modern barbarity in language was for him the monosyllable: 'We are full of Monosyllables, and those clog'd with consonants'; he notes a fault in another writer's style, 'that he has in many places written twenty words together . . . which were all Monosyllables', or associates short words with uncouth, political radicalism — 'he is a very Leveller in Poetry, he creeps along with ten little words in every line'.¹⁴ Levellers inclined to make their claims on the basis of 'Auncient possession', of bygone, better states and so naturally tended to monosyllabism, as they continued to do in Pope's ear — 'And ten low words oft creep in one dull line',¹⁵ where levelling, prosodic or political, is bound to be levelling-down. An emblematic falling-off of Dryden's own was that he had been compelled to translate the first line of the *Aeneid* monosyllabically — 'Arms, and the Man I sing, who forc'd by Fate' — though he consoled himself that this was 'not harsh', while acknowledging that 'it seldom happens but a Monosyllable Line turns Verse to Prose, and even that Prose is rugged and unharmonious'.¹⁶

The 'strength' which our 'Syres' had and which we have traded in for 'skill', as 'To my Dear Friend Mr. Congreve' says, was a strength in part well lost. 'Strong' and its cognates keep company in Dryden's mind and mouth with a tough crowd of words: 'harsh', 'rugged', 'unharmonious', 'savage', 'forced', 'rude', 'barbarous'. Dryden does not forget that 'strength', however admirable as an aesthetic quality, belongs with a warlike form of life he does not wish to revive. That is the point of the 'as' in 'Strong were our Syres; and as they Fought they Writ'; English verse before it had been regularised sounded like a bold, unruly baron, its prowess inherently aggressive. Dryden's artistic self-consciousness in the line bristles with political implication, as, for instance, at 'Conqu'ring with force of Arms, and dint of Wit'. The physical 'dint' ('A stroke or blow; *esp.* one given with a weapon in fighting') in 'dint of Wit' has been pacified into metaphor by the time

¹⁴ Respectively: 'The Preface to Ovid's *Epistles*', in Kinsley, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 183; 'To the Right Honourable Robert, Earl of Sunderland . . .' in E. N. Hooker, H. T. Swedenberg and others (eds.): *The Works of John Dryden* (Berkeley, 1956–), hereafter referred to as *Works*, vol. XIII, p. 223; letter to Walsh, 1691, in Charles E. Ward (ed.): *The Letters of John Dryden* (Duke, 1942), p. 34; 'Of Dramatick Poesie, An Essay', in *Works*, vol. XVII, p. 11.

¹⁵ *An Essay on Criticism* (1711); I quote from the edition of Herbert Davis (Oxford, 1966), p. 74.

¹⁶ 'The Dedication of the *Aeneis*', in Kinsley, *op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 1054.

of Dryden's poem (the *OED* gives 1664 as the first use of 'by dint of' for 'by means of'), but the wit of his parallel construction — 'force of Arms', 'dint of Wit' — preserves the older, rougher sense even while showing that it has been superseded. The continuum of disputatious skill from battle ('Arms') to controversy and satire ('Wit') demands respect but is also daunting because it reminds us how very recently we managed to put behind us the quarrelsomeness of our 'Syres'. For these 'Syres', conquering and resisting conquest, are not only Ancient Britons or doughty Saxons, but seventeenth-century Englishmen who fiercely suspected the argument that sovereignty derives from conquest because they thought it fraught with peril to the liberty of the subject, congenial to the pretensions of an absolute monarch; conquest was not only something that had happened long ago but something which might imminently happen again.

Dryden's writing in the poem to Congreve comprehends in both senses the history of English literature in the turbulent generation between the two friends, but, doing so, it comprehends more than literary history, for Dryden's ear aligns the political settlement of the Restoration with the 'Equality' of his own numbers. This sense of versification as instinct in its smallest motions with the nation's story grew firmer over time. A century after 'Charles Return'd', Dr Johnson repeats Dryden's pattern: Waller and Denham showed that 'verse consisted not only in the number but the arrangement of syllables', Dryden secured 'the establishment of regularity' and since that time 'English poetry has had no tendency to relapse to its former savageness'.¹⁷ The versification itself of the poem to Congreve, in its ability to contain and throw into relief obdurate monosyllables, exemplifies the many ways in which society was polished — agriculture ('Rules of Husbandry'), etiquette ('manners'), architecture and town planning ('Builders'). Appropriately, then, Dr Johnson's praise of Dryden climaxes in the celebrated comparison of the poet to Augustus: 'What was said of Rome, adorned by Augustus, may be applied by an easy metaphor to English poetry embellished by Dryden, *lateritiam invenit, marmoream reliquit*, he found it brick, and he left it marble'.¹⁸ Felicitous, too, that the monosyllabic 'brick' should have its chunkiness smoothed into the more yielding desinence of 'marble'.

¹⁷ 'Life of Dryden', in *Lives of the English Poets* (1779–81); I quote from the 2 vol. Oxford ed. (1906, repr., 1973), vol. I, pp. 294, 295.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* vol. I, p. 332.

Had Dryden simply identified his refinement of English numbers with a supposed perfection of the state by Charles II, he would really have been what one historian has seen fit to call him, 'the age's most durable sycophant'.¹⁹ (The phrase leaves it intriguingly open whether sycophants become the more admirable or the more deplorable the longer they survive.) But he knew well enough that the Restoration had not ushered in a lasting and anodyne peaceableness, and that its effects were not those sheerly of refinement. Charles II was met on his return at Blackheath by 'divers great and eminent troops of horse in a most splendid and glorious equipage' but also with 'a kind of rural triumph expressed by the country swains in a morrice dance with the old music of tabor and pipe'.²⁰ Dryden's verse similarly combines the pompous show of a modern state with recrudescences of a less orderly society, 'the old music of tabor and pipe'. It does so because he wrote to his time (as a man may set words to a tune), a time in which Locke could write his treatises of government and Percy Endrby exhume the old tale that English civilisation was lineally descended from Troy so that, therefore, 'the manner of Great Brittain's Government was ever princely',²¹ a time whose revivalism has been subtly characterised by J. G. A. Pocock: 'What was needed was a government not destructive of liberty, but equally not open to the reproach that any man who had not given his consent to its foundation might withhold his obedience, and it might be argued that the monarchy satisfied this need . . . Every man knew who had made the Protector, but none knew who had made the king unless it were God himself; and if the divine origin of kingship were expressed in terms of ancient English custom rather than of scriptural warrant, it became plain that the immemorial monarchy was the best guarantee of the immemorial law. The Restoration of 1660 was the greatest triumph which the cult of the ancient constitution ever enjoyed . . .'.²² Professor Pocock's word 'triumph' (*OED* senses 1 and 4), chiming with the 'rural triumph' which greeted Charles II, rightly catches the element of pageant in the Restoration and its costume-drama of a renovated past and a retrieved

¹⁹ Ronald Hutton, *The Restoration: A Political and Religious History of England and Wales 1658–1667* (Oxford, 1985), p. 128.

²⁰ Anon., *England's Joy . . .* (1660), in Andrew Browning (ed.), *English Historical Documents 1660–1714* (1953), p. 60.

²¹ *Cambria Triumphans* (1661), quoted in T. D. Kendrick, *British Antiquity* (1950, repr., 1970), p. 101.

²² *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (1957, repr., 1987), p. 156.

future. The theatres opened again, but the Caroline audience was not only 'tam'd . . . to manners'. As he wrote for his contemporaries, Dryden was aware that his newly-polished countrymen had not lost their appetites for 'strength': 'whither custom has so insinuated it self into our Country-men, or nature has so form'd them to fierceness, I know not; but they will scarcely suffer combats & other objects of horror to be taken from them'.²³

Dryden's auditory imagination is, as neo-classical imaginations are, haunted by the thought of what its own creation required. Many died draining the swamp from which Versailles arose; the *palais à volonté* of Corneille's and Racine's plays is thick with the ghosts of former, less trained selves, who loom up, uninvited, in the atavistic spasms which continue to fasten on the characters as they strive towards stateliness. Hegel's chapter on 'Spirit in estrangement from itself' in the *Phenomenology* gives a dazzling formulation of the labour which smoothness exacted both individually and collectively, of how much social decorum was reared upon a disavowal of the unsocialised self. From Hegel's philosophical standpoint, the individuals caught in such a process of acculturation are unconscious of what they themselves contribute to the norms which they subserve; the State 'ist . . . das Werk und einfache Resultat, aus welchem dies, daß es aus ihrem Tun herkommt, verschwindet' ['is an accomplishment, a pure product, from which the realisation that such an accomplishment is a result of their own activity constantly disappears'].²⁴ Brilliant though his account is, and especially so in his sense of the contradictory status of language for such individuals,²⁵ at a less abstract level it is impossible to believe with him that no individual can be cognisant of his involvement in the process (unable though he may be philosophically to articulate that involvement, at least to Hegel's satisfaction). The case of Dryden translating one of his classical predecessors, for example, presents us at every moment and in minute details of rhythm, syntax, and diction, with an individual calibrating against each other two sets of norms,

²³ 'Of Dramatick Poesie, An Essay', in *Works*, vol. XVII, p. 50. Rymer felt much the same: 'it may be true that on our Stage are more Murders than on all the Theatres in *Europe*. And they who have not time to learn our Language or be acquainted with our Conversation may there in three hours time behold so much bloodshed as may affright them from the inhospitable shore, as from the Cyclops Den.' 'Preface' to Rapin's *Reflections* . . . , in Spingarn, op. cit., p. 166.

²⁴ I translate from *Die Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807) in the ed. of Gerhard Göhler (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1970, 2nd ed., 1973), p. 280.

²⁵ See Hegel, op. cit., p. 286.

and understanding practically his own bearing on each as well as their bearing on him. Dryden was so alert to the special quality of this activity that he chose a rare word to express it, and underscored its rarity: 'Nor must we understand the Language only of the Poet, but his particular turn of Thoughts, and of Expression, which are the Characters that distinguish and, as it were, individuate him from all other writers. When we are come thus far, 'tis time to look into our selves, to conform our Genius to his . . .'.²⁶ 'As it were, individuate' suggests, as the *OED* confirms, that 'individuate' is not common parlance for Dryden (the dictionary's citations are from such as Sir Thomas Browne and Henry More, and show the scholastic ancestry of the word in the *principium individuationis*). The particular moment at which Dryden's cultural self-consciousness appears, though, is more plainly put— 'tis time to look into our selves, to conform our Genius to his . . . — by which Dryden did not mean that he attempted an impersonation of the past writer and his world but that he gauged where he was near to and where remote from his original, and, in discovering that, discovered himself. For such orientation of his self in time, he did not need to go to the classics; Shakespeare was far enough away: 'the tongue in general is so much refin'd since *Shakespear's* time, that many of his words, and more of his Phrases are scarce intelligible. . . . I need not say that I have refin'd his Language, which before was obsolete; but I am willing to acknowledge, that as I have often drawn his *English* nearer to our times so I have sometimes conform'd my own to his; & consequently, the Language is not altogether so pure as it is significant'.²⁷

When Dryden speaks of refining Shakespeare's language, he seems confident that he and his time have advanced from what went before. Yet he records a loss as well as a gain, the implication of his last remark being that Shakespeare's English, though less 'pure', was more 'significant'. Refining is a process of removing impurities but, as Dryden might have reflected from the case of refined sugar, the less refined states of some substances may have valuable properties which their purer derivatives lack. Language is like sugar. Shakespeare's English was more 'significant' because it was more semantically dense (and so more prone to bombast and obscurity), more lithe in syntax and less

²⁶ 'Preface' to Ovid's *Epistles*, in Kinsley, vol. I, p. 185.

²⁷ 'Preface' to *Troilus and Cressida*, or, *Truth Found Too Late* (1679), in *Works*, vol. XIII, pp. 225, 226–227.

smooth in versification (and so tending to be crabbed); those who wrote it had more impulsive, rangier imaginations but were in consequence less correct. 'Pure' and 'significant' are in fact two more terms to add on either side of the interminable, unsettlable balance sheet which 'To my Dear Friend Mr. Congreve' drew up: 'But what we gain'd in skill we lost in strength'. As Dryden 'conforms' himself to the past, and 'conforms' the past to himself, he is involved, practically and self-consciously, in sensing his own agency in the creation of his 'time' and its standards. He also faced more generally the question of cultural change, whether it has a direction (progress, decline, or some other position between swings and roundabouts) and what, if anything, drives it. At the level of formulated 'philosophy of history', Dryden has little to say on such matters. The sixth book of Polybius's *Histories* greatly influenced Renaissance thinking on the supposed 'cycle of constitutions' and, through the Florentine humanists, also told on English political thought of the seventeenth century.²⁸ Polybius was one of Dryden's early favourites: 'I had read him in *English* with the pleasure of a Boy, before I was ten years of Age'.²⁹ Yet, in his 'Character' of that author, Dryden treats his grand, seminal theory of historical cycles as a learned in-joke: 'When he speaks of Providence, or of any Divine Admonition, he is as much in jest, as when he speaks of Fortune: 'tis all to the capacity of the Vulgar. Prudence was the only divinity which he worshipp'd; and the possession of Vertue the only End he propos'd'.³⁰ Though he emphasises ethical concerns ('Prudence . . . Vertue') as superior to the schemes of philosophical history or political science, Dryden was not indifferent to those schemes. It is just that he thought about those issues in a practical way, in the ethical conduct of his own writing with regard to the past. The balance sheet of 'skill' (smoothness, sweetness, equality of numbers, refinement, the 'pure') and 'strength' (independence, sublimity, power, the 'significant') was not epitomised in a formula but drawn up for him through innumerable, specific acts of creative translating. Yet he weighed in that balance what others pondered more abstractly. To lose in strength what you have gained in skill is to experience a nemesis many thought attended on any advance in civilisation: a state becomes strong because of the collective power

²⁸ The classic account of this matter is J. G. A. Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1975), from which I take the phrase 'cycle of constitutions' (p. 77).

²⁹ 'A Character of Polybius and His Writings' (1693) in *Works*, vol. XX, p. 18.

³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 31.

of its citizens in war; once it has become strong, the refining arts may begin to develop, but these flowers of civilisation are poisonous — the citizens become polished and luxurious, they lay down their arms and render themselves, in their new daintiness, defenceless against the next arising, rougher power. As Professor Pocock, tracing such a thought from Machiavelli to Gibbon, puts it: 'the growth of refinement was the corruption of personality. At this point Machiavelli's unintended legacy to Western thought is seen to have been a paradoxical view of the history of civilization, in which the forces that built up human personality were identical with the forces that undermined it . . . There was no refuge to be found in primitivism, and none in progress either . . .'.³¹

Dryden shared this tragic sense of what Norbert Elias called 'the civilizing process'.³² It forced itself on him through his ear, his ear which told him that 'our *English* is a composition of the dead and living Tongues',³³ not a mere 'compound' but a 'composition', something that makes and represents its dilemma as well as undergoing it. Dryden's time had much it wished to forget, and practised officially 'an exquisite art of forgetfulness' in the Duke of Buckingham's phrase.³⁴ Charles II came home bearing 'general pardon, indemnity and oblivion'³⁵ for his subjects, and Dryden thanked him for that: 'Among our crimes oblivion may be set,/But 'tis our Kings perfection to forget.' (I, 27; 87–8). He will have wily noted that this regal amnesia could be handy for purposes at odds with his own, as when the 1689 Bill of Rights refers to 'the late King James the Second having abdicated the government'.³⁶ Where Dryden's 'Dint of wit' preserved a sense of 'Dint' which was obsolescent, 'abdicated' here relies on a new and controversial sense of the word, for, as the *OED* notes, the verb at first implied 'voluntary renunciation' but had come recently to include 'the idea of abandon-

³¹ 'Between Machiavelli and Hume: Gibbon as Civic Humanist and Philosophical Historian', in G. W. Bowersock, John Clive and Stephen R. Graubard (eds.), *Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), p. 105.

³² *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (1939), trans. as *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford, 1978, 1982), 2 vols. Elias, like Hegel, but for different reasons, would not have credited a person in the seventeenth century with a capacity to reflect self-consciously on his own acculturation: 'The birth pangs of the industrial revolution, which could no longer be understood as the result of government, taught men, briefly and for the first time, to think of themselves and their social existence as a process.' vol. I, p. 44.

³³ *Works*, vol. XIII, p. 222.

³⁴ Speech declaring the Cavalier Parliament dissolved, 15 February 1667, in Browning, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

³⁵ Act for the preservation of the King, 1661 (13 Car. II, stat. I, cap. 1), Browning, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

³⁶ I Gul. & Mar., sess. 2, cap. 2, Browning, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

ment by default' (sense 5); it had come to include that idea just in the discussion of whether or not James II could be deemed to have abdicated — 'See the parliamentary discussions of 1688', as the dictionary drily recommends. Conquered kings have not only their titles taken from them but even the words for how their loss occurred. (In this context, there might also be a wishful sense to 'the late King James the Second', as if he had conveniently died before he was dethroned; he had become an ex-King by 1689 but was not wholly to oblige his enemies until 1701 when, all too late, he became thoroughly 'late'. Contrast the reiterated 'of happy memory' or 'of blessed memory' which was the usual due of previous sovereigns.) Though as Historiographer-Royal Dryden had been a contributor to the political '*Art of Oblivion*',³⁷ his most characteristic verse stubbornly recalls the bitter past which might better have been left behind, recalls it as when he imagines Horace and his audience recalling:

... the Monarchy of his *Caesar* was in its newness; and the Government but just made easie to the Conquer'd People. They could not possibly have forgotten the Usurpation of that Prince upon their Freedom, nor the violent Methods which he had us'd, in the compassing of that vast Design: They yet remember'd his Proscriptions, and the Slaughter of so many Noble Romans ...³⁸

At the Restoration, Dryden had hoped much from his king's and countrymen's capacity for amnesia; in this passage, five years after the Glorious Revolution, the tone about powers of forgetting has changed; 'They could not possibly have forgotten ... They yet remember'd ...': he sounds indignant that they might have done what they could not possibly have done, or baffled why they pretend to have done so, and clings only to the grim assurance that, whatever they claim, the past with all its miseries remains with them.

It is because Dryden and Virgil share a reluctant fidelity to pained memories that Dryden speaks so fluently through Virgil and his Aeneas, as, for instance, when Aeneas is visited by Hector's ghost:

'Twas in the dead of Night, when Sleep repairs
Our Bodies worn with Toils, our Minds with Cares,
When *Hector's* Ghost before my sight appears:
A bloody Shroud he seem'd, and bath'd in Tears.

³⁷ Abraham Cowley: 'Preface' to *Poems* (1656), in Spingarn, op. cit., vol. II, p. 84.

³⁸ 'A Discourse concerning the Original and Progress of *Satire*' (1693), in Kinsley, vol. II, p. 651.

Such as he was, when, by *Pelides* slain,
Thessalian Coursers drag'd him o're the Plain.
 Swoln were his Feet, as when the Thongs were thrust
 Through the bor'd holes, his Body black with dust. (III, 1101; 350–7)

What pierces Dryden's imagination is the thought of how brutally Hector's corpse was treated, and what shows this is so is that 'Swoln were his Feet, as when the Thongs were thrust' is not only an entirely monosyllabic line but that it also thickens the texture of alliteration in the passage 'the Thongs were thrust/Through the bor'd holes, his Body black', alliteration being for Dryden another means of hauling the barbarous past into his lines. Dryden has not here written twenty monosyllables in a chain, as he complained of another poet, only fifteen, a chain climactically broken on 'Body'. Surrey and Denham in their versions of this passage had both turned to short words at about this point — Surrey: 'Drawn at a cart as he of late had be'; Denham: 'Dragg'd by the cords which through his feet were thrust'³⁹ — but neither of them so attentively brings his words low in sympathy with Hector's fall. Neither of them, for instance, has the contrast between the grand, proper names — '*Pelides*', '*Thessalian*' — and these lamed feet.

Again and again in his magnificent rendering of the fall of Troy, Dryden's writing touches the sore points of his sense of civility, as when he makes Priam call Pyrrhus a 'Barbarian' though there is no warrant for this in Virgil (III, 1110; 730). Incumbent over the surface of past time, as he reads his original, he discerns through the Latin a Homeric ferocity: 'Has not *Virgil* chang'd the Manners of *Homer's* Hero in his *Aeneis*? Certainly he has, and for the better. For *Virgil's* Age was more Civiliz'd, and better Bred; and he writ according to the Politeness of Rome, under the Reign of *Augustus Caesar*; not to the Rudeness of *Agamemnon's* Age, or the Times of *Homer*.'⁴⁰ Yet these layers of politeness, the centuries of accrued refinement between Dryden and Virgil and then, back, between Virgil and Homer, crack like eggshell when Priam is slaughtered. The old king denies that Pyrrhus can be Achilles' son because he does not act like his father:

Not He, whom thou and lying Fame conspire
 To call thee his; Not He, thy vaunted Sire,

³⁹ Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, *Aeneid*, II, 345, in E. Jones (ed.), *Poems* (Oxford, 1964), p. 44; Sir John Denham, *The Destruction of Troy* (1656), line 261, in T. H. Banks (ed.), *The Poetical Works of Sir John Denham* (New Haven, 1928, 2nd ed., 1969), p. 169.

⁴⁰ 'Discourse . . . *Satire*', in Kinsley, vol. II, p. 661.

Thus us'd my wretched Age: The Gods he fear'd,
 The Laws of Nature and of Nations heard.
 He chear'd my Sorrows, and for Sums of Gold
 The bloodless Carcass of my *Hector* sold.
 Pity'd the Woes a Parent underwent,
 And sent me back in safety from his Tent. . . .
 . . . Then *Pyrrhus* thus: go thou from me to Fate;
 And to my Father my foul deeds relate.
 Now dye: with that he dragg'd the trembling Sire,
 Slidd'ring through clotted Blood, and holy Mire
 (The mingl'd Paste his murder'd Son had made,)
 Haul'd from beneath the violated Shade;
 And on the Sacred Pile, the Royal Victim laid.
 His right Hand held his bloody Fauchion bare;
 His left he twisted in his hoary Hair:
 Then, with a speeding Thrust, his Heart he found:
 The lukewarm Blood came rushing through the wound,
 And sanguine Streams distain'd the sacred Ground.

(III, 1110–11; 734–57)

A weak, indeed 'trembling', sire faces the too strong son of an almost invulnerable father: the scene, with its dispute about civility across the generations, was bound to appeal to Dryden. He intensified both the 'force of Arms' and the 'dint of Wit' of his original. Virgil does not have the emphatic repetition 'Not He . . . Not He', nor the terrible retort on that confident discrimination of persons when the pronouns go haywire as Priam is killed: 'His right Hand', 'his bloody Fauchion' and 'his left' are all Pyrrhus's but 'his hoary Hair' and 'his Heart' switch without signalling to Priam, though the immediately following 'he found' reverts, again without signalling, to Pyrrhus. Murderer and victim blur together as the grammar falls apart. This is the more notable because Dryden has elsewhere added to the passage a detached verbal wit which might be called 'urbane' were it not so ferocious. The initial impetus to harsh jocularitry came from Virgil, when he gave Pyrrhus the cutting riposte to Priam's accusation that he is not Achilles's son: 'go thou from me to Fate;/And to my Father my foul deeds relate', which is as much as to say 'You think Achilles isn't my father? You will soon be able to check with him in person. Go and tell tales about me to him in the underworld; ask him yourself whether he's my father.' Dryden goes further in this direction when he calls the death-blow a 'speeding Thrust', punning on the fact that it comes quickly and speeds Priam on his way out of life. So too, the streams of blood are 'sanguine' both literally through the latinism but also figuratively through the

sense of 'hopeful, confident of success'; Priam's blood is in this sense 'sanguine' only in Pyrrhus's eyes, as it flows bathed in his triumphantly unmoved regard.

Dryden goes to some lengths to invest the passage with a violence of long-standing, a thrill of self-conscious historicity. He sets the profuse smoothness of Priam's internal rhymes — 'fear'd... chear'd', 'Parent... underwent/... sent... Tent' — against Pyrrhus's youthfully primitivistic alliteration — 'Fate/... Father... foul', 'deeds... /... dye... dragg'd'. The word 'Slidd'ring' has been re-invented for the occasion, the *OED* giving no record of its use between 1440 and here in 1697. The word colours Virgil's plainer 'lapsansem' very highly, and with a light of archaic vehemence, just as the consonantal stickiness of 'clotter'd Blood' and 'mingl'd Paste' barbarically clogs the Virgilian 'et in multo... sanguine nati' ['and in the much blood of his son']. Dryden seems to have been taken with 'clotter'd'; he comes back to it in a related, aggressive context when describing the temple of Mars in *Palamon and Arcite* — 'The Gore congeal'd was clotter'd in his hair' (IV, 1498; 577); Chaucer has only 'His herte-blood hath bathed al his heer'.⁴¹ He may have found the word in Chaucer, it is in *Knigh's Tale* at line 2745, and otherwise unusual though Chapman has it in his *Iliad*, and had become archaic by Dryden's time, if the *OED* is to be believed. Elsewhere in the sequence, Dryden digs up 'crudled' and 'dodder'd' which equally summon a thick Saxonism to date this ancient horror, the primal murder of a father.

When there is blood in question, Dryden's verse quivers into animated keenness, like a hound. His most violent passage is in his version of *Metamorphoses*, XII where Nestor gives an account of the battle between the Centaurs and Lapiths at the marriage-feast of Perithous and Hippodame, itself an emblematic moment when 'strength' erupts into the polite world which thought it had tamed such forces. The initial moment of this battle is Eurytus's attempted rape of the bride. Here Dryden alters the texture of his verse by a resurgence of alliterative organisation: 'He seized with sudden Force the frightened Fair' (IV, 1674; 313). Once he has started that old tune into new motion, he plays it to the hilt. Theseus throws a large drinking vessel at a Centaur:

The Hero snatch'd it up: And toss'd in Air,
Full at the Front of the foul Ravisher.

⁴¹ I quote from Larry Benson (ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer* (1987, repr., 1988), p. 36, line 2007.

He falls; and falling vomits forth a Flood
Of Wine, and Foam and Brains, and mingled Blood . . .

(IV, 1675; 332–5)

The exaggerated effing and blinding of these lines burlesques the events they recount, levels the hero's action down to a boorish slapstick which makes him uncomfortably like the Centaur he's, in the official story, above. The word 'Hero' has a sardonic curl on it, as it does in Dryden's Preface to these *Fables* where he distinguishes a 'Man of Honour from one of those Athletick Brutes whom undeservedly we call Heroes' (IV, 1442). The Lapith Celadon is even more unfortunate:

His Eye-balls rooted out, are thrown to Ground;
His Nose dismantled, in his Mouth is found,
His Jaws, Cheeks, Front, one undistinguish'd Wound.

(IV, 1675; 352–4)

Ovid himself is not delicate in this sequence, but Dryden trumps him in the repulsive. Celadon's eyes only leap from their sockets in the original ('*exsiluere oculis*'); the special nastiness of grubbing about in the eye-sockets which 'rooted out' conveys, and the callous non-chalance of the litterbug who throws them to the ground, are both Dryden's alone. 'His Nose dismantled' sounds to us more grotesquely finical than it did to Dryden, who probably had the military sense of the word in mind (as when a town's fortifications were 'dismantled'), but Dryden certainly meant the jeering pun on 'undistinguish'd' ('His Jaws, Cheeks, Front, one undistinguish'd Wound') — his face being now an indistinguishable mess, Celadon is not looking his most *distingué* — as he also meant the sardonic effect of writing a triplet rhyme — 'Ground'/'found'/'Wound' — just at this moment, to underscore how in shape the verse is even as Celadon loses all feature. Sandys, whose version of Ovid Dryden is said to have praised, sounds blessedly anaemic in comparison: 'Out start his eyes; his batterd nose betwixt/His shiver'd bones flat to his pallat fixt'.⁴²

When he is translating atrocious passages — incest, rape, parricide, animal sacrifice — Dryden often thus heightens in detail the shock of his originals. This might be considered a result of his sensitivity. As he reads these monuments of classical civilisation, in a language compared to which he thought his own barbarous and harsh, the events they speak of appal him, the gore leaps off the venerable page or, as we

⁴² Ovid's *Metamorphosis Englished, Mythologiz'd, and Represented in Figures* . . . (1632), p. 404.

say, it 'screams at him'. He is then driven in recoil to a version even more horrifying than the original, more horrifying because it records his own horror at the original (the effect is like that in beach-tennis, when the harder you hit the ball on the elastic away from you, the more violently it rebounds). On the other hand, a less sympathetic reader might detect a fierce prurience at work here, or a temperament coarsely avid of stimulation. The question of what to think about such examples involves us in considering not Dryden's soul alone but the tastes of that audience for whom, professional as he was, he wrote, whom he thought he could please with such writing, or who he thought would, at the least, let him get away with it. Reflecting about that audience leads us to a paradox inherent in the nature of what it is to be 'civilized' or believe yourself so. The civilised person has introjected constraints that once were externally imposed; he is self-restraining. He is more easily embarrassed, more quickly nauseated, than the unrefined. Yet at the same time he is more sophisticated, which is to say, more experienced and therefore may well also be more jaded. An adult presented with a full potty by a proud toddler winces while he congratulates the child; the smell offends him as it does not offend the child. In this respect, the adult is the more sensitive, and some people gauge cultivation according to such capacity from tremulous response (I have no 'nose' for the bouquet of wine and so, by this measure, am less civilised than a connoisseur). The story has another point, in reverse. Children are impressed by many things — a cat, thunder — which it is a mark of the civilised adult to pass by with equanimity. Something like this paradox came over Dryden as he read in his classics their stories of that savagery from which all his and their polish began.

Consider a detail in Dryden's version of *The Knight's Tale*. When Theseus sees Palamon and Arcite duelling, he is eager to know what's happening and urges his horse forward. Chaucer writes: 'This duc his courser with his spores smoot,/And at a stert he was bitwix hem two'.⁴³ The narrative effect of fast-forwarding is brilliantly sketched by delaying the verb 'smoot' till the end of the line, and then giving the effect of the blow to the horse's flanks immediately with 'at a stert', a single jump, and a mere 'was'; the horse bounds rapidly with an almost audible 'boinggg!', to where Theseus wants him. Dryden takes more time, and dwells on the spurring, as in a freeze-frame: 'Resolv'd to learn, he spurr'd his fiery Steed/With goring Rowels, to provoke his

⁴³ *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 48, lines 1704–1705.

Speed.' (IV, 1489; 249–50). Chaucer does not make you think about cruelty to animals even for an instant, but Dryden's 'goring Rowels' are intent upon the creature's pain. There are many ways of accounting for this difference between Chaucer and Dryden in terms of complex imponderables about the art of narration, but the subtleties of narratology cannot dispense us from encountering the tricky question of how the horse felt at this imagined moment, and whether there is anything to choose between what Chaucer and Dryden say about the dumb animal. Nor can that question be answered by opting for one poet and his world as against the other. Rather, the question abides with us because it is a question about the nature of that civilisation we carry in ourselves, a civilisation which alone puts the question to us. Perhaps Dryden responds more acutely to the horse, or perhaps Chaucer's bloodless and ungalled lines display more imaginative tact, a kindlier touch.

Similar questions arise where the pain of human animals is concerned. At the opening of his tale, Chaucer's Knight, perhaps not without reluctance, says he will not go into the detail of Theseus's conquest of Ypolita, of 'how asseged was Ypolita'.⁴⁴ Dryden repeats the show of reticence, 'I pass their warlike Pomp', while extending the list of things he will not mention; one such addition is 'The Town besieg'd, and how much Blood it cost' (IV, 1468; 14, 19; my italics). That 'Blood' is not in Chaucer. When Dryden supplied it, he may have been pandaring to a Restoration appetite for imaginary gore; he may have been delicately intimating the carnage tacitly assumed in his original's 'chivalrye' because, as he brooded over the elder poet, he scented in his predecessor's silences the air of a world more accustomed to violence than his own. So too, after the battle against Creon, the Knight has a vivid and businesslike account of the pillaging of corpses which leads to the discovery of Palamon and Arcite, 'Thurgh-girt with many a grevous bloody wounde,/Two yonge knyghtes liggyng by and by'.⁴⁵ The few Chaucerian words sparked off something in Dryden to this:

There, in a Heap of Slain, among the rest
Two youthful Knights they found beneath a Load oppress'd
Of slaughter'd Foes, whom first to Death they sent,
The Trophies of their Strength, a bloody Monument.

(IV, 1471; 141–4)

⁴⁴ *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 37, line 881.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 39, lines 1010–1011.

They are exceptional lines: the alternation of decasyllable and alexandrine is very rare in Dryden's narrative verse; the latinising of 'oppress'd' and of the triple apposition, suspended over the relative clause, at 'Foes . . . Trophies . . . Monument' wildly diverges from the painedly idiomatic source. The story is halted for an elegiac pause of neo-classical moralising. And at the centre of that pause, the pivotal word 'Strength', on which Dryden rears his gravelled sense of a culture as at once achieved and laying waste, the great phrase (if only it could be termed an oxymoron) 'a bloody Monument'. Here again, is Dryden coarsely intrusive where Chaucer was decently plain or, on the other hand, alert to brutal facts the earlier style took too much for granted? Dryden, I believe, asked these questions of himself as he turned the work of his predecessors 'into our Language, as it is now refin'd' (IV, 1445), asked about the worth of his own refinement. We cannot answer such questions, any more than he could, not because some decisive information has been lost, but because to know the answer to those questions would be to know what we ourselves are worth, what the value is of human history and the developments within it, and this is not given us to know.

As he transfused the life of old writings — 'transfuse' is a word he liked to use for translating (see, for example, IV, 1458) — into the English of his day, Dryden involved himself in something like the ethical self-scrutiny a good anthropologist might nowadays face while doing field-work: 'What, in my world, answers to this in that other world? Is anything in that world which I call "primitive" alive in me?' Poetic translation sets the quandary of such a seeking of analogues more intimately and inwardly than a catalogue of equivalents and disparities could do, and the quandary is sharper, more minute and prickly, than can be captured by a philosophical thesis about an alleged 'indeterminacy of translation'. For the translating poet begins from the odd fact that a poem in another tongue has spoken to him, called him, and it is this calling which he must translate, because it is this calling, the continuing power in the source to give pleasure, which makes the source a poem, not just a mere document, shows that the work of the preceding writer is 'not . . . what is dead, but . . . what is already living'.⁴⁶

The past and its insistences are not always darkly backward in

⁴⁶ T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *Selected Essays* (1932, 3rd enlarged ed., 1951, repr., 1976), p. 22.

Dryden's imagination. He was equally capable of finding the old days and tunes quaint, or discovering in them, as he thought he found in Theocritus's 'Dorick Dialect', 'an incomparable sweetness in [their] Clownishness' (I, 399). Take a passage from his version of the twenty-seventh idyll; Daphnis has spent a long time seducing Chloris, and things are now coming to a climax:

Chlo[ris]. What do you mean (uncivil as you are),
To touch my breasts, and leave my bosome bare?
Daph[nis]. These pretty bubbies first I make my own.
Chlo[ris]. Pull out your hand, I swear, or I shall swoon.
Daph[nis]. Why does thy ebbing blood forsake thy face?
Chlo[ris]. Throw me at least upon a cleaner place: . . . (I, 430; 90–5)

Chloris's lines all divide at their caesurae between the rustic and the polite; the first halves of her lines are monosyllabic, and there is a slight but perceptible elevation of the diction in the second half of each line, so that the simply vexed 'What do you mean' gets a little haughty with '(uncivil as you are)' — she speaks in parentheses and so looks more literate; the more frank 'To touch my breasts' is retreated from in the more veiled 'and leave my bosom bare'; the urgent 'Pull out your hand, I swear' acquires a posed quality when it is completed by 'or I shall swoon'; the last line I quote 'Throw me at least upon a cleaner place' is too good a joke to need explaining. Daphnis too has at least heard of poetical etiquette and can manage not only 'pretty bubbies' but also 'ebbing blood'. Dryden said the Theocritean charm was like hearing a lass with a Yorkshire accent (I, 399), but the charm of his lines is that such an accent is constantly being hitched up into the would-be genteel. The sweet clownishness of his writing draws humour not only from the rusticity but from the cultivatedness of these attempts. The buttoned-up and the unbuttoned are at grips with each other in the lines, and the permanence of the pleasure they have to give us is a lasting reminder that we, and all like us, are neither, in Lévi-Strauss's terms, raw nor cooked. What we are is half-baked.

A less jocund aspect of rusticity yoked to polish, a less blithe sense of the perpetual half-way-house which is the condition of the semi-civilised, appears in *The Medall*, when Dryden is writing directly about the Civil Wars and the Protectorate:

God try'd us once; our Rebel-fathers fought;
He glutt'd'em with all the pow'r they sought:
Till, master'd by their own usurping Brave,
The free-born subject sunk into a Slave.

We loath our Manna, and we long for Quails:
Ah, what is man, when his own wish prevails! (I, 256–7; 127–32)

The 'usurping Brave' here is Cromwell, 'Brave' having in the passage the uncommon sense of a hired assassin or a mercenary, as it does in *Aurung-Zebe*: 'Morat's too insolent, too much a Brave'. Why did Dryden write 'He glutted 'em' rather than 'He glutted them'? The d/th conjunction in 'glutted them' does not lie smoothly on the voice, and 'them' would have produced an alliterative chain — them, the, they — on semantically weak words. But the main point of 'glutted 'em' is to give the line that vocal earthiness Dryden so often summoned to evoke the roughness of the past, though here that roughness should also be heard as a plain-speaking which contrasts to its credit with the 'refaynement' of the present. The trick is a historicist version of pastoral; we are asked to think 'They squared up to facts in those days, didn't they?' and at the same time 'How *backward* they were'. Dryden felt this ambivalence about his immediate past because of what it is to have had 'Rebel-fathers'. He was of a generation whose fathers had done all the rebelling the country could take for some time, and so left none over for their sons in their rebellious primes; the sons had to be conservatives (Dryden's position is, in this respect, like that of those children in our time whose parents were hippies). Dryden turns on these boisterous progenitors the full suavity of his establishment wit, as in the line 'The free-born Subject sunk into a Slave', very characteristic in its combination of intellectual agility and an apparent plainness of statement: 'born' in relation to 'sunk' acquires the sense of 'borne up', as above a wave, so that the birthright of liberty is precious, like the ability to float when at sea; 'Subject' calls up its Latin sense of something which is cast down in order to show us, once 'sunk' appears, that though some radicals might say that there is no lower you can get than to be 'Subject' to a King, there is a deeper depth of abjection, that of becoming 'Slave' to the effects of such radicalism. Yet though he can so rapidly caricature the follies of the 'Rebel-fathers' Dryden does not wholly stand off from them. They were absurd, over-eating like greedy children, so they become 'glutted' with power, made themselves sick, but their genes are still in us, because we too suffer from eating-disorders: 'We loath our Manna', like children pushing away what is good for them ('You *know* I hate spinach').

Dryden's 'arrangement of syllables' may convey his historical self-consciousness by displaying the modish present as well as by invoking

the unregenerate past. The trick here is to find the right place for a polysyllabic word in a predominantly monosyllabic context, so that it will appear as the crest of a line, 'entersowing' the novelty as Carew thought ancient British words had been left entersowed in the language. Dryden knew what he was doing: 'I Trade both with the Living and the Dead, for the enrichment of our Native Language. . . . Poetry requires Ornament, and that is not to be had from our Old *Teuton* Monosyllables . . .' (III, 1059). Sometimes the high relief of a polysyllable aims directly at ornamental resonance — 'And grinn and whet like a *Croatian* Band' (I, 259; 240) or '*Laurentian* Nymphs, by whom the Streams are fed' (III, 1265; 97) — but such grandeurs may be more thoughtful, as in 'But ah too short, *Marcellus* of our Tongue' (I, 389; 23), where the life is all too short compared with the name, which stands alone, monumentally persistent in its Latin amid the fleeting, English monosyllables. Twice the great elegy on Oldham rhymes on 'Tongue' — 'the young'/'the native Tongue', 'thou young'/'our Tongue'; English itself is precocious and already dying, *Oldham* will acquire the stability his surname seemed to promise only by changing it to the Latin '*Marcellus*'. The lament for Oldham goes to the tune of the welcome to Congreve: 'Till you, the best *Vitruvius*, come at length'.

Such disposition serves more spritely purposes when the polysyllabic word is made to sound affectedly foreign rather than venerably so. His style in this matter responds to the linguistic fashions of his day, fashions such as that which infested one of Dryden's cousins who, he wrote to the Earl of Dorset, 'talkes nothing all day long to me in french & Italian to show his breeding'.⁴⁷ Melantha in *Marriage à la Mode* is similarly afflicted; she not only peppers her conversation with words like '*grimace*' and '*fatigue*' which had not been naturalised into English when the play was first produced but insists also on 'run the *risque*' which the *OED* suggests was at home in the language, and even begs someone to 'stay a *minuite*' though we have been saying 'minute' since the fourteenth century.⁴⁸ The most cunning of Dryden's outlandish polysyllables comes in *Religio Laici*, when he is complaining about the way long years of practice in deceit have brought the Catholic clergy to their current past-mastership in hoodwinking:

⁴⁷ Letter of summer 1677, in *Letters*, p. 13.

⁴⁸ *Marriage à la Mode* (1673); I quote from the edition of Mark S. Auburn (1981), respectively II.i.207, II.i.208, III.i.188, Vi.183.

In those dark times they learn'd their knack so well,
That by long use they grew *Infallible* . . . (I, 321; 386–7)

The italics on '*Infallible*' insinuate that the word is as foreign to the English language as this papistical claim is foreign to the English conscience, or suggest at least that Dryden only 'quotes' the word as it is used by others for to use it himself would infect his mouth. The skill lies in the entersowing of syllables so that when the word blazes out after sixteen consecutive monosyllables, it will have a foolish, inflationary portentousness. It is as if we were arguing with a conniving Catholic, and he produced the Petrine claims as his clinching argument but managed to sound to our ears, our English ears, only like a windbag. Like all good polemical devices, the polysyllable highlighted against a monosyllabic ground can serve both sides of a question. So, when *The Hind and the Panther* comes at the issue of authority in scriptural interpretation from a pro-Catholic angle, Dryden variously focuses his lines on 'interpret' and its cognates, standing out like a thorny problem from a context of plain words: 'And each may be his own Interpreter' (II, 482; 463), 'All who can read, Interpreters may be' (II, 487; 110), 'Why all these wars to win the Book, if we/Must not interpret for ourselves, but she?' (II, 492; 283–4), 'Shows want of such a sure interpreter' (II, 497; 477). When he was writing more grandly, less considerately, as often in his heroic tragedies, Dryden was prone to the belief that such an effect was genuinely lofty rather than unwittingly stilted. Almanzor in *The Conquest of Granada by the Spaniards*, Part I tells with surprise of how he has fallen in love: 'I'me pleas'd and pain'd since first her eyes I saw,/As I were stung with some *Tarantula*'⁴⁹ — again sixteen syllables, and a gawky inversion ('her eyes I saw' for 'I saw her eyes'), to culminate in a rhyme which misses the bull's-eye, as 'well/*Infallible*' missed, 'saw/*Tarantula*', though here Dryden has skidded on the banana-skin which in *Religio Laici* he artfully laid out for his opponent. He does not mention what is pleasant about being stung by a '*Tarantula*' and, anyway, tarantulas don't sting, they bite.

This separating-off of the polysyllable from its surrounds can secure the feeling of 'quotedness' for the polysyllable even when the words have no foreign tincture. Compare Barten Holyday and Dryden translating Juvenal's third satire, on the miseries the poor have to put up with. Holyday:

⁴⁹ *The Conquest of Granada by the Spaniards* (1672), in *Works*, vol. XI, p. 56.

... What jests are spent,
On a poor man, if his cloak's foul or rent.⁵⁰

Dryden:

Add, that the Rich have still a Gibe in Store:
And will be monstrous witty on the Poor ... (II, 686; 248)

Dryden lamented that the scholarly Holyday had been 'forc'd to crowd his Verse with ill sounding Monosyllables, of which our Barbarous Language affords him a wild plenty' (II, 669), and Holyday's version is indeed lame here in its exclusive monosyllabism, 'lame' in the sense of 'rhythmically indeterminate'. Dryden's couplet, though, has sixteen monosyllables and two disyllables. Yet those two words 'monstrous witty' make a difference. Set off as they are from what surrounds them, they acquire implicit inverted commas and a snooty accent: 'monstrous witty' is something the better-off say about themselves ('La, Sir, you were monstrous witty at my Lady Sneerwell's t'other day'); the word 'monstrous' tells against their behaviour, which is truly monstrous — outrageous, unnatural — though this is a sense to which in their colloquial world of self-congratulation they are deaf. (The *OED* dates the first use of 'monstrous' in this colloquial sense from Swift in 1710 and it is indeed characteristic of Swift to turn between the word's senses, between the appalling and the blithe, the blithely appalling and the appallingly blithe, but I think Dryden anticipated the effect.)

He was expert at making his poems sound as if they inhabited two worlds at the same time. Such double domicile is a condition of all mock-heroic writing, and follows from the historical parallels between two ages which he drew in works like *Absalom and Achitophel*. His draughtsmanship in such parallelism was intricate. Consider the debate about why it was that Absalom was the most beautiful of David's sons:

Whether, inspir'd by some diviner Lust,
His Father got him with a greater Gust;
Or that his Conscious destiny made way
By manly Beauty to Imperiall sway. (I, 217; 19–22)

The two couplets offer sily competing 'explanations' of Absalom's good looks, and they are modulated in sound so that the first sounds earthier, more brass-tacks-y while the second conducts itself more as befits an epic, which this poem is slightly pretending to be. The

⁵⁰ Barten Holyday, *Decimus Junius Juvenalis, and Aulus Persius Flaccus Translated* ... (1673), p. 39.

first couplet is from the world of Gloucester sniggering about Edgar's conception; we might imagine it as something a yokel who supported Absalom/Monmouth might have said ('Ah, he's a fine figure of a man, the Duke. You may be sure there was good sport at his making.') The next lines, in the comparatively refined style of the modern heroic, might rather be imagined as issued by the Duke of Monmouth's press office. The wonderful disparity between the two couplets arises from the bouncily alliterative 'His Father got him with a greater Gust', a heartiness which is sedulously removed from the polish of what follows. 'Gust' is especially rich, meaning 'relish' but also conveying that 'the earth moved' for David at this particular copulation and also, because of the sense of 'gush' which 'gust' had in Dryden's English, indelicately hinting that he may have ejaculated more copiously for this son than for the others. All such thoughts are banished from the pastiche Virgilianism of 'Or that his Conscious destiny made way . . .'. The two styles together compose a perfect emblem for the semi-civilised state of England at that time, we might say, were it not that the historical parallels Dryden has drawn, and the fact that his joke is still alive and kicking, should rather incline us to say, given our experience of aftertimes, that the passage images a state in which we are still living.

Alliterative verse may figure different kinds of self-consciousness about time and the timeliness of poetry:

Of these the false *Achitophel* was first:
A Name to all succeeding Ages Curst. (I, 220–1; 150–1)

The multiple puns on 'succeeding' are a stock in trade of Restoration verse, and need not be dwelt on, but the pointed alliteration of 'false', 'Achitophel' and 'first' is splendidly distinctive of Dryden. He affects the letter here because he knows that such devices are apt to a poet who is cursing someone; to play with the sound of a name in this manner is a poetical way of making a voodoo doll. Here again, the poem is exquisitely attuned at the level of its sonic organisation to bicultural play, for when Achitophel himself speaks, he speaks a refined tongue, aeons distant from flyting and suchlike. I do not mean that he himself never alliterates, he does, but that his speech more characteristically sounds like this:

Not that your Father's Mildness I contemn;
But Manly Force becomes the Diadem. (I, 226; 381–2)

'Father's Mildness' chiasmatically alliterates into the next line's 'Manly

Force', and this dispersal and looping of an alliterative sequence has a smoothness evident to our ears now in contrast to the roughness of phrases like 'greater Gust'. Hearing such smoothness, we should recognise the extent to which 'our ears now' were created by Dryden, by such deft, self-conscious deployments of pastness in the texture of his verse (there is an extremely funny pastiche of Milton a few lines earlier: 'Him Staggering so when Hells dire Agent found' (I, 226; 373)). He was superbly able as a poet to take the rough with the smooth, place them alongside each other, and promote reflections in the acoustic thereby created. Achitophel is a smooth talker, a polite, modern man, but Dryden no more trusted the 'progress' he represents than the primitivism of 'Strength'. His suspicion of smoothness is nowhere more evident than in his having translated the celebrated phrase about the path to Hell from Book VI of the *Aeneid*, 'facilis descensus Averno', as 'The Gates of Hell are open Night and Day;/Smooth the Descent, and easie is the Way.' (III, 1206; 192–3) His contemporaries were alert to this stylistic mobility of his, though they sometimes looked askance at it as a mark of his political and religious inconstancy, or as merely effete. Prior and Montague have a brilliantly perceptive joke about this matter, when they portray him as glorying in his own mutability:

Here now to show you I am Master of all Stiles, I let my self down from the
Majesty of Virgil, to the Sweetness of Ovid.

Good Lord, how she admir'd her Heavenly Hiew!

What more easy and familiar! I writ this Line for the *Ladies*: the little
Rogues will be so fond of me to find I can yet be so tender. I hate such a
rough unhewn Fellow as *Milton*, that a Man must sweat to read Him; I'gad
you may run over this and be almost asleep.⁵¹

It is an early instance of the gibe about the new style of 'smoothness' — so soft you can sleep on it — which Pope was to make much of. That Dryden appears here as an effeminate — 'I hate such a rough unhewn Fellow as *Milton*' — when he was later to be praised by Hopkins for an opposing virtue — 'he is the most masculine of our poets' — shows not that he was androgyne but how amply he spanned that civilising process which took place in the verse of the English seventeenth century, and not only in its verse. It also reminds us from how many angles we need to view such a process, its gains and losses, while

⁵¹ *The Hind and the Panther Transvers'd* . . . (1687), in Helen and James Kinsley (eds.), *John Dryden: The Critical Heritage* (1971), p. 172.

agreeing with Scott's praise of this great poet: 'He . . . showed that the English language was capable of uniting smoothness with strength.'⁵²

Dryden's sense of his past, both the individual past of his own life and the cultural past of the English language, appears in his poise between the differing aspects and values of 'strength'. Modern literary history often lacks his three-dimensional response, as of someone walking round a sculpture, to the issues hereabouts; it may have more narrowly literary concerns than his; it also tends to a one-sided enthusiasm for all things strong. Walter Jackson Bate, for example, in his influential *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet*, takes a selection of the opening lines of 'To my Dear Friend Mr. Congreve' (which he refers to as 'To Mr Congreve') as an epigraph for his book and as the source for the title of its first chapter, 'The Second Temple'. Professor Bate's argument has become familiar: at some unspecific point, probably about the time of Dryden, artists became encumbered by 'the remorseless deepening of self-consciousness', they were bowed down beneath 'the rich and intimidating legacy of the past'.⁵³ Dryden's lines about 'the Gyant Race, before the Flood' are taken to refer to previous, mighty artists before whom the modern poet feels himself to be a mere epigone. Dryden was less keen on giants than Professor Bate is. His giants are primarily those Greek equivalents of the builders of Babel, who were rightly put down by the Olympians, as can be seen from Dryden's earlier use of the same phrase in his translation of Ovid's Jove recalling the threat these bullies had posed: 'our Universal State/ Was put to hazard, and the Giant Race/Our Captive Skies, were ready to imbrace' (II, 806; 238–40). They are also the wicked giants from before the flood (Genesis 6:4) who, one legend had it, 'on being warned of the Flood, had escaped to *Anglia*, then an extremity of the Continent and the most remote *angulus* of the world'⁵⁴ and had become the first inhabitants of these islands. So that 'our Syres' were not Angles, nor angels, but these monstrous angle-dwellers, on whom we look back with some awe, no doubt, but not with undiluted respect.

Nor is Dryden so melancholy about the 'second Temple' as the story about 'the burden of the past' requires him to be. He can be made to seem so melancholy only if, as Professor Bate does, you stop quoting the poem at the words 'The second Temple was not like the

⁵² Scott, *Life*, p. 410.

⁵³ *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (1971), p. 4.

⁵⁴ Kendrick, op. cit., p. 4.

first' and grant it a full stop there which it does not possess: 'The second Temple was not like the first:/Till You, the best *Vitruvius*, come at length . . .'. When this poem was published in 1694, they were just completing the masonry of the choir of Wren's new St Paul's, which was indeed not like the first St Paul's because it was built in a classical — Vitruvian — style, unlike the mostly Gothic assemblage it replaced.⁵⁵ Dryden's allusion is, as Bate says, to the second Hebrew Temple, which was smaller, less unified, and barer than the Temple Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed. The most important difference between the two temples was that the Holy of Holies was empty in the second temple, but this fact had for the Catholic Dryden a religious significance other than the literary historical symbolism Bate detects: the Holy of Holies would be empty in Wren's St Paul's because it was the first purpose-built Anglican cathedral, and would not hold the Real Presence in the Blessed Sacrament. That fact may show a falling-off but not a falling-off which a strictly literary history can describe.

'To my Dear Friend Mr. Congreve' does not repine about the dominance, the smothering priority, of the past; it has some anxieties about the future, about posterity. The 'gentle irony'⁵⁶ Bate finds in its praise of Congreve and his second play, *The Double-Dealer*, turns not against Congreve, but on Dryden himself, for Dryden takes up in this poem the terms in which Congreve's first play had been, a little tactlessly, eulogised in the previous year. The younger man's admirers had chorused that, as soon as Dryden was dead (which he shortly would be) Congreve would succeed him. Thus, Southern had remarked that the only thing Dryden had left to wish for was 'a Successor', and Bevil Higgons had been more painfully forthright:

When *DRYDEN* dying, shall the World deceive,
Whom we Immortal, as his Works, believe;
Thou shalt succeed . . .⁵⁷

Gracefully, Dryden accepts that he has one foot in the grave, that he is rapidly becoming part of that past he had so long worked in, and which the 'present Age of Wit obscures'. He is returning to Congreve

⁵⁵ Richard Lockett in his 1981 Chatterton Lecture pointed out the relevance of 'what was contemporaneously happening at the top of Ludgate Hill' to the poem; see his 'The Fabric of Dryden's Verse', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. LXVII (1981), p. 296.

⁵⁶ Bate, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

⁵⁷ Thomas Southerne, 'To Mr. CONGREVE', line 23; Bevil Higgons, 'To Mr. CONGREVE', on his *PLAY*, called, *The OLD BATCHELOUR*, lines 21–23, both in Anthony G. Henderson (ed.), *The Comedies of William Congreve* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 4, 6.

a compliment which Congreve had paid him in 1693, on Dryden's translation of Persius:

Thou great Revealer of dark Poesie . . .
 Old *Stoick* Virtue, clad in rugged lines,
 Polish'd by you, in Modern Brilliant shines: . . .
 So now, whatever Praise, from us, is due,
 Belongs not to Old *Persius*, but the New.
 For still Obscure, to us no Light he gives;
 Dead in himself, in you alone he lives.⁵⁸

When Dryden dies, it will be in a writer like Congreve alone that he will live; the transfusion which gave Persius a life in the seventeenth century will need to be performed again if Dryden is to survive his time, 'for we', as Dryden said (meaning poets), 'have our Lineal Descents and Clans, as well as other Families: *Spencer* more than once insinuates, that the Soul of *Chaucer* was transfus'd into his Body; and that he was begotten by him Two hundred years after his Decease'. The 'Lineal Descent' is to pass to Congreve:

Oh that your Brows my Lawrel had sustain'd,
 Well had I been Depos'd, if You had reign'd!
 The Father had descended for the Son;
 For only You are lineal to the Throne. (II, 853; 41-4)

This kindly wish that Congreve had succeeded to the Laureatship Dryden lost in the Revolution of 1688 comes with a special aptitude in a poem prefatory to *The Double-Dealer*, a play much concerned with true and false heirs: 'it is a great grief to me, indeed it is Mr. *Careless*, that I have not a Son to inherit this.'; 'Must the Family of the *Plyants* be utterly extinct for want of Issue Male. Oh Impiety!'; 'I would fain have some resemblance of myself in my Posterity . . .'.⁵⁹ There is a wry jocularly about the wish, especially given the buffoonery surrounding Sir Paul Plyant's fatherly ambitions in Congreve's play, but the jokes intensify the serious reflections in Dryden's line, where imaginative paternity appears not only with the gravity of regal successions but also, with daring hyperbole, as mirroring and reversing the relations of God the Father and God the Son ('The Father had descended for the Son'). The poem to Congreve reverses *Mac Flecknoe* with its mock-coronation by a bad poet of his successor, and in it, Dryden, who was translating Virgil at the time, speaks in the voice of

⁵⁸ In Helen and James Kinsley, op. cit., pp. 205-206.

⁵⁹ *The Double-Dealer*, in Henderson, op. cit., pp. 141, 152, 154.

the dead Anchises, blessed once more in the sight of his beloved son in the underworld, the words from the sixth book of the *Aeneid* which Dryden said was his favourite:⁶⁰

He, when *Aeneas* on the Plain appears,
Meets him with open Arms, and falling Tears.
Welcome, he said, the Gods undoubted Race,
O long expected, to my dear Embrace;
Once more 'tis giv'n me to behold your Face! (III, 1225; 929–33)

Anchises had expected Aeneas for only just over a year in fact, but in the underworld, it had seemed longer to him; this is the long wait with which 'To my Dear Friend Mr. Congreve' opens: 'the promis'd Hour is come at last', 'Our Age was cultivated thus at length'. It takes a long time to write like Dryden, as Dryden himself knew; his hope is now that some answeringly long time might be granted to his writings after he is dead. The 'at last' and 'at length' of the Congreve poem are characteristic of Dryden's voice; he was fond of the phrase 'at length' and often adds it to passages of Virgil which particularly move him. When there is a verbal warrant in Virgil for the phrase (as sometimes there is not), it is usually the word 'tandem' which gives rise to Dryden's 'at length', a 'tandem' such as Anchises utters when he sees his son at last again: 'venisti tandem, tuaque exspectata parenti/vicit iter durum pietas' [do you come at length, and has the harshness of the journey been overcome by what your father expected of you, by piety?].

Shortly before Aeneas and Anchises meet at last, the hero has been granted a vision of a 'Titan Race' (III, 1221; 782), the giants who had thought to take Heaven and 'imitate inimitable Force' (III, 1221; 799). These are the false pretenders to deity whom Anchises has in mind when he greets Aeneas as 'the Gods undoubted Race', a phrase which Dryden added to Virgil. Yet Dryden as Anchises has less to show Congreve than was promised to Aeneas; poets do not build empires, and have no kingdoms on offer:

Maintain Your Post: That's all the Fame you need;
For 'tis impossible you shou'd proceed.
Already I am worn with Cares and Age;
And just abandoning th'Ungrateful Stage:
Unprofitably kept at Heav'ns expense,
I live a Rent-charge on his Providence:

⁶⁰ Letter to Tonson, ? April 1695, *Letters*, p. 75.

But You, whom ev'ry Muse and Grace adorn,
Whom I foresee to better Fortune born,
Be kind to my Remains; and oh defend,
Against Your Judgment, Your departed Friend! (II, 853; 64–73)

These edgy supplications are half-afraid they will not be met, and that is why there are jokes here: he asks Congreve to defend his works, though to defend them may be against Congreve's better judgement, indeed, it is because Congreve has better judgement than Dryden that Dryden's works will need defence, defence *against* as well as by that judgement. The nature of the refining which Dryden helped bring about naturally tends to the outgrowing of those who initiated it, to cast the predecessor into shade; 'Maintain Your Post' carries a ghostly undersong as Dryden recedes from view: 'Maintain Your Past'. And then 'Be kind to my Remains': this asks, first, to be decently buried — 'please behave as if you were kin to me, and grant me the usual pieties' (when Dryden wrote these words, his three sons by the flesh were all in Rome, and might not have been able to take charge of the obsequies). There was, it seems, some trouble about Dryden's funeral, though the accounts are now inextricably confused, but Farquhar's letter makes the ceremony sound an aptly hybrid pomp, like the solemnities which greeted Charles II on his return: 'I come now from Mr. Dryden's funeral, where we had an Ode in Horace sung' — it was the thirtieth ode of the third book, 'Exegi monumentum . . .' — 'instead of David's Psalms . . . The Oration indeed, was great and ingenious, worthy the subject, and like the author; whose prescriptions can restore the living, and his pen embalm the dead' — it was delivered by Garth, the physician-poet — 'And so much for Mr. Dryden; whose burial was the same as his life, variety and not of a piece: — the quality and mob, farce and heroicks; the sublime and ridicule mix'd in a piece; — great Cleopatra in a hackney coach.'⁶¹

'Be kind to my Remains': the words avail themselves of a pun on 'remains' as 'literary remains' which had been possible since Mr Herbert's *Remains* were published in the middle of the seventeenth century: 'look after my works'. In 1717, Congreve discharged part of the obligation these words laid on him, when he wrote the 'Epistle Dedicatory' to a six volume edition of *The Dramatick Works of John Dryden*: 'In some very Elegant, tho' very partial Verses which he did me the Honour to write to me, he recommended it to me to *be kind*

⁶¹ Farquhar, letter of 1700, in Helen and James Kinsley, op. cit., p. 243.

to his *Remains*. I was then, and have been ever since most sensibly touched with that Expression . . .'.⁶² Congreve prefaced Dryden's *Dramatick Works* as Dryden had prefaced *The Double-Dealer* and thereby satisfied, as he said, 'the Passion which I felt in me, to do something answerable to an Injunction laid upon me in so Pathetick and so Amicable a Manner'.⁶³ He stood by Dryden's remains, as Dryden had so often stood, Aeneas-like, by the remains of his predecessors, answering their injunctions with a filial, transfusive care. Artistic renovation is not best described as an attempt to get previous times off one's back, as when Professor Bate speaks of 'the immense effort of the arts, including music, of the early and middle twentieth century to get the nineteenth century off their backs'.⁶⁴ There is a counter-myth to the myth of Oedipal struggle which has shaped and swamped our day's imagination of what it is to be a son and have a father: the myth of Aeneas who did not tell Anchises to get off his back.

A later poet is not under the past only as someone may be 'under' a burden; he is also under the past as one may be under an aegis, as Dryden so frequently put his published works 'under' Virgil by placing above his own writing an epigraph from Virgil. *Astrea Redux*, *Annus Mirabilis*, *The Medall*, *Threnodia Augustalis*, *The Hind and the Panther*, *Britannia Rediviva*, the poems from the *Examen Poeticum*, all carry Virgil at their head and place themselves under his protection. His last published collection, the *Fables*, stands firm by those remains, taking as its epigraph Aeneas's words on the anniversary of his father's death: 'Nunc ultro ad cineres ipsis et ossa parentis . . . /adsumus': 'But now here we are, by the very ashes and bones of my father, and we are here, I believe, not without the purpose and the will of heaven.' Or, as Dryden has it, drawing a refined veil over the strong locution 'cineres ipsis et ossa parentis':

But since this happy Storm our Fleet has driv'n,
(Not, as I deem, without the Will of Heav'n),
Upon these friendly Shores, and flow'ry Plains,
Which hide *Anchises*, and his blest Remains;
Let us with Joy perform his Honours due . . . (III, 1173; 69–73)

That 'adsumus', where Dryden cuts short his quotation (it is the first

⁶² 'Epistle Dedicatory', in *The Dramatick Works of John Dryden, Esq: in Six Volumes* (1717), repr. in Helen and James Kinsley, op. cit., pp. 263–264.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Bate, op. cit., p. 19.

word of a hexameter, and the sentence is not complete), is a proud cry, an answer to a roll-call such as Dryden might have given in Westminster School: 'Adsum!'. 'Present!' Such a cry is an act at once of obedience and of self-assertion. It matters that Dryden answers Virgil's call in Virgil's words and not in the singular: 'adsumus' — 'The English poets, 1700, all present and (as best we can manage) correct, Sir!'. The plural witnesses to the fact that a poetic translator of Dryden's genius does not encounter his past originals as an isolated individual but rather as the ambassador of his time and place, as an envoy from his contemporaries to the other country of the past. Pasternak commented on this when reflecting on his own work as a translator: 'Translations are conceivable because ideally they too have to be works of art, and, by virtue of their own unrepeatability, must stand on the same level as the originals, while sharing their text. Translations are conceivable because, for centuries before our time, whole literatures translated one another; and translation is not so much a method of becoming acquainted with individual works as a medium for the age-old communion of cultures and peoples.'⁶⁵ Translation is also the deepest channel for poetic influence and the most intimate rehearsal of historical self-consciousness; the translator's character, at once unrepeatably unique and supra-individual, represents the more general condition of what it is for people to live in a culture (whether they are poets or not).

Recent accounts of the bearing of the past on poets have ignored this essentially plural character of the 'age-old communion of cultures and peoples', and so produced the despondent figure of the lonely poet outweighed by an intolerably extensive past. Professor Bate may not have foreseen that his work would give birth to a yet more individualistic story, the tale of 'the anxiety of influence' as told by Harold Bloom. Indeed, 'individualistic' is putting it mildly: 'Poetic strength comes only from a triumphant wrestling with the greatest of the dead, and from an ever more triumphant solipsism'.⁶⁶ With whom could a consistent solipsist believe himself to be wrestling, and can a solipsist know either defeat or triumph? Bloom promised from the first to 'de-idealize our accounts of how one poet helps to form another'; his version of poetic influence 'exposes and de-idealizes "tradition" [by]

⁶⁵ 'Notes on translation', in Angela Livingstone (ed.) *Pasternak on Art and Creativity* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 187.

⁶⁶ *A Map of Misreading* (1975), p. 9.

showing us that all “tradition” is indistinguishable from making mistakes about anteriority’.⁶⁷ Yet if tradition and making mistakes are indistinguishable from each other, it seems ungenerous of Bloom to pincer one term — ‘“tradition”’ — with inverted commas, while leaving the other — ‘making mistakes’ — unqualified, as if somehow it more really existed than tradition. The concept of ‘making mistakes’ has actually no application, for Bloom does not allow the possibility that one poet might get another right (as in a good translation, for instance) and where we cannot be right, we cannot be mistaken either.

Crucial to Bloom’s theory is an acceptance of Bate’s account of the ‘burden of the past’, with that account’s misapprehension of what ‘To my Dear Friend Mr. Congreve’ means. The words of the poem keep cropping up, as when Bloom writes early in *The Anxiety of Influence*: ‘The greatest poet in our language is excluded from this book for several reasons. One is necessarily historical; Shakespeare belongs to the giant age before the flood, before the anxiety of influence became central to poetic consciousness.’⁶⁸ This is far removed from the steeped pastness of Dryden’s ‘the Gyant Race’ — ‘Race’ not ‘age’, as Bloom untunes the phrase — ‘before the Flood’. As is the adulation of ‘strength’ throughout Bloom’s writing. The gesture which a truly ‘strong’ poet makes when he comes into his own, the meaning of a new achievement in poetry need not always be, as Bloom’s constant triumphing implies, the punch into the air of the footballer who has just scored, or the clasped, self-congratulatory hands of a wrestler over his opponent. Sublime strength is revealed at least as well by the ability to take another person’s hand, in the vulnerable knowledge that one needs a hand, such a hand as the past holds out. This was Dryden’s thought too: ‘To find in our selves the Weaknesses and Imperfections of our wretched Kind, is surely the most reasonable step we can make towards the Compassion of our fellow Creatures’.⁶⁹ But then Bloom’s strong poet is so odd a being that perhaps he has no ‘fellow Creatures’.

Dryden’s voice in ‘To my dear Friend Mr. Congreve’ is the voice of a reasonable man who makes a step towards a fellow creature. In the concentrated elegance of this great poem, he speaks not out of a superstitious dread of the past but from rational trepidation about the future. The worry is the worry of a dying father, his worry what his

⁶⁷ *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), p. 5; *Kabbalah and Criticism* (1975), p. 103.

⁶⁸ *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 11.

⁶⁹ ‘To the Right Honourable Philip, Earl of Leycester, &c.’, in *Works*, vol. XV, p. 62.

son may become now that the world for that son is a world without him. This worry is in part the self-interested desire not to be wholly forgotten, and may be groundless, as the poem knows, for Congreve has been enabled by Dryden to do without Dryden, but the worry is not only selfish, for the voice speaks also on behalf of all else that has become or is about to become the past, as if a father on his death-bed should say to his son 'Look after your mother', for example. The injunction laid on Congreve by Dryden's kind words while Dryden still lived is laid on us too now that Dryden's voice is past. As Simone Weil wrote: 'Of all the human soul's needs, none is more vital than this one of the past. . . . The past once destroyed never returns. The destruction of the past is perhaps the greatest of all crimes. Today the preservation of what little of it remains ought to become almost an obsession.'⁷⁰

Note. This is an expanded version of the lecture delivered on 12 March 1992. I am grateful to Paul Davis, Ruth Mackenzie, Jeremy Maule, Christopher Ricks, and Stanley Griffiths, each of whom helped me with the piece.

⁷⁰ Simone Weil, *L'enracinement*, trans. by A. F. Wills as *The Need for Roots* (1952, repr., 1978), p. 49.