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Defining the Public Poet: Towards a Definition of Dryden's Scepticism

Adam John Hopley

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Abbreviations

Bredvold	Louis Bredvold, <i>The Intellectual Milieu of John Dryden: Studies in Some Aspects of Seventeenth-Century Thought</i> (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1936)
<i>Companion</i>	<i>The Cambridge Companion to John Dryden</i> , edited by Steven Zwicker (Cambridge University Press, 2004)
Harth	Philip Harth, <i>Contexts of Dryden's Intellectual Thought</i> (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968)
Hobbes	Richard Tuck, ed., <i>Hobbes: Leviathan</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)
Montaigne	<i>The Essays of Michel De Montaigne</i> , 2 vols, translated by Charles Cotton (1685) (London: G Bell, 1930)
Noggle	Noggle, James, <i>The Skeptical Sublime: Aesthetic Ideology in Pope and the Tory Satirists</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)
Parker	Fred Parker, <i>Scepticism and Literature: An Essay on Pope, Hume, Sterne and Johnson</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003)
<i>Poems</i>	<i>The Poems of John Dryden</i> , vols 1 & 2, edited by Paul Hammond and vols 3-5 edited by Paul Hammond and David Hopkins (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 1995-2005)
Popkin	Richard H. Popkin, <i>The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza</i> (California and London: University of California Press, 1979)
Winn	James Anderson Winn, <i>Dryden and his World</i> (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987)
<i>Works</i>	<i>The Works of John Dryden</i> , edited by H.T. Swedenberg and others, 20 vols (Berkeley, California 1956-)

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Scepticism and Dryden: Critical Perspectives

John Dryden was one of the leading public commentators of the Restoration and late seventeenth century. Everywhere in his writings he displays a critical engagement with contemporary ideas about government, philosophy, human conduct and the role of a national Church, and every literary form to which he turned his hand felt his influence. It is widely accepted that Dryden's age was one in which scepticism had become a defining and irrepressible intellectual force. However the nature of sceptical thought in the late seventeenth century and of Dryden's scepticism in particular has been a subject of great critical contestation. My purpose in this thesis is to provide a comprehensive account of seventeenth-century scepticism as it relates specifically to Dryden's work. By examining the philosophical implications of his statements on politics and religion, and by analysing the literary strategies he adopts in a representative selection of his poems, plays, essays and translations, I shall seek to show that scepticism was at the heart of Dryden's fundamental philosophical sympathies. It is my belief that a kind of undeclared sceptical conviction informed Dryden's commitment to established, or status quo, authority, whilst, at the same time, a range of less identifiable sceptical ideas pervaded his writing throughout his career.

As philosophical and literary criticism repeatedly attests, the term 'sceptical' can rarely, if ever, be simply equated with 'doubt' or 'incredulity as to the truth of some assertions or supposed fact', as the *OED* generally defines it (*OED* 2). Yet on the other side, neither do specific, apparently self-contained, critical sub-definitions of scepticism, such as 'fideism' and 'mitigated scepticism', sufficiently account for the protean nature of sceptical thought at any given moment in the late seventeenth century, or, in fact, for those ideas, sceptical in spirit, at any given

moment in Dryden's work. Indeed, what has been understood as sceptical throughout the seventeenth century refers to no clear attitudes or established principle of belief. Even writers and philosophers who shared a similar political and religious outlook differed in their assumptions as sceptical thinkers. Taking any immediate inconsistencies into consideration, it is my intention to treat scepticism as a dynamic component, alike historical and epistemological, of a wider culture of intellectual debate. As such, I will be looking to augment (rather than attempt to supplant) existing commentaries, expanding upon previous critical considerations of Dryden's philosophical character by demonstrating how the poet and playwright adopted many of the different forms of scepticism to different literary and political and religious ends and in different political and religious contexts.

Central to my study is a consideration of how Dryden managed his relationship with his king and his reading and viewing public, and, to this end, how he accommodated his private interests to his, often self-styled, role as public writer. As Cedric D. Reverand II observes, Dryden regarded 'his role as a public poet in a classical sense, as *vates*, meaning both bard and prophet', which 'empowered' him with a 'special authority to comment and criticize'.¹ To this end, I argue, Dryden recognises several aspects of poetry's public potential: its ability to track social (and usually transient) currents of thought; its capacity to find the general in the particular; and its independence from prevailing political influences, useful because it meant that critical comment could be offered on them. As far as Dryden was concerned, poetry had to take risks – and sides. Jürgen Habermas's research on the Enlightenment's first phase, where a serious alternative to

¹ Cedric D. Reverand II, 'The Final "Memorial of my own Principles": Dryden's Alter Egos in his later Career', in *John Dryden: Tercentenary Essays*, ed. by Paul Hammond and David Hopkins (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp. 282-307 (p. 282).

Church and Court existed and maintained some measure of hegemonic influence, gives some insight into the historical moment with which Dryden was negotiating:

The domain of ‘common concern’ which was the object of public critical attention remained a preserve in which Church and State authorities had the monopoly of interpretation not just from the pulpit but in philosophy, literature, and art, even at a time when, for specific social categories, the development of capitalism already demanded a behaviour whose rational orientation required even more information. To the degree, however, to which philosophical and literary works and works of art in general were produced for the market and distributed through it, these culture products became similar to that type of information: as commodities they became in principle generally accessible. They no longer remained components of the Church’s and court’s publicity of representation.²

Considering this view from the perspective of seventeenth-century history, Craig Calhoun notes that whereas ‘faith and reason’ might now be ‘held to be the attributes of individuals’, they were, in Dryden’s age, ‘defined, defended, and debated in arguments that appealed to public opinion’.³ For Dryden, the ‘public’ in the sense of an identifiable audience was not as yet fully-fledged, and I will go on to demonstrate how he gradually came to assess this domain of ‘common concern’ in his own writings, even putting it to use in such works as *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681) and *The Medal* (1682).

What follows now though is an exposition of the meaning and use of ‘scepticism’ in seventeenth-century criticism writ large, and a synopsis of how sceptical and sceptically inspired points of view relate to Dryden’s work. To complete this task I provide by way of analytical review an outline of the development of the history of sceptical thought; references to strictly philosophical studies, such as Richard Popkin’s *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (1979), and to studies which do not directly deal with the seventeenth century, but which

² Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. by Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1989), pp. 36-37.

³ Craig Calhoun *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1992), p. 221.

I later show are illuminating in other respects, such as James Noggle's *The Skeptical Sublime* (2001) and Fred Parker's *Scepticism and Literature* (2003), will prove a necessary part of my discussion here.⁴

That Dryden was sceptical is certainly no new observation. When, in his *Lives of the English Poets* (1779-1781), Samuel Johnson found occasion to describe Dryden's intellectual predispositions, he used a vocabulary that portrayed the poet and playwright in strikingly sceptical terms, stating that he was 'by no means constant to himself', and that his writing was 'always *another and the same*'.⁵ Likewise, Alexander Pope, in his *Essay on Criticism* (1711), contrasted the uncritical judgement of those who value 'their own side or mind', making 'of themselves the measure of mankind', with Dryden's cautious reserve and tactical level-headedness.⁶ Dryden himself also explicitly presented himself as a sceptic, giving, as he did, three open professions of scepticism, in 'Defence of an Essay of Dramatic Poesy' (1668), 'Preface to *Religio Laici*' (1682), and 'Preface to *Sylvae*' (1685).⁷ However, but for a casual and largely perfunctory explanation of his general philosophical temper, or, in Dryden's own case, a

⁴ Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (London: University of California Press, 1979), James Noggle's *The Skeptical Sublime: Aesthetic Ideology in Pope and the Tory Satirists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Parker, *Scepticism and Literature: An Essay on Pope, Hume, Sterne and Johnson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Subsequent references to these studies will be to the abbreviation Popkin, Noggle and Parker respectively; see my list of abbreviations at the beginning of this thesis.

⁵ Samuel Johnson, *Lives of English Poets*, vol. II, ed. by Roger Lonsdale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 121 and p. 123.

⁶ Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism* (1711), in *Pastoral Poetry and an Essay on Criticism*, ed. by E. Auden and Audra Williams (London: Methuen; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 290. Maynard Mack's comparison of Dryden's and Pope's writing gives an interesting insight into the nature of Dryden's sceptical thought, as well as his influence upon the eighteenth-century man of letters. Stating that what emerges from their writings was 'not so much a system as a highly eclectic set of values, in substance an attempt to harmonize apparently opposing attitudes', he concludes that both were everywhere looking to preserve their own sense of intellectual flexibility (Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man* ed. by Maynard Mack [London: Methuen; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961], pp. 211-12). As my thesis will bear out, this is a conclusion with which I agree.

⁷ *The Works of John Dryden*, vol. IX, ed. by H.T. Swedenberg, Jr, and others (Berkeley, CA and London: University of California Press, 1956-), p. 15, and *The Poems of John Dryden*, vol. II, ed. by Paul Hammond (Harlow: Pearson Education, 1995), p. 86 and p. 247.

largely unexplained natural diffidence in matters of philosophy, none of these statements reveals anything very much about the nature of Dryden's sceptical thought, still less about how Dryden's scepticism modulated into his poems and plays. Only in twentieth-century early-modern literary scholarship was the theme of scepticism in Dryden's work more extensively and more seriously explored, first by Louis Bredvold in *The Intellectual Milieu of John Dryden* (1936), and then by Philip Harth in *Contexts of Dryden's Thought* (1968).⁸ Individually, Bredvold and Harth contributed a great deal to our understanding of seventeenth-century literature, and in their own way they broke new ground in seventeenth-century historical research. Yet taken together, their views on Dryden are in the main antithetical and, as such, constitute something of an unresolved dialectic within the Dryden critical canon.

According to Bredvold's thesis, Dryden exemplified a habit of thought closely related to that of sixteenth-century continental thinkers like Michel de Montaigne and Pierre Charron, thinkers who had revived the Hellenistic school of sceptical philosophy, Pyrrhonism, and modernised it. Knowledge, the Pyrrhonic argument runs, is ultimately unattainable, as the reasoning intellect is both of itself limited and severely impaired by the limits of sense perception. Where certainty is sought – where hypotheses assume the role of truth propositions – the Pyrrhonist advocates a kind of intellectual detachment, maintaining that all ideas should be held with their opposite, in a 'state of equipollence' or 'suspended judgment'.⁹ The ultimate end of Pyrrhonism is imperturbability of thought, or 'a calm resignation to the unknowableness of truth', termed

⁸ *The Intellectual Milieu of John Dryden: Studies in Some Aspects of Seventeenth-Century Thought* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1936) and Philip Harth, *Contexts of Dryden's Intellectual Thought* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968). Subsequent references to these studies will be to the abbreviation Bredvold and Harth respectively; see my list of abbreviations at the beginning of this thesis.

⁹ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, trans. and ed. by Julia Annes and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. xxi.

ataraxia – a concept it shares with the other major Hellenistic schools, Epicureanism and Stoicism.¹⁰ Named after its founder, Pyrrho of Elis (c. 365-270 BCE), and receiving full theoretical formulation in the writings of Sextus Empiricus, Pyrrhonism had been a versatile, open-ended and pragmatic philosophy, useful as a tool of speculation, but always non-committal, since, it was believed, to advance one idea over another is to support a knowledge claim – which can always be exposed as illusory.¹¹ Bredvold describes the appeal of Pyrrhonic thought to Dryden and his contemporaries in no uncertain terms:

His contact with philosophical skepticism enabled him to rationalize his natural diffidence of temper. Though he has no claim to originality as a thinker, he did possess a loose group of ideas and philosophical doctrines which he understood and to which he felt himself affined [...] Their pervasive influence is evident wherever Dryden made any important intellectual decisions, whether in politics, religion, or philosophy – most evident perhaps in his conversion to Catholicism. They drew him quite naturally into certain currents of thought of the century. He lived in an age of philosophical scepticism; every reader of any pretension to cultivation knew Montaigne and Charron intimately, and almost every scholar had read Sextus Empiricus. Neither Dryden nor his age can be fully understood apart from this Pyrrhonism, diffused in every department of thought, lending itself to the most unexpected places.¹²

Identifying, as a defining feature of his writing, the practice of ‘testing certain arguments by throwing them into the arena with their opposites’, Bredvold argues that Dryden’s intellectual sympathies and compositional approach can always be equated with Pyrrhonism in one respect or another.¹³ It is not difficult to see why Montaigne is regarded as an intellectual model in this respect. Largely credited as the pioneer of the modern essay (literally *assay*, or attempt), Montaigne, in Parker’s words, portrayed ‘the mind in movement’ (that is, according to its natural behaviour of ranging arbitrarily over the different issues and implications of a given subject), rather than arguing from the static position of a single and apparently authoritative point of

¹⁰ Bredvold, p. 19.

¹¹ See *Outlines of Scepticism*, particularly pp. xx-xxi.

¹² Bredvold, p. 15.

¹³ Bredvold, p. 110.

view.¹⁴ Of the 106 essays that he wrote (which were published between 1571 and 1595 and collected under the simple title *Essays*), his longest, ‘An Apologie for Raimond Sebond’ was considered an especially influential manifestation of such sceptical flux and flow. As Popkin states, the ‘rambling musings of the *Apologie* have a method in their madness, a method of increasing the fever of doubt until it destroys every possible stronghold of rational activity’.¹⁵

However, it was not so much Montaigne’s *essaying* aesthetic that Bredvold cites as influential in Dryden’s work as his ‘new orientation’ in ‘ethical thought’.¹⁶ According to Pyrrhonic reasoning, no ethical system – religious or political – can be regarded as preferable to another; therefore the sceptic will live by appearances, ‘in conformity with traditional customs’.¹⁷ Though historical sources provide no evidence that Pyrrho and his disciples in the Greek and Roman world had explicitly counselled such conformity, more recent research confirms its significance to Montaigne, particularly in his hostility to Reformation thought. As a consequence, manifestations of Pyrrhonism in Montaigne’s writings (and in those of his intellectual heirs like Charron) have been linked with the Catholic principle of fideism – the view, still nascent in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that any effort to understand the will of God is wholly opposed to true belief. Perhaps influenced by Bredvold, more recent scholars like Popkin and Terence Penelhum have tended to treat Pyrrhonism and fideism as interchangeable concepts. Thomas Carroll highlights the problems of this, stressing the need to understand the ‘comparably recent origin of the term [fideism] and the problem this circumstance presents for using the term

¹⁴ Parker, p. 32.

¹⁵ Popkin, p. 54.

¹⁶ Bredvold, p. 34.

¹⁷ *Outlines of Scepticism*, p. 7.

outside this context'.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the retrospective application of 'fideism' in relation to arguments against reform theology, as well as its association with the revival of Pyrrhonic scepticism, is appropriate since, in Penelhum's words, the term can be broadly taken to mean 'that faith does not need the support of reason and should not seek it'.¹⁹ Characterised by the rule-of-faith dispute between would-be reformers of the Church like Martin Luther and John Calvin and the Church's ecclesiastical councils, the Reformation had denied the 'entire framework by which orthodoxy had been determined for centuries', posing a seemingly insoluble theological and epistemological dilemma: 'Once a fundamental criterion has been challenged, how does one tell which of the alternative possibilities ought to be accepted?'²⁰ With its deference to established authority, 'Pyrrhonic fideism' proved a powerful theological weapon against reform, for if 'the Pyrrhonist accepted the laws and customs of his community, he would accept Catholicism'.²¹ Again, the central text in Montaigne is the *Apology*. I quote from Charles Cotton's 1685 translation of the text:

There is nothing in human invention that carries so great a show of likelihood and utility as [Pyrrhonism]; this presents man, naked and empty, confessing his natural weakness, fit to receive some foreign force from above; unfurnished of human, and therefore more apt to receive divine knowledge; setting aside his own judgement to make more room for faith; not misbelieving, nor establishing any doctrine against the laws and common observances; humble, obedient, disciplinable, studious, a sworn enemy of heresy, and consequently freeing himself from vain and irreligious opinions introduced by false sects; 'tis a blank paper prepared to receive from the finger of God such forms as He shall please to write upon it.²²

Montaigne applauded the Pyrrhonists for making 'no other use of their arguments and their reason than to ruin the appearance of experience', and for shaking 'all convictions [...]

¹⁸ 'The Traditions of Fideism', *Religious Studies*, 44 (2008), 1-22 (p. 10).

¹⁹ 'Fideism', in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. by Charles Taliaferro and others (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), p. 441.

²⁰ Popkin, p. 3.

²¹ Popkin, p. 47.

²² *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, 2 vols, trans. by Charles Cotton (1685) (London: G Bell, 1930), pp. 199-200. Subsequent references to Montaigne's *Essays* will be to the abbreviation Montaigne; see my list of abbreviations at the beginning of this thesis.

vouch[ing] for nothing'.²³ Above all, though, he celebrated their belief regarding the futility of rational thought and their rejection of philosophical value judgements as the paragon of true Christian piety. Of course, such unequivocal terms as 'enemy of heresy', 'vain', 'irreligious' and 'false' notably depart from the lexicon of indeterminacy developed by Empiricus; much of the first book of *Outlines of Scepticism*, for example, is concerned with the phrasal 'modes of suspension of judgement' which seek to negate the kind of dogmatic judgement that Montaigne, in this instance at least, seemed to be defending.²⁴ But accepting the laws and common observances, Montaigne reminded us, allows for the same imperturbability of thought, or, *ataraxia*, which is the only sincere and godly aim of life.²⁵

One hundred and fifty years of religious and philosophical history notwithstanding, Bredvold imputes to Dryden the same Pyrrhonism and on the same grounds. Like Montaigne, he argues, Dryden 'submits the reason to a destructive philosophical analysis' and like Montaigne he advocates that 'the unity and perpetuity of the Church can be preserved only by the sacrifice of the independence of the individual reason in the final decision of controversies'.²⁶ The religious rationalists against whom Dryden apparently adopts this position included the deists, a growing core of theologians and philosophers who held with a natural religion, denying the revelation of Christianity, as well as a number of more disparate thinkers who based their main theological premises upon logic or scientific evidence rather than upon Church or biblical authority – Edward Stillingfleet, John Tillotson, the Cambridge Platonists, amongst others.²⁷ Bredvold stops

²³ Montaigne, p. 281.

²⁴ *Outlines of Scepticism*, pp. 46-50.

²⁵ 'The aim of sceptics', writes Sextus Empiricus 'is tranquillity in matters of opinion and moderation of feeling in matters forced upon us'. *Outlines of Scepticism*, p. 11.

²⁶ Bredvold, p. 122.

²⁷ Bredvold, pp. 106-107 and p. 120.

short of invoking Luther and the names of other would-be reformers in the sixteenth century as the antecedents of such thinkers, but he does argue that the Anglican and the Catholic churches were alike insofar as they embodied a religious orthodoxy which was becoming increasingly destabilised by a ‘spirit of dissent’ that could not be reconciled with ‘a settled and authoritative order in Church and State’.²⁸ With this as his premise, he contends that Dryden’s Pyrrhonism can be found in his obviously political compositions, such as his poems *Absalom and Achitophel*, *The Medal* and his play *The Duke of Guise* (1682); likewise, he holds that this Pyrrhonism explains the relationship between his two denominationally very different religious poems, the apparently Anglican *Religio Laici* (1682) and the Catholic *The Hind and the Panther* (1685). For him these are so philosophically alike that ‘the earlier poem might be regarded as a sort of prelude to the later; both are basically sceptical and fideistic [...] both the poems are woven on the same warp of Pyrrhonism and fideism’.²⁹

Offering, as Harth observes, ‘a single relatively simple explanation for a highly complex series of thoughts and actions for which Dryden was responsible’, Bredvold’s thesis had a significant impact on the way Dryden was read.³⁰ Certainly, the poet’s first twentieth-century biographer, Charles Ward, averred that Pyrrhonism was a ‘marked characteristic of his mind [...] and] his refusal to accept an *ipse dixit* runs like a bright thread through most of his work’.³¹ However, on close scrutiny, its shortcomings are apparent. Although, in the Dedication to his translation of Virgil’s *Aeneid* (1697), Dryden freely declared that he was ‘of Montaigne’s principles, that an honest man ought to be contented with that form of government, and with those fundamental

²⁸ Bredvold, pp. 142-43.

²⁹ Bredvold, p. 121.

³⁰ Harth, p. 2.

³¹ Charles Ward, *The Life of John Dryden* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), pp. 15-16.

constitutions of it, which he receiv'd from his ancestors' (*Works*, V, p. 281), it does not follow that he identified political obedience with Pyrrhonism; in fact, in the preface to his translation of *Lives of Plutarch* (1683), he seemingly distanced himself from the epistemological balancing act of Pyrrhonic philosophy, deriding the 'Pyrrhonians' as 'the grosser sort of Scepticks, who bring all certainty in question and startle even at the notion of common sense' (*Works*, XVII, p. 249). At no point does Bredvold acknowledge this pronouncement, much less try to explain or contest it. Furthermore, by referring to the political and religious troubles of sixteenth-century Catholic Europe in order to explain those of seventeenth-century Britain, and by postulating that fideism was the poet's foremost religious conviction, Bredvold overlooks the fact that Dryden was addressing the questions and concerns of his own time. It is on such grounds of historical difference that most recent critics dispute his conclusions. Thomas Fujimura, for instance, finds no fideism in *Religio Laici*; rather he states that the poem is written 'in accord with the statements of Anglican divines on the role of reason in matters of faith'.³² Similarly Donald Benson argues that although, for 'polemical purposes', Dryden 'sometimes exceeds traditionally orthodox views about both the limitations and the capacities of reason'; yet, all factors considered, 'the rationalist tendency was more basic in him than the skeptical'.³³ Even where parallels might be drawn between Dryden and his intellectual forebears, it need not be done so on the basis of sceptical thought. Thus Elias Chiasson pronounces that 'there is no need to posit anything so special as Pyrrhonic scepticism or Catholic fideism' to explain Dryden's position because quite simply he is part of 'that tradition of Christian humanism which had, in varying

³² 'Dryden's *Religio Laici*: An Anglican Poem', *PMLA*, 76 (1961), 205-21 (p. 206).

³³ 'Theology and Politics in Dryden's Conversion', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 4 (1964), 393-412 (p. 412).

degrees and with varying speculative or practical emphases, been common to patristic, medieval, and Renaissance Christendom'.³⁴

Further objections might be added to these. To compare Montaigne's Pyrrhonism with Dryden's on the basis of fideism, for example, is to overlook the extent to which the philosopher – a controversialist by Bredvold's own admission – was prepared to forgo the interests of faith and ecclesiastical injunctions in a way that the poet was never willing to do. In his *Essays* (1569) Montaigne frequently takes the Pyrrhonic suspension of judgement to its full epistemological extreme. Consider, for example, the following comment from the 'Apology', where Montaigne discusses the contemporary debate about Copernican heliocentricity and Ptolemaic geocentricity, that argument, so controversial in its day, about whether the Sun or the Earth is at the centre of the universe:

In our time Copernicus has so grounded this doctrine, that it very regularly serves to all astrological consequences: what use can we make of this, except that we need not much care which is the true opinion? And who knows but that a third, a thousand years hence, may overthrow the two former?³⁵

Montaigne's refusal to discriminate between one or other of 'the two opinions' cuts across the views of the Church and of Luther since both condemned Copernicus's hypothesis as heretical.³⁶

And his lack of expectation about finding the true opinion, indeed his nonchalance about the pursuit of it, hardly amounts to a statement of faith.

³⁴ 'Dryden's Apparent Scepticism in *Religio Laici*', *Harvard Theological Review*, 54 (1961), 207-21 (p. 207).

³⁵ Montaigne, p. 281.

³⁶ The basis for the Catholic belief in geocentric cosmology is scriptural. See particularly Joshua 10:12-13, 1Chronicles 16:30, and Psalms 93:1 and 96:10. For Martin Luther's judgement, see 'Luther Rejects the Copernican Cosmology' (1539) in *Luther's Works*, vol. LIV, ed. and trans. by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), pp. 358-59.

However, Bredvold's analysis of early-modern intellectual life does account for a culture of thought that, I argue, should be regarded as sceptical in a way which is relevant to Dryden. Many Christian apologetics in the early-modern period typically display a scepticism that stretches back to the first years of the faith, to the Pauline view of worldly knowledge as foolishness compared with the wisdom of God, and to such theological writings of the patristic period as Tertullian's *Prescription of Heretics* (c. 325 AD), which famously attempted to suppress the influence of Greek philosophy in the faith: 'What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? [...]. Away with all attempts to produce a Stoic, Platonic and dialectic composition'.³⁷ When viewed from the perspective of Dryden's undeniably Christian world, how do statements like 'we have not lifted up ourselves to God, by the weak pinions of our reason, but he has been pleased to descend to us', that the poet made in his 'Preface to *Religio Laici*' (*Poems*, II, p. 90), and 'But gracious God, how well dost thou provide / For erring judgements an unerring guide!' (*Poems*, III, 53; 64-65), made in *The Hind and the Panther*, differ from the biblical and theological writings that informed them?³⁸ On what basis can we set apart Dryden's claims from those of his influences?

Equally, in place of the theory of scepticism, some critics have hypothesised that the laureate poet was simply writing to perform a service to his country. Benson, for example, states 'the crucial reservation Dryden made about reason was more essentially a political than a theological one, relating to public order rather than private certainty'.³⁹ 'While reason properly employed',

³⁷ *Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325: Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, vol. III, ed. by James Donaldson (Edinburgh: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 246. For the Pauline view, see 1 Corinthians 1:19-21.

³⁸ Hammond, *The Poems of John Dryden*, vol. II and III. Subsequent references to Dryden's poems, including prefatory matter, are to this edition unless otherwise stated. The five volumes of this edition are abbreviated to *Poems*, followed by the volume number. See my list of abbreviations at the front of this thesis.

³⁹ 'Theology and Politics in Dryden's Conversion', p. 412.

he continues, ‘was a competent guide to faith for reasonable men, it was also capable of public exploitation by zealots and democrats’.⁴⁰ Yet many instances of early-modern scepticism are inextricably bound up with such public concerns. To Pyrrhonism might be added Academic scepticism, which came out of the same Hellenistic philosophical tradition, and is applied to the same ends. Taking its name from the Academy founded by Plato, where it is said to have been developed by Arcesilaus (c. 315-241 BCE) and Carneades (c. 213-129 BCE), Academic scepticism can be said very generally to consist in the view that no knowledge is possible and so pursuit of it is futile. Its early-modern advocates included Agrippa von Nettesheim, Sebastien Castellio, Martin Bellius and Desiderius Erasmus, whose works were certainly known to Dryden.⁴¹ In strictly epistemological terms, Academic scepticism played but a small part in the sixteenth-century intellectual scheme of things: negating philosophy entirely, it was a closed argument; however, not only was it used to support Catholic claims to religious authority in the early years of the Reformation, but there is evidence to suggest that this basic scepticism had a direct impact upon other strains of Restoration thought. Again Dryden’s preface to *Religio Laici* is particularly striking; as my fourth chapter shows, this seems indebted to Erasmus’s *The Free Will* (1524). It is important to keep in mind that early-modern scepticism as it applies to Dryden should be seen as a variety of emphases rather than any one path of development.

According to Phillip Harth, Dryden was sceptical insofar, and only insofar, as the poet and playwright identified his natural intellectual sensibilities with the methodological approach of the Royal Society. Consolidating the criticisms of Bredvold’s global thesis, Harth takes Dryden entirely at his word, examining his three expressions of scepticism in their individual literary and

⁴⁰ ‘Theology and Politics in Dryden’s Conversion’, p. 412.

⁴¹ See Dryden’s ‘Discourse Concerning Original and Progress of Satire’ (1692), *Poems*, III, p. 388.

historical contexts in order to find some consistency in meaning which would clarify how he was using the term. Harth concludes that on each occasion Dryden alludes not ‘to a tradition of attacking the reliability of reason and the senses’, but to a ‘habit of presenting two opposing ways of reasoning’ and to a ‘positiveness of opinion’ to this end.⁴² This scepticism, he maintains, is in both aim and execution akin to the inductive method of scientific inquiry first formulated by Francis Bacon in the early seventeenth century, and developed to full effect by prominent Royal Society members like Joseph Glanvill, Robert Boyle and Dryden’s friend, Walter Charleton. Just as Bacon and his intellectual heirs in the Society had intended to liberate scientific thought from the dogmatism of Aristotelian philosophy (to which it had arguably been enslaved since the acceptance of Aristotle’s worldview by the Scholastics in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries), so Dryden, he reasons, attempted to ‘justify his plea for freedom’ and to ‘claim for poetry the privilege [...] of rejecting the errors of the past’.⁴³

Significantly, Harth also discerns that every time Dryden refers to his scepticism he is seeking to dispel accusations of literary high-mindedness – that is, of ‘supreme confidence in one’s judgement’ and ‘the putting forward of private opinions as indisputable truths’, which had been levelled at *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1667), and which (Dryden apparently feared) might be directed at some of his less conventional works.⁴⁴ The ‘Defence of an Essay of Dramatic Poesy’ (1668) provides the best illustration of Harth’s observation in this respect. Here Dryden’s analogy between his approach to ‘poetry and criticism’ and the scepticism of the ‘modern free philosophers in science’ is explicit. Yet, sharing a conviction about the efficacy of inductive investigation, the thinkers that Dryden cites as sceptical also shared the ability to transcend the

⁴² Harth, pp. 8-9.

⁴³ Harth, p. 27 and p. 28.

⁴⁴ Harth, p. 31.

criticisms which their investigations might attract. Notwithstanding its potential challenges to received wisdom, methodological scepticism implied some measure of intellectual respectability:

in vindication of myself, I must crave leave to say that my whole discourse was sceptical, according to that way of reasoning which was used by Socrates, Plato, and all the Academies of old [...] and which is imitated by the modest inquisitions of the Royal Society. That it is so, not only the name will shew, which is *An Essay*, but the frame and composition of the work. You see it is a dialogue sustained by persons of several opinions, all of them left doubtful, to be determined by the readers in general. (*Works*, IX, p. 15)

Dialectical reasoning apart, this comparison between the ancient and modern schools of thought seems misplaced. Having considered a wide range of subjects, but generally avoiding the questions of the physical universe, the academies of old were no simple precursor to a Society which confined its study to ‘natural knowledge’. Moreover, Socrates had been condemned to death for attempting to subvert the political values of the Athenian state in which he lived; as the name of the institution indicates, the Royal Society enjoyed political patronage. However, to work on the frontiers of the known universe entailed some of the same risks for the Society. Essays like ‘The Agreement of Reason and Religion’ (1676) and ‘Lux Orientalis’ (1676) by Glanvill reflect an anxiety about transgressing acceptable fields of inquiry, and an attempt to consign philosophy to its proper station beneath the authority of Church and state. In ‘Lux Orientalis’, for instance, Glanvill takes up the question of reincarnation, but before he does so he judiciously defines the parameters of his discussion, deferring to the better judgement of the Church whilst thanking that institution for affording him the privilege of speculating on matters that may be judged as heretical; in particular, he is careful to point out that any new discoveries in science should not be confused with new ideas in religion: ‘Therefore let me here premonish

once for all, that I intend no Innovation in Religion, or disturbance of our established and received Doctrines, by any thing I have undertaken in this little *Treatise*'.⁴⁵

For Harth, Dryden negotiated this fine line between acceptable and unacceptable areas of inquiry in the same way. As he shows, the appeal to a cautious sceptical reserve is echoed in 'Preface to *Religio Laici*' (1682), when the poet contrasts his natural inclination 'to scepticism in philosophy' with the Christian faith he is discussing, 'which is above' philosophy (*Poems*, II, pp. 86-87), and again in 'Preface to *Sylvae*' (1685), when, in his capacity as translator, he sought to distance himself from the 'dogmatical way of' his contentious subject, Lucretius, by professing to 'lay by my natural diffidence and scepticism' (*Poems*, II, p. 247). And out of the Royal Society mould, Dryden the sceptic, as opposed to Dryden the satirist, or even Dryden the royal panegyrist, never made politics and religion a domain of his concern: 'Had he applied to the political and religious spheres this freedom of inquiry [...] questioning accepted beliefs and traditions, he would presumably have been a Whig in politics, a freethinker in religion'.⁴⁶

For its helpfulness in explaining the assumptions upon which a seventeenth-century definition of scepticism rests, and for its demonstration of how these assumptions directly apply to Dryden's writings, Harth's theory of Dryden's scepticism is beyond dispute. Nor should it come as a surprise that Harth's conclusions remain the most accepted in critical circles today.⁴⁷ Doing for literature what contemporary scientists were doing for physics and chemistry, Dryden was among a generation of artists and intellectuals who were exploring new ideas in the new (post-

⁴⁵ 'Lux Orientalis, or, An Enquiry into the Opinion of the Eastern Sages concerning the Praeexistence of Souls', in *Joseph Glanvill: Collected Works of Joseph Glanvill*, vol. II, ed. by Bernhard Fabian (Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms, 1979), p. a4.

⁴⁶ Harth, p. 32.

⁴⁷ See *Poems*, II, pp. 87-87n.

Cromwellian) Britain. The years that followed the restoration of Charles II were characterised by a diversity of voices, with some of the scientific among them claiming scepticism as a medium of expression. As the first part of my next chapter will show in more detail, Dryden recognised that such voices could be used to literary ends.

However, where Bredvold can be faulted for providing an all-encompassing theory of scepticism, Harth, for his part, could be accused of being too narrow in his assumptions, basing his understanding of scepticism on a rather nominal interpretation of the term: ‘the advocates of the new philosophy’, he states at one point in his argument, ‘had several names for their own way of reasoning, and one of these was scepticism’.⁴⁸ This has had an effect on the way Dryden has been subsequently read. As Brown argues, interpretations of Dryden’s work since 1968 have dwelt on ‘the problematic intricacy of his metaphors, or the subversive irony of his allegory’ to the point where they ‘have come un-moored from an understanding of his intellectual, political, or social beliefs’.⁴⁹ Though ‘readings of Dryden's specific works have increasingly discovered skepticism, paradox, subversion, absurdity, or irony to be their central aesthetic achievement’, critics now ‘consistently disregard or dismiss the difficulties presented by the hypothesis of philosophical skepticism and stress instead the immediate demonstrable intricacies of Dryden's style’.⁵⁰

The limitations of Harth’s insights are best explained by his response to *Religio Laici*. By emphasising how Dryden’s declaration of scepticism and diffidence in the preface to this poem anticipated ‘the same charge of being magisterial that Howard had leveled against’ *Essay of*

⁴⁸ Harth, p. 10.

⁴⁹ ‘The Ideology of Restoration Poetic Form: John Dryden’, *PMLA*, 97 (1982), 395-407 (p. 396).

⁵⁰ ‘The Ideology of Restoration Poetic Form: John Dryden’, pp. 395-96.

Poesy, Harth discounts a standard convention of philosophical scepticism and Christian humanism that had been adopted since the Reformation.⁵¹ This becomes evident when Dryden's declaration is read in connection with what preceded it:

if it be objected to me that being a layman I ought not to have concerned myself with speculations which belong to the profession of divinity, I could answer that perhaps laymen, with equal advantages of parts and knowledge, are not the most incompetent judges of sacred things; but in the dull sense of my own weakness and want of learning, I plead not this: I pretend not to make a judge of faith in others, but only to make a confession of my own; I lay no unhallowed hand upon the ark, but wait on it, with the reverence that becomes me, at a distance. (*Poems*, II, p. 86)

Clearly there is paradox, even irony, here. If the layman is no incompetent judge of sacred things, then why play down one's ability to judge such matters? If the poem is a private confession of faith, then why offer it to the public? Far from drawing a line of distinction between the sacred and secular, Dryden's supposed diffidence was but a pretext to blur and even cross that line. Montaigne, who, Harth argues, influenced Dryden only incidentally, had employed the same tactic in the 'Apology'. Insisting that his 'task' was 'more proper for a man well read in divinity than for me, who know nothing of it' and that 'Christians do themselves wrong by assuming our arguments and endeavours can arrive at [...] supernatural and divine knowledge', he nonetheless makes the kind of statements his essay intends to prohibit.⁵² Likewise Erasmus's *On Free Will* (1524), a text which opened a public debate on the issue of predestination with Luther, claimed that there shall be no 'invective' between him and the magisterial reformer because 'it does not behoove Christians so to act' and because 'truth by excessive quarrelling is often lost'.⁵³ Glanvill, too, had shown something of this caution, eager, as he was, not to encroach on church authority.

⁵¹ Harth, p. 6.

⁵² Montaigne, p. 118.

⁵³ *A Diatribe or Sermon Concerning Free Will*, (1524), as cited in, *Erasmus and Luther: Discourse on Free Will*, ed. by Ernst F. Winter (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 4.

To Parker, reflexivity of this kind is symptomatic of ‘the paradox on which sceptical thinking rests: broadly, the paradox that scepticism generates understanding’.⁵⁴ *Religio Laici* is no exception. Behind the masquerade of modesty, Dryden creates for himself a space in which he assays his own understanding of some fundamental Christian doctrines, particularly in relation to the debate between revealed religion and deism. Kenshur, for example, finds that Dryden ‘explicitly rejects deism while assimilating its principles into the structure of an argument that he presents as orthodox’.⁵⁵ Significantly, his interpretation of the poem as ‘Erastian’ is based on a similar premise as the Pyrrhonism attributed to it by Bredvold: ‘Dryden, with a cunning blend of logical rigor and rhetorical subtlety, transmuted the discourse of theological controversy into an argument for submission to established political authority’.⁵⁶

Despite its apparent simplicity, then, *Religio Laici* was no straightforward and safe Church of England apologetic; reading between the lines, we can discern Dryden’s knowledge of Catholic theology, his acquaintance with latitudinarian thinkers like the Cambridge Platonists, and his familiarity with the work of continental Protestants like Jacob Arminius. To some extent, of course, such eclecticism merely reflected the theological convictions that had been adopted by divines from within the established church; Anglicanism, a term often retrospectively applied to the emerging British Church in the 1680s was, as Fujimura states, a *via media* – its *raison d’être* largely consisting in ‘maintaining a proper equilibrium between a purely rational theology (Deism) on the one hand and fideism (Catholicism) and voluntarism (Puritanism) on the other’.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Parker, p. 30.

⁵⁵ ‘Scriptural Deism and the Politics of Dryden’s *Religio Laici*’, *ELH*, 54 (1987), 869-92 (p. 883).

⁵⁶ ‘Scriptural Deism and the Politics of Dryden’s *Religio Laici*’, p. 890.

⁵⁷ ‘Dryden’s *Religio Laici*: An Anglican Poem’, *PMLA*, 76 (1961), 205-21 (p. 207).

Defined in relation to these contrasting belief systems, it is inevitable that the Anglican faith would be influenced by ideas from across conventional religious divides; and when viewed from this perspective, it is not hard to see why *Religio Laici* has been regarded as a record of these influences. However, as the following observation from Harold Love shows, the approach that Dryden takes in *Religio Laici* is not untypical of his writing elsewhere:

Dryden's particular mode of intellectual pluralism derived from the perception that a given problem could often be illuminated by invoking irreconcilable systems of explanation in tandem with each other. Since he was a rhetorical poet, trained in an ancient tradition that valued ideas primarily for their usefulness as means to persuasion, some of his more glaring inconsistencies may represent nothing more than polemical opportunism. But in the major poems, criticism, and heroic plays, as perspective is qualified by perspective and viewpoint set against viewpoint, we become aware that even the sleights of the professional advocate may be an instrument for the determination of truth – truth which is not in any sense partial or fractured but which must be viewed as a statue or a great building must be viewed, from as many aspects as possible.⁵⁸

On the basis that I have just discussed, polemical opportunism may well apply to *Religio Laici*. Yet the sleights of hand, the juxtaposition of perspective against perspective and viewpoint against viewpoint are no less pertinent descriptions of the poem's compositional approach. For Love, Dryden's work has a dialogic quality which encapsulates a world where 'a single, coherent theologico-philosophical system' has 'broken down' and a division of 'the experiential whole into any number of sub-wholes' was necessary.⁵⁹

That Harth misses this quality of Dryden's intellectual persona is evident in his response to *The Hind and the Panther*. An allegory written in three parts, much of the poem is structured around a dialogue between a 'milk-white Hind' (*Poems*, III, 45; I.1), which symbolises the Catholic Church, and a Panther, 'fairest creature of the spotted kind' (*Poems*, III, 71; I.328), which represents the Church of England. Without doubt, *The Hind and the Panther* served as a defence

⁵⁸ Harold Love 'Dryden's Rationale of Paradox', *ELH*, 51 (1984), 297-313 (p.298).

⁵⁹ Love 'Dryden's Rationale of Paradox', p. 298.

of the Catholic faith to which Dryden was recently converted, yet, for Harth, it was to all intents and purposes a manifesto of Catholicism; by favouring the Hind in the exchange between the two churches, he claims, the dialectic of the poem belies any pretensions it makes to objectivity: '[Dryden] writes to the advantage of the side he is defending to forestall possible objections and replies by bringing them forward at once, presenting them as unfounded accusations'.⁶⁰ Overlooking the very significance of the theological debate, the dialectic to this end is dismissed as little better than a sophisticated literary device that is designed to deliver 'a full and decisive answer' for the Catholic side.⁶¹

Clearly, Bredvold and Harth's interpretations of Dryden's scepticism allow for no reconciliation; in fact, on the matter of the value of rational thought, they are entirely mutually exclusive. Where Bredvold postulates a theory of 'antirationalism' promoted by the Church, Harth asserts a 'confident affirmation of the powers of human reason', epitomised by a 'pursuit of knowledge' where 'errors will be detected and truth [will] prevail'.⁶² More recently, Popkin's study of scepticism has provided the field with a third possible interpretative model. His concept of mitigated or constructive scepticism (a term he appropriates from the eighteenth-century sceptic, David Hume) designates the theories of certain post-Pyrrhonic thinkers who 'accept the full force of the sceptical attack on the possibility of human knowledge' but 'allow for the possibility of knowledge in a lesser sense, as convincing or probable truths about appearances'.⁶³ Fundamental to Popkin's hypothesis of mitigated scepticism was René Descartes's knowledge-affirming claim that the systematic rejection of all ideas that can be doubted will give a

⁶⁰ Harth, p. 37

⁶¹ Harth, p. 37.

⁶² Harth, p. 31.

⁶³ Popkin, p. 129.

foundation of indisputable truth: in the first instance, this was intended as a riposte to the philosophical endgame of Montaigne's Pyrrhonism; yet, locating truth in the apparently incontestable evidence of subjective self-awareness, it resupplied philosophy with the kind of *a priori* argument needed to 'recognize other truths, which in turn allows us to build up a system of true knowledge about reality'.⁶⁴

Emphasising the individual's relationship with the knowable things of the physical world about him or her, the formulations of Descartes and other mitigating sceptics (Marin Mersenne and Pierre Gassendi among them) were considerably influential to Glanvill and his Royal Society contemporaries.⁶⁵ But the idea of mitigated scepticism has a broader and more complex range of applicability. Noggle, for instance, states that it bore a 'methodological and epistemological appeal' which 'seems distinct from any particular position that anyone of any party or religion would assume in debates of the moment'; as such it 'performs the work of social cohesion', encouraging 'citizens of various convictions [to] argue different sides of each case until the best possible, most probable answers emerge'.⁶⁶ Thus, Noggle reasons, Dryden's declaration of scepticism in the preface to *Religio Laici* is of the mitigated sort because it 'guards against more radical doubts inadvertently engendered by philosophers' and enthusiasts' dogmatic, self-exalting delusions'.⁶⁷

Mitigated scepticism is certainly a very useful analytical tool, and, as I shall show, it provides valuable insights into Dryden's writing throughout his career. However, it does offer only a

⁶⁴ Popkin, p. 184.

⁶⁵ For the scientific influence of Cartesian philosophy see Michael Hunter, *Science and Society in Restoration England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 15-16.

⁶⁶ Noggle, p. 23.

⁶⁷ Noggle, p. 33.

general view on the late seventeenth century, failing, above all, to account for the use of scepticism in other, more general contexts where social cohesion plays a small part or no part at all. Today, ‘scepticism’ is one among many philosophical terms to have taken on meaning outside its immediate intellectual orbit and we are hardly likely to confuse its casual with its critical uses. But in the seventeenth century, commentators were less judicious. As Noggle has additionally observed, the term ‘scepticism’ in the period was often ‘more a principle of application than a settled meaning’, designating ‘people who would not accept it as a description of their views but who are, according to their opponents, really skeptics without knowing it’.⁶⁸ Including ‘Metaphysical dogmatists, Cartesians, Dissenters, Catholics, deists, Epicureans and even Royal Society members’, these people were regarded as sceptics not because of a shared core ideology but because of ‘radical tendencies or implications of ideas’ that their accusers ‘would disown’.⁶⁹ Daniel Defoe’s 1699 *Letter to a Member of Parliament, Shewing the Necessity of Regulating the Press Chiefly from the Necessity of Publick Establishments in Religion* is a characteristic example of this broad use of the term; advocating a censorship of the press (which had ended when the Licensing Act lapsed in 1695), Defoe takes up a reactionary position, seeking to defend the politically accepted religious outlook of the day from the threat of unorthodox opinion: ‘The Restraint of the *Press* is necessary, if we consider the pernicious Influences it casts upon *Religion* in *General*, as ‘tis the direct *Inlet* to *Scepticism*, *Heresie*, and *Infidelity*’.⁷⁰ Along with heresy and infidelity, scepticism in this context, is a byword for permissiveness.

⁶⁸ Noggle, p. 15.

⁶⁹ Noggle, p. 15.

⁷⁰ Daniel Defoe, *A Letter to a Member of Parliament, Shewing the Necessity of Regulating the Press Chiefly from the Necessity of Publick Establishments in Religion, from the Rights and Immunities of a National Church* (Oxford, 1699), pp. 40-41.

Given the very diversity of thought between these groups, equating scepticism with radicalism in this way appears very much to have been an attempt to insult an enemy rather than identify the doubter. Such an equation seems symptomatic of fears that these groups had about each other, which, in turn, reflected anxieties about the extent to which late seventeenth-century society was always susceptible to subversion by new influences. Radical tendencies – indeed political, religious and philosophical tendencies of every kind – could only be defined locally, against each other, and not from within the context of fixed ideas and accepted conventions of belief. The sole reason why this should have been the case is quite simply that no such context existed. Between the years 1660 and 1700, the timeframe of this study, Britain had lived through the demise of a short-lived republicanism, the restoration of an old royal line, the forced termination of that line in effectively the second revolution of the century, and the creation of a constitutional monarchy. Furthermore, the Anglican Church, newly re-established in 1660, proved highly intolerant of nonconformity, and therefore highly dismissive of the need to manage the nation's religious heterogeneity, whilst fears about absolutism and Catholicism during the reigns of Charles II and James II, and discontents about William III's aggressive religious war with France, thereafter, divided opinions over the monarch's right to exercise a royal prerogative, which polarised political interests. In short, the ongoing attempt at a political and religious settlement was anything but settling, affording no common perspective.

This uncertain state of affairs had its own radicalising effect, explaining in part why scepticism became a principle of application. The free flow of ideas that characterised the age was very often incompatible with the rigidly partisan nature of political debate, and any voicing of views in this climate could well have fallen foul of the unpredictable tides of political and religious

dispute. ‘Doubt’, observes Jessica Munns in her account of scepticism in Restoration drama, ‘was produced by, and then reinforced, an apprehension of fractures, uncertainties, and alterations in the nature of authority at a time of accelerating change’.⁷¹ And though scepticism can be said to have expressed a ‘fashionable iconoclasm [...] to Puritan dogmatism’ (a fact, as my next chapter will show, which is more relevant to Dryden than previous discussions of the poet’s scepticism have acknowledged), it ‘also articulated an ideological crisis within the patriarchal monarchism of an aristocratic culture’.⁷²

By professing a purely epistemological scepticism and, perhaps more pertinently, by forestalling claims of dogmatism and other imputations that might have been alleged, Dryden could well have been attempting to evade accusations of radical or divisive thinking. He was, after all, a writer who for the entirety of his public life accommodated himself to the values of king and country – to the Anglican faith upon the restoration of Charles II, to the Catholicism of James II and to the absolutism of primogenitural monarchical rule. Like other sceptics who received royal patronage (Joseph Glanvill included), Dryden belonged to the post-restoration aristocratic culture of which Munns is speaking, and was part of everything it stood for; as such, his works naturally aimed at ideological synthesis, rather than involving itself with issues that would perpetuate the problems of political and religious disunity.⁷³ But this is not to say that Dryden had felt the seas of change less keenly than his more independent contemporaries – the ‘Metaphysical dogmatists,

⁷¹ Jessica Munns, ‘Change, Skepticism, and Uncertainty’, in *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theatre*, ed. by Deborah Payne Fisk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 142-57 (p. 155).

⁷² ‘Change, Skepticism, and Uncertainty’, p. 155.

⁷³ As Jackson Cope notes, the ‘impetus for Glanvill’s lifelong concern with the problem of knowledge’ was his fear of and disgust for rebellious nonconformity and what he felt was its ultimate outcome, atheism’. Jackson I. Cope., ‘Anglican Apologist: Old Ideas and New Style in the Restoration’, *PMLA*, 69 (1954), 223-50 (p. 223). The political undertone of many of his essays, in which he urges caution against the *bête noir* of enthusiasm and fanaticism, would appear to confirm this as very much the case. See, for example, *Collected Works of Joseph Glanvill*, vol. VI, p. 50.

Cartesians, Dissenters, Catholics, deists, Epicureans' whom Noggle numbers in his broadly inclusive third definition of scepticism. Nor can the idea of what he identifies as radical tendencies in Dryden's work be entirely dismissed. From the pre-laureate panegyrics *Astraea Redux* (1660) and *To his Sacred Majesty* (1661), to the succession crisis satires *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681) and *The Medal* (1682), critics repeatedly find ambivalence and unease in Dryden's political and religious convictions. In the words of Laura Brown, these represent 'the aesthetic codification of anxiety' – 'the literary elaboration of an assertion at odds with itself'.⁷⁴

To some extent, of course, this merely reflects the displaced poetics which had been the legacy of the previous royalist generation. With a strong foundation of political and religious consensus somewhat lacking between 1660 and 1688, Dryden and his contemporaries could only buttress 'the stability of an old system with the supports of an irreconcilable new one'.⁷⁵ The proximity of events was also a factor on this respect. As Nicholas Jose states of the royalist poets upon the restoration, 'the very memory of all those changes so near at hand made it paradoxical and ahistorical to claim that the government of the country could be in no hands but the king's'.⁷⁶ Necessarily, the 'abstract, often awkward rhetoric' to which panegyrists like Dryden 'had to resort' did not contain but rather 'invited scepticism'.⁷⁷ When the Test Act (1673) and the attempt in the late 1670s to prevent James II's succession incited further political conflict, this problem of perspective was hardly likely to be resolved. However, there are strands in Dryden's works, particularly in his plays, which tend towards a sense of political necessity that does not

⁷⁴ 'The Ideology of Restoration Poetic Form: John Dryden', p. 398.

⁷⁵ 'The Ideology of Restoration Poetic Form: John Dryden', p. 404.

⁷⁶ *Ideas of the Restoration in English Literature: 1660-71* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 33.

⁷⁷ *Ideas of the Restoration in English Literature*, p. 33

dovetail comfortably with his Stuart convictions. On this matter, Dryden's mitigated scepticism comes into its own.

These strands are most apparent in his responses to the political formulations of Thomas Hobbes. Many theorists in the 1640s and early 1650s had, to quote Christopher Hill, started to consider a political system that abandoned 'the concept of legitimacy as the justification of political authority' in favour of a *de facto* sovereignty that would ensure 'protection to the subjects who lived under this power'.⁷⁸ Bringing about, as they did, a shift in emphasis from legitimacy to protection – a shift that Hill attributes to 'a weariness, a suspicion of ideological politics' – these theorists exemplified (at least in part) a 'desire to escape previous commitments and loyalties'.⁷⁹ Thomas Hobbes, whose *Leviathan* (1651) redefined the role and purpose of the commonwealth according to a completely pragmatic agenda, is often considered the foremost exponent of the new political vision described by Hill. Hobbes devised a contract theory of government based upon the universal instinct for self-preservation, claiming that the natural 'condition of Man [...] is a condition of Warre', where 'it followeth [...] every man has a Right to everything; even to one another's body'.⁸⁰ Concluding that society would agree to submit to an agreement which guaranteed mutual protection, providing it would get and keep them out of this condition of war, Hobbes posited the need for an absolute coercive power or sovereign, as a final safeguard against conflicting interests. The defining feature of Hobbes's State was not legitimacy, but obedience, as he later explained:

For the prosperity of a People ruled by an Aristocraticall, or Democraticall assembly, commeth not from Aristocracy, nor from Democracy, but from the Obedience, and

⁷⁸ *Some Intellectual Consequences of the English Revolution*, p. 21.

⁷⁹ *Some Intellectual Consequences of the English Revolution*, p. 21.

⁸⁰ *Leviathan: Revised Student Edition* ed. by Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 2002), p. 91. All subsequent references to *Leviathan* will be to the abbreviation Hobbes.

Concord of the Subjects: nor do the people flourish in a Monarchy, because one man has the right to rule them, but because they obey him. Take away in any kind of State, the Obedience (and consequently the Concord of the People,) and they shall not onely not flourish, but in a short time be dissolved.⁸¹

Dryden's contact with Hobbesian ideas was first noted in his own day by Richard Leigh: he found that *The Conquest of Granada* (1672) 'represented Men in a *Hobbian* State of War'.⁸² More recently, the influence of the political philosopher upon the playwright has been confirmed by Dryden's late twentieth-century biographer, James Winn.⁸³ However, the degree to which Hobbesian philosophy (particularly with its stress on obedience) can be placed in the early-modern sceptical tradition and the degree to which it informed Dryden's sceptical viewpoint has not been fully appreciated; indeed, for Bredvold, Dryden's 'skeptical tendency' was 'betrayed only casually in his comments on Hobbes'.⁸⁴ Yet although Hobbes has made no explicit recourse to God or to a universal Church – stating respectively that his kingdom is 'not yet come' and that the 'power Regal under Christ, [was] challenged, universally by the Pope' – he sought to expose the conceits of human reason, arguing that the 'characters of mans heart [are] blotted and confounded [...] with dissembling, lying, counterfeiting, and erroneous doctrines'.⁸⁵ And responding to an intellectual crisis that came about because of challenges to a political and religious status quo – the previously unquestionable authority of Church and State – he sought to recover in his society what Montaigne and others had attempted to preserve in theirs, as Richard Tuck, a prominent recent commentator on Hobbes's work shows:

Montaigne and Descartes accepted that bringing our moral judgments into line with those of the rest of our community was a good reason for renouncing our existing ones and accepting a range of new evaluations; seen in this light Hobbes was simply making more

⁸¹ Hobbes, pp. 233-34.

⁸² *The Censvre of the Rota. on M^r Driden's Conquest of Granada* (Oxford, 1673), p. 3.

⁸³ *Dryden and his World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), , p. 111, p. 154, p. 213, pp. 216-18 and p. 274. Subsequent references to this work will be to the abbreviation Winn; see my list of abbreviations at the beginning of this thesis.

⁸⁴ Bredvold, p. 73.

⁸⁵ Hobbes, pp. 419-20 and p. 10.

precise and self-aware the process whereby such an alignment might be secured. Hobbes's predecessors had supposed that renunciation would be practiced by a skeptical sage living in a society of skeptical unbelievers, and that the direction of the renunciation was therefore unproblematic. Hobbes, however, raised the question of how an entire society of skeptics might coordinate its renunciations round a single figure in order to create a set of moral beliefs for the society.⁸⁶

If we accept that Dryden realised the role of scepticism in promoting social and political unity, then we should recognise how he attempts to answer this and other questions raised by Hobbes.⁸⁷

Although the sceptical impulses of the early-modern period are not always present in Dryden's writings, they do frequently appear in key canonical texts. In my next chapter, I will consider the most important elements of sceptical thought in Dryden's early works, most notably, his poem addressed to his Royal Society friend, Walter Charleton (1662), his propaganda poem, *Annus Mirabilis* (1667), and his first critical work *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*. Evaluating these key works in the context of the historical moment which informs them, I will reveal that Dryden displayed a propensity for paradox and disjuncture, as Brown defines it, which is expressive of his personal political doubts and fears after the high point of the Restoration, but which also affirm his sceptical conviction in the legitimacy of re-established monarchical authority.

In my third chapter, I examine Hobbes's influence on Dryden as evinced in some of his early heroic dramas, particularly *The Indian Queen* (1665), *The Conquest of Granada* (1672) and *Aureng-Zebe* (1675). It is my belief that Dryden adopted an openly explorative approach to Hobbes's political philosophy, very much at odds with many other contemporary responses, yet nonetheless commensurate with speculative sceptical thought, and, more specifically, with the

⁸⁶ Richard Tuck, 'Hobbes's Moral Philosophy', in *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*, ed. by Tom Sorell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 175-207 (p. 193).

⁸⁷ Noggle, p. 23.

experimental method of dramatic composition that he himself had formulated. In these plays, the usually resolutely conservative Dryden was at his most radical, revealing political anxiety through historical parallels of his own devising, and giving free rein to sceptical expression about the need for heroic ideals in his own age. However, as the chapter will go on to show, the range that Dryden allows himself was curtailed by the obligation to rally behind his king during the Exclusion Crisis; following the Test Act (1673), Dryden was forced to rethink both his political vision and his confidence in heroic drama, causing him to embrace more and more those philosophical and religious arguments that defend Stuart ideology.

In chapter four, I undertake an analysis of *Religio Laici* and *The Hind and the Panther*, and I explore how Dryden appealed to a number of sceptical arguments in order to explain his commitment to the Anglican faith, and then, in 1687, to justify his conversion to Catholicism. Here, I argue that the poet dramatised his theological journey, beginning from a position that shows strong affinities with mitigated scepticism, before then turning towards fideism as a final intellectual position. Finally, chapters five and six will examine Dryden's translations. Concentrating on his selected translations of Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* (1685) in the former and on his Juvenal and Persius in the latter, these chapters will look at the appeal to Dryden of the consolation philosophy of antiquity, showing how these poets provide Dryden with new kinds of sceptical expression. To this end, I shall analyse manifestations of sceptical thought in his late prefatory writings in general and in his translation theories in particular. Throughout, I return to Dryden's distinctive struggle with 'public' issues, and the evolution of this term in his thought and aesthetic instincts, including in his translations.

Dryden and the Restoration Poetics of Progress and Change: 1660-1667

In this chapter I examine two connected strains of scepticism in Dryden's *Astraea Redux*, 'To Dr Charleton' (1662), *Annus Mirabilis* (1667) and *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1667) – works that have been considered representative of Dryden's intellectual sympathies during this early period of his career. The first of these strains I identify with what I call Dryden's poetics of progress, that is, his literary responses to and participation in Britain's artistic and cultural reinvigoration after the Interregnum. Though Harth has explored the connection between Restoration literary criticism and the new science – arguing that Dryden became a sceptical critic in parallel to Robert Boyle's sceptical chemist – there is more to be said about the wider culture of thought that scepticism was serving, and in particular, the extent to which Dryden's scepticism reflected a highly politicised intellectual vision of Britain in the 1660s. Beginning, where the strictly philosophical emphasis of Harth's thesis leaves off, I consider how Dryden establishes himself as a public poet in this rapidly evolving cultural climate, and how he attempts to present himself in relation to acclaimed scientists and philosophers whom he regarded, as he states in 'To Dr Charleton', as 'Th' assertors of free reason's claim' (*Poems*, I, 72; 21). The second strain, I identify as a poetics of change, by which I mean those instances of ambiguity and awkward equivocation in the symbolism of key works, which register the political tensions of the moment. Here I shall show that Dryden adopted a more indeterminate scepticism, one which, at its most extreme, contrasts the ideologically stabilising function of mitigated scepticism with sympathies for the dogmatism that mitigated scepticism was meant to deny. According to Fred Parker, scepticism's

first effect is normally disconcerting or disillusioning. The explanatory structures the mind builds for itself are, naturally, likely to be affirmative or idealistic, or at the least to

be usefully functional or comforting; scepticism routinely suggests that such formulations are unlikely to survive the encounter with experience.⁸⁸

Aware of the dangers of over-indulged idealism, Dryden's enthusiasm for the restoration of Charles II, and his outward commitment to the policies of the new regime, is repeatedly tempered by misgivings about whether the transfer of power back into royal hands will result in the halcyon days of imperial splendour that his works during this time often otherwise imagine.

Firstly, though, I will sketch in the background of Dryden's career and explain where Dryden stood in relation to the political and cultural developments of the early 1660s. The Restoration period was an unpredictable moment in British history, and from the outset John Dryden struggled to adapt. On the one hand, the aspiring public poet seemed to come of age, demonstrating a confident understanding of the literary tastes and the political needs of the time. With the publication of his Restoration panegyric, *Astraea Redux*, and his Coronation poem, *To His Sacred Majesty*, he boldly aligned himself with the new royal rulers, forever abandoning both the republican hope he had in part countenanced in 'Heroic Stanzas on the Death of Cromwell' (1658), and, no less significantly, his predominantly Puritan upbringing.⁸⁹ With the publication of *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, he staked his claim on the development of English drama, urging us to regard him as one of its formative contemporary influences. That this claim might not be justified has been a matter of some debate, not least because his plays rarely displayed the full courage of independent theoretical conviction. David Hopkins, for instance, finds that in promoting English drama the poet-critic bolstered his insights with the twin pillars

⁸⁸ Parker, p. 14.

⁸⁹ Few assumptions should be made about Dryden's Puritan background. His education, under the tutelage of the Royalist Richard Busby, among other factors of his early life, reveals that Puritan loyalties did not always presuppose suspicion of influential professionals from across the ideological divide. For a comprehensive account of Dryden's education at Westminster and Trinity College, including his early literary influences, see James A. Winn's biography, *Dryden and his World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 36-57.

of French criticism, René Rapin (1621-1687) and Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux (1636-1711).⁹⁰ Nevertheless, the young Trinity graduate from the Northamptonshire gentry positively embraced the intellectual sensibilities that came to define the dominant Restoration outlook and captured, in Hume's words, a 'conscious sense of making a new start [...] being able to explore a variety of options'.⁹¹

At the same time as he embraced the authority of the restored monarchy, Dryden showed signs that he was anxious about the uncertainties of change, addressing political questions which he knew that the restoration of monarchical government in-and-of-itself would not sufficiently answer. When Charles II was invited by General Monck to take the throne, he returned to a country in which the old religious and political divisions still ran deep. A series of laws passed in the early 1660s by the newly-created Convention and Cavalier parliaments attempted to dismiss these divisions by imposing the authority of the king and the Anglican Church; but the 'Restoration Settlement', as the laws came collectively to be known, was largely an *ad hoc* undertaking, and failed to provide a viable constitutional agreement that would get the country off on a sound political footing.⁹² Dryden understood the complexity of the situation unfolding before him from the start; in Nicholas Jose's words, his 'poems of welcome to the new regime are full of friction, sluggishness, overjudicious and compromising kinds of ingenuity. He persistently admits negative possibilities'.⁹³ The two sides of Dryden's early creative persona first become apparent in lines 105-14 of *Astraea Redux*:

Some lazy ages, lost in sleep and ease,
No action leave to busy chronicles;

⁹⁰ See *John Dryden* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 95-7.

⁹¹ *Dryden's Criticism*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 4.

⁹² See Barry Coward, *The Stuart Age: England 1603-1714* (London: Pearson, 2003), pp. 281-304.

⁹³ *Ideas of the Restoration in English Literature*, p. 167.

Such whose supine felicity but makes
 In stormy chasms, in epoches mistakes;
 O'er whom Time gently shakes his wings of down
 Till with his silent sickle they are mown:
 Such is not Charles his too, too active age
 Which governed by the wild distempered rage
 Of some black star infecting all the skies,
 Made him at his own cost like Adam wise.
 (*Poems*, I, 43; 105-14)

To Ward, this poem gives an ‘appearance of ease and [...] vigour’ that reflects a ‘growing competence in Dryden’s handling not only of diverse themes but of the couplet form which he later will develop to its highest potential’.⁹⁴ To Winn, it was ‘a triumph of propaganda [...] surely conceived as a step towards securing [...] royal attention’.⁹⁵ Yet, for all the nascent confidence of its author in weaving a ‘rich and varied tapestry [of] mythology, classical literature, Christianity, history, and the contemporary scene’, *Astraea Redux* relies on somewhat questionable classical precedents and biblical typologies. The comparison of Charles to Adam shows that Charles too had ‘sinned and suffered’, thus implicating him in the sins of the nation he represents, just as Adam’s sin, his rebellion in paradise, is endemic to all humankind.⁹⁶ As Alberto Cacicedo observes, Dryden likens Charles to ‘Adam at a point in Adam’s career that makes it impossible to see him as pure, spiritual, or redemptive’.⁹⁷ Going further, Dryden explicitly demonstrates the extent to which his own literary identity is bound up in this postlapsarian political world: it is to the active late Stuart age that the poem owes its existence, whilst the energy of Dryden’s flourishing poetic style derives from the underlying tensions of the contemporary moment – from the portrayal of an un-redemptive king whose return nevertheless allows his subjects to ‘Work out and expiate our former guilt’ (*Poems*, I, 51; 275), and from a

⁹⁴ *The Life of John Dryden*, p. 24.

⁹⁵ Winn, p. 113.

⁹⁶ Winn, p. 109.

⁹⁷ ‘Seeing the King: Biblical and Classical Texts in *Astraea Redux*’, *SEL*, 32 (1992), 407-27 (p. 419).

barely concealed uneasiness about the kind of statesman that Charles will become: ‘Not tied to rules of policy, you find / Revenge less sweet than a forgiving mind’ (*Poems*, I, 50; 260-61).

Dryden creates this kind of subtext in many of his Restoration writings; most conspicuously, in *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, the attempt ‘to vindicate the honour of our English Writers’ is set against the ‘dreadful suspence’ of England’s increasingly controversial trade war with the Dutch (*Works*, XVII, p. 7).⁹⁸ Such a strategy might be said to encapsulate an attitude that falls somewhere between a play of irony which recognises that, in Parker’s terms, ‘paradox generates understanding’, and the political and theological safeguards promoted by Montaigne and Erasmus (who urged that the legitimacy and prerogative of established authority should be accepted on trust).⁹⁹ At first sight this looks rather like the mitigated scepticism as defined by Richard Kroll: ‘a reaction to the psycho-historical conditions of the Civil War and Interregnum, which came to be symbolised by all forms of epistemological dogmatism’.¹⁰⁰ However, though, as Noggle argues, he undoubtedly seeks to ‘fix the stabilizing rules or boundaries of a newly reinstated social fabric’, Dryden’s aesthetic throughout the early 1660s is too markedly divided against itself for his work to be simply pigeon-holed as a type of mitigated scepticism, as flexible and broadly encompassing as that term is.¹⁰¹ Indeed, taken together, his first compositions lack the conviction that he had decisively cut ties with the Protectorate, or at least with the values it

⁹⁸ Though the second Anglo-Dutch war (1665-67, a war which aimed to secure the independence and honour of the English nation) had initially received the backing of most MPs, it had become difficult to justify by the time of the *Essay*’s composition; as Coward notes, ‘Despite heavy Dutch losses, even English propaganda could not portray the deaths of two admirals, the loss of 8,000 men, and the destruction of twenty ships as a victory’. *The Stuart Age*, p. 301.

⁹⁹ Parker, p. 53.

¹⁰⁰ *The Material Word: Literate Culture in the Restoration and Early Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 50.

¹⁰¹ Noggle, p. 23.

stood for; consider, for example, the following lines from ‘Heroic Stanzas on the Death of Cromwell’:

No civil broils have since his death arose
 But faction now by habit does obey;
 And wars have that respect for his repose
 As winds for halcyons when they breed at sea.
 His ashes in a peaceful urn shall rest,
 His name a great example stands, to show
 How strangely high endeavours may be blessed,
 Where piety and valour jointly go.
 (*Poems*, I, 29; 141-48)

Clearly, ‘Heroic Stanzas’ should be read on its own terms; the occasion of Cromwell’s death was not the moment to discuss Britain’s political future; it was the time to pay homage to the heroic qualities of a great leader. And yet, the very sensitivity that Dryden shows Cromwell distinguishes the poem from *Astraea Redux*, his subsequent political poem, on a number of crucial points. Here, lazy ages lost in sleep and ease is a source of inspiration: Cromwell’s name becomes synonymous with his political success at achieving civil obedience; and the question ‘How shall I begin, or where conclude, / To draw a fame so circular?’ (*Poems*, I, 53; 17-18), which Dryden asks of himself early on in the poem, is finally answered by paying homage to the permanence to this achievement – that is, by attributing to Cromwell the great example of high endeavours, and the classical virtues, piety and valour. As Winn states, Dryden had avoided the temptation of clothing ‘Cromwell in borrowed robes’, showing that he had anticipated that it would have been inappropriate to honour the late Protector with the ‘kind of poem earlier poets had written for monarchs, just as the actual monument raised to Cromwell in Westminster Abbey was deliberately unlike royal tombs’.¹⁰² By contrast, some of the symbolic excesses of *Astraea Redux* conceal the fact that this poem’s object of praise has no basis in history; in Brown’s

¹⁰² Winn, p. 91-2.

words, ‘Dryden’s form proposes an equation of irreconcilable terms, an equation that produces various kinds of poetic disjunction, and that reveals a deep and unexpressed contradiction’.¹⁰³

As was shown in my previous chapter, contemporary critics generally agree that Dryden’s scepticism in the 1660s exemplifies a characteristically scientific paradigm of speculative thought (typically termed freedom of inquiry) that was advocated by Joseph Glanvill and other members of the Royal Society. Becoming a member of that institution himself in 1662, Dryden began thinking speculatively almost as a matter of course, and there is no doubt that Society members did influence him in this respect. However, the notion of speculative thought as it relates to Dryden’s work requires some clarification. Firstly, as a tool of sceptical inquiry, speculation should not be identified exclusively with the largely scientific aims of the Royal Society. As Parker, in his definition of eighteenth-century scepticism states, ‘sceptical thinking’ implies ‘a reasoned emphasis on the severe limitations of rationality [...] which nevertheless generates a surprising confidence of assertion’.¹⁰⁴ Although this recalls Glanvill’s sceptical premise that ‘to believe that every thing is certain, is as great a disinterest to Science, as to conceive that nothing is so’, it does not presuppose the need for a specifically scientific methodology.¹⁰⁵ In fact, as Parker subsequently states, sceptical thinking ‘flourishes in a space that is at once imaginative and social’.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, the ‘intellectual sources’ of such a view include thinkers that wrote outside of the Society, and, in some circumstances, thinkers that

¹⁰³ *Ideas of the Restoration in English Literature*, p. 167.

¹⁰⁴ Parker, p. 53.

¹⁰⁵ ‘II. Of Scepticism and Certainty’, in *Collected Works of Joseph Glanvill*, vol. VI, p. 45.

¹⁰⁶ Parker, p. 53. Again it needs to be emphasised that Parker is speaking of eighteenth-century literature, but in its general outlines, his definition of scepticism is applicable to Dryden here.

predate the Society's creation, especially Montaigne, who (his Pyrrhonism notwithstanding) is, as Parker has concluded, 'an influential model as well as a source'.¹⁰⁷

Thus, to the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, which Harth regards as the most 'appropriate and accurate' demonstration of Dryden's scepticism during this time, might be added the 'account' of *Annus Mirabilis* (1666), the first of Dryden's long prose critical essays.¹⁰⁸ Setting out a comprehensive theory of the nature of poetry, the 'account' is punctuated by references to Virgil, Lucan, Ovid, and others from the pantheon of Roman poets who had long been held up as unquestionable authorities of the form, and the best instructors in technical matters. The argument Dryden formulates, though, is largely exploratory and contains moments where, in the spirit of speculative thought, he is clearly testing positions against each other:

The composition of all poems is or ought to be of wit, and wit in the poet, or wit writing (if you will give me leave to use a school distinction) is no other than the faculty of imagination in the writer, which like a nimble spaniel beats over and ranges through the field of memory, till it springs the quarry it hunted after; or, without metaphor, which searches over the memory for the species or ideas of those things which it designs to represent. Wit written is that which is well defined, the happy result of thought or product of that imagination. (*Poems*, I, pp. 119-20)

Here Dryden goes about his hypothesis of poetic composition very systematically, yet ultimately his conclusions are deduced from no central or defining premise. This is apparent in his explanation of literary inspiration. Read one way, through the metaphor of the spaniel, the creative act is meant to be understood as an inductive, or at least, intuitive, process: the imagination, having caught the scent of an idea, tracks its quarry single-mindedly until close enough to seize upon it. Read the other way, without the metaphor, the process seems deductive; this time the search involves a considered and scrupulous comparison of a number of ideas (or

¹⁰⁷ Parker, p. 53.

¹⁰⁸ Harth, p. 44.

‘species’) in order to find among them the one that is most suitably expressive of the creative end that it is intended to represent. Dryden is describing the two approaches that a writer typically undertakes in the business of writing, and, in doing so, is seemingly attempting to accommodate the literary with the scientific – the magic of the muse with the rigour of method. Crucially, he finds the doubling harmonious, since neither view presupposes the certainty of an objective or dogmatic truth claim, as his subjective definition of a historical poem which immediately follows these lines confirms: ‘I judge it chiefly to consist in the delightful imaging of persons, actions, passions or things’ (*Poems*, I, p. 120). Owing, for this first person perspective as much to the writings of Montaigne as any other mode of sceptical argumentation, Dryden expresses what Parker defines as ‘the presence of the thinking self within the process of thinking [handling] a kind of truth too subtle or too evasive to be accessible to direct rational inquiry or impersonal philosophical discourse’.¹⁰⁹ As I shall go on to explain, the scientific method that he openly embraced in the mid 1660s should be understood as a manifestation of this form of sceptical thinking, as well as being sceptical discourse in its own right.

Secondly, it is important to emphasise that speculative thought was by no means an attribute of Dryden’s critical writing alone, at least not in this early period of his career. By equating Dryden’s scepticism with his criticism, Harth rightly emphasises a manner of argument that is mostly characteristic of scientific or philosophical forms of reasoning. But as Earl Miner more generally reminds us, the would-be laureate in his more accustomed role as poet achieved ‘a scale that measured man’s reality as well as the world’s in ways compatible with each other’.¹¹⁰ Parker’s concept of an intellectual space in which sceptical thinking flourished had, for Miner,

¹⁰⁹ Parker, p. 46.

¹¹⁰ *The Restoration Mode from Milton to Dryden* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 14.

first opened up in the early years of the Restoration, and possessing an ‘assurance in themselves and their world’, poets like Dryden actively sought to accomplish ‘a great deal by way of creation and disagreement’.¹¹¹ The most comprehensible illustration of such a poem in Dryden’s early career is his ‘To my Honour’d Friend, Dr Charleton’ – a commendatory poem on Walter Charleton’s new theory about the origin and purpose of Stonehenge and on the accomplishments of seventeenth-century British scientists more generally – which prefaced Charleton’s *Chorea Gigantum* (1662). Dryden says:

Columbus was the first that shook his throne,
 And found a temperate in a torrid zone:
 The feverish air fanned by a cooling breeze,
 The fruitful vales set round the shady trees,
 And guiltless men who danced away their time,
 Fresh as their grove, and happy as their clime.
 Had we still paid that homage to a name
 Which only God and nature justly claim,
 The western seas had been our utmost bound,
 Where poets might still dream the sun was drowned;
 And all the stars that shine in southern skies
 Had been admired by none but salvage eyes.
 (*Poems*, I, 71-72; 9-20)

If Dryden had been seeking to flatter his way into influential intellectual circles, then a poem addressed to Charleton was by no means a bad move.¹¹² Having established a solid reputation in medical research and metaphysical philosophy since 1650, he seemed a likely ally in a Society where interest in the language and literature of the nation would never become a major priority.¹¹³ However, Dryden was not writing a conventional poem of praise, and as these lines show he took his own cause very seriously. For many Royal Society members, the convenient if (by then) *incredible* animism of such metaphors as the sun drowning in western seas needed to

¹¹¹ *The Restoration Mode*, p. 15.

¹¹² It was in fact Charleton who proposed Dryden’s election to the Society, in late November 1662. See Winn, p. 129.

¹¹³ After showing interest in the post, Dryden was appointed to the ‘committee for improving the English language’, although its meetings, disturbed by the plague of 1665, ‘eventually came to nothing’, Winn, p. 129.

be sacrificed for the language of plain description. As Thomas Sprat states in his *History of the Royal Society* (1667), the institution ‘exacted from its members, a close, naked way of speaking; positive expressions; clear senses; a native easiness: bringing all things as near as the Mathematical plainness, as they can’.¹¹⁴ The reason for such an insistence is obvious enough: to aim for simplicity in speech is to make it intelligible to all and, therefore, accessible to disciples in every field of research; as the reference to mathematics shows, it is an attempt at universal understanding. But Dryden, whose ear was attuned to the language of metaphor and lyrical expression, would have immediately recognised that the integrity of poetic convention was in some jeopardy at this idea. Similarly, knowing that a poet cannot work without the exercise of his or her licence, he would have understood that poetry’s traditional role in public communication – not to mention his own livelihood – was severely compromised in a country whose leading intellects ‘preferred the language of Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants, before that, of Wits, or Scholars’.¹¹⁵ In order to safeguard his own interests, the poet clearly had to challenge these linguistic assumptions.

Two options were open to Dryden: to defend traditional poetry with a new argument, or to modify contemporary ideas about the poetic vocation to reflect new emphases. With no small measure of ingenuity, he opted for the latter. Tracing through his mind Columbus’s voyage to the New World (the discovery of which posed a direct challenge to Aristotle’s philosophical dominion over the Old), he discovers a terra *hitherto* incognita of literary inspiration. Simply by locating the Americas on his literary map he escapes the problem of reproducing tired clichés and conceits – in short, the problem of dreaming about the same natural phenomena again and

¹¹⁴ *History of the Royal Society in Restoration England*, ed. by J.I. Cope and H.W. Jones (St Louis and London: Washington University Press, 1959), p. 113.

¹¹⁵ *History of the Royal Society in Restoration England*, p. 113.

again. The image ‘And found a temperate in a torrid zone’, which is unique to the poem, is a measure of what this new clime of conceptual thought had to offer.¹¹⁶ Again, Dryden was seeking to combine elements of scientific thought with those of literary thought, or at least, was exploiting the breakthroughs of the former to enhance the latter; however in the opening lines of ‘To Dr Charleton’ he also achieves something else. By exposing the limitations of the Society’s views about language, he is using speculative thought against itself. As Winn says about this poem, ‘If Dryden would later identify skepticism as an attitude he shared with the members [...] he did not hesitate to apply a certain skepticism to the Society’s own claims’.¹¹⁷

This scepticism can be easily misunderstood. Without language, the medium of knowledge, nothing is capable of definition. In my previous chapter I showed that Bredvold regarded Dryden’s intellectual outlook as primarily Pyrrhonic – the view which will admit of no knowledge, but balances a given hypothesis with its opposite, and thus keeps the reasoning intellect in a state of perpetual suspension. With ‘To Dr Charleton’ specifically in mind, the writings of the Roman Pyrrhonic Sextus Empiricus may appear to favour Bredvold’s understanding of Dryden in this respect. ‘Indeterminacy’, Bredvold says in Book I of his *Outlines of Scepticism*, ‘is an intellectual feeling in virtue of which we neither deny nor posit anything investigated in dogmatic fashion’.¹¹⁸ Questioning the Society’s theories about language, Dryden inevitably calls into question the dogmatic fashion by which these theories had been *determined*. Like the deconstructionist critic, it might be argued, he draws attention to the problem of semantic slippage, insofar as the mind’s attempt to gain purchase and reach an

¹¹⁶ As Hammond explains, ‘Aristotle believed that the heat was so intense in the torrid zone between the tropics of Cancer and Capricorn that no one could live there’, *Poems*, I., p. 71n.

¹¹⁷ Winn, p. 132.

¹¹⁸ *Outlines of Scepticism*, p. 49.

understanding of the world through language is everywhere undermined by the fact that language itself is always in a state of flux.

There is, though, no textual evidence to suggest that Dryden was thinking in such strictly epistemological terms at any point in ‘To Dr Charleton’, and ultimately Bredvold’s observation that Pyrrhonists regarded ‘the search for criteria of truth’ as ‘an attempt to know the unknowable’ – an insight upon which his claims about Dryden’s sceptical outlook comes to depend – is at odds with what are essentially the mitigating aspects of the poem’s scepticism, which is to say, to make reference to Popkin’s definition of his the term, with its ‘modern empirical and pragmatic outlook’ and, to this end, its ‘standards for evaluating the reliability and applicability of what we have found out about the world’.¹¹⁹ Dryden’s metaphors make the work of the Society more comprehensible, clarifying its aims in human terms whilst simultaneously advocating the value of such clarifications. Any poem that was at heart Pyrrhonic would mostly likely have taken the disintegration of knowledge through language as its central focus, and, given the early-modern Christianisation of Pyrrhonism, would have relied not on the creation of new metaphors but on the use of ones already known. Later, when in the Preface to *Religio Laici* in 1682, Dryden was to condemn those who attempt to ‘prove religion by reason’, he stated that such an endeavour is like the construction of the tower of ‘Babel, which if it were possible (as it is not) to reach heaven, would come to nothing by the confusion of the workmen’ (*Poems*, II, p. 91). No such metaphor exists in ‘To Dr Charleton’.

However, the final conclusions of Bredvold’s argument – that the sceptic will always support the established or status quo authority of the society in which he or she is living – still has something

¹¹⁹ Popkin, p. 150.

to teach us, particularly when considered in relation to Dryden's identity as a poet writing for the public sphere. As Richard Helgerson observes, the 'term *public poet* [...] leads too readily to an opposition with *private man*'.¹²⁰ While we cannot know for sure the extent to which the latest philosophical advances influenced Dryden, we can safely assume that he regularly shared ideas with his honoured friend in private, ahead of, and possibly in preparation for, his entry into the Society. Any dialogue with Charleton to this end is likely to have involved a good deal of casual conversation, the kind of talk where the embryo of an idea can happen into existence unconsciously as a result of fresh stimuli, or of the mind being exercised in a new way. It would have taught Dryden how his own aesthetics might be enlivened by the relativity of hypothesising, allowing him to develop a sceptical appreciation of opposing points of view. Significantly, the home or the coffee-house notwithstanding, such dialogues embodied a public mode of discourse, one which upon the restoration of Charles II had been given specific political sanction.¹²¹

That the king patronised the Society is testament to this to some extent. But the spirit of free inquiry which Dryden and his contemporaries were enjoying has its precedent in Restoration policymaking, specifically the intent to engender a new climate of religious toleration. When Charles awaited his return to Britain, he was required to provide a statement of political intentions; agreeing to satisfy the common desire for stability and allaying any fears of despotism, he put his name to the Declaration of Breda (1660), a contract in which peace and the accommodation of religious opinion was guaranteed:

¹²⁰ *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton, and the Literary System* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1983), p. 4.

¹²¹ Neither private nor fully public social spaces, coffee-houses were beginning to proliferate in Restoration London. Winn speculates that Dryden may have let his membership of the Society lapse later in the decade because of the opportunity for literary discussion that the coffee-house presented from 1664. Winn, p. 131.

And because the passion and uncharitableness of the times have produced several opinions in religion, by which men are engaged in parties and animosities against each other (which, when they shall hereafter unite in a freedom of conversation, will be composed or better understood), we do declare a liberty to tender consciences, and that no man shall be disquieted or called in question for differences of opinion in matters of religion, which do not disturb the peace of the kingdom.¹²²

Of course, the Declaration cannot be altogether taken at face value. Drafted by General Monk (a representative of the old order), it was, in the first instance, intended to secure immunity from prosecution for some of the key revolutionaries of the Civil War, demanding Charles's consent before the Crown could officially devolve to him. Furthermore, the document was a preliminary of the Restoration Settlement, which increasingly shut out from the Anglican fold those that would not come round to their political and religious hard line. With the Clarendon Code (1661-65), a series of legislation drafted by Charles's Lord Chancellor, Edward Hyde, it was clear that the new regime would not establish a base of power where nonconformity was represented, tolerated or contained, but envisioned 'the restored Church and the restored monarchy [...] stand[ing] together'.¹²³ Nevertheless, the fact that the king had publicly adopted a broadly tolerant attitude towards tender consciences in matters of religion illustrates, at the very least, the propagandistic importance to England's political future of open pragmatism. As the passage above implies, general liberties were to be seen as compatible with the cause of truth, retaining, as they do, the belief that free conversation promotes a debate, or dialectic, where opinions of religion will be better understood. Freedom from persecution for nonconformist views may have been fundamentally at odds with the unyielding scepticism of the sixteenth-century Catholic Pyrrhonists, but in Restoration and late seventeenth-century England an enduring conciliation

¹²² *The Constitutional Documents of the Puritan Revolution 1625-1660*, ed. by Samuel Rawson Gardiner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), p. 465.

¹²³ *The Stuart Age*, p. 295.

between conflicting views was, if only on the ideological surface of things, to be a guiding political principle.

By publicly praising the work of Charleton, then, Dryden was not only presenting a conviction about the poet's place in a brave new world of ideas, he was also presenting himself as a literary spokesperson for the emerging national and royal attitude that defined this world. Like public poets who made similar self-presentations before him – Edmund Spenser, John Milton, and Ben Jonson – he accommodates himself, to adopt Helgerson's words, 'to the demands of a particular moment', speaking 'to his own time in a language it might be expected to understand' in order to 'perform the mediating function that was ideally his'.¹²⁴ The previously Puritan poet might well have pursued a different course in his career. Speaking specifically of Milton, whose epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667) was still awaiting publication in 1662, Helgerson argues that 'political and religious polarizations divided him from his literary contemporaries', and so he placed himself not in his society but outside of it, at 'the converging point [...] of vatic poets [and] Biblical prophets'.¹²⁵ The disparity between Milton's otherworldly and Dryden's down-to-earth response to the Restoration can be seen in the opening lines of 'To Dr Charleton'; they begin the poem where early-modern scepticism generally began, by denouncing the authority of received philosophical opinion:

The longest tyranny that ever swayed
Was that wherein our ancestors betrayed
Their free-born reason to the Stagirite,
And made his torch their universal light.
So truth, while only one supplied the state,
Until 'twas bought, like emp'ric wares or charms,
Grew scarce and dear, and yet sophisticate,
Hard words sealed up with Aristotle's arms.

¹²⁴ *Self-Crowned Laureates*, p. 14.

¹²⁵ *Self-Crowned Laureates*, p. 188 and p. 280.

(*Poems*, I, 71; 1-8)

At first sight, this passage reads like a manifesto for the new science, promoting the cause of knowledge by reminding its reader of the paradigmatic shift in epistemological thought, away from the dogmatism of the Stagirite or Aristotle, and towards, as we find out in line 23, the pragmatism of Francis Bacon; it was, Dryden shows, such a shift that had allowed scholars like Charleton to thrive, quite apart from the natural talents of that ‘learned friend’ (*Poems*, I, 73; 33) and those of William Gilbert (25), Robert Boyle (27) and William Harvey (31), with whom he is honourably ranked. And yet, politicised terms like ‘tyranny’ and ‘ancestors betrayed’, together with the idea of the state being supplied by one individual and the phrasing ‘sealed up with Aristotle’s arms’, encourage a parallel reading.¹²⁶ In no uncertain terms, Dryden was at this moment turning his back on the interregnum years – presided over by Cromwell and the Puritans who had, by force of arms, also exerted a authority that in the end could not be sustained.

Going further, Dryden seeks to persuade his readers that in contrast to the forbidding climate of the Interregnum no loyal subject is debarred from royal privileges, claiming that the king’s beneficence is the single factor that unites them all. This is brought into full perspective by the closing lines of the poem, where further allusions to England’s recent political power struggles recall the time when Charles had suffered tyranny and the betrayal of hereditary monarchy by dissident hands. Disputing Inigo Jones’s theory that the site had been a Roman temple, Charleton claimed that Stonehenge was built by the Danes as a place to inaugurate kings; Dryden, referring to the days after the battle of Worcester (1651) when Charles II found sanctuary within the

¹²⁶ The image of line 8 adds a further ambiguity. The accepted interpretation is that Dryden’s diction here echoes an advertisement for Buckworth’s Lozenges in Kenelm Digby’s *A Late Discourse* (1660), which were ‘sealed up with their Coat of Armes’. See *Poems*, I, p. 71n and Winn, p. 133.

stones from Cromwell's pursuing army, characterises Charleton's insight as a distinctively Restoration achievement, one aligned to public stability:

These ruins sheltered once his sacred head,
Then, when from Worcester's fatal field he fled;
Watched by the genius of this royal place,
And mighty visions of the Danish race.
His refuge then was for a temple shown:
But, he restored, 'tis now become a throne.
(*Poems*, I, 74; 53-58)

It is in these final lines that Dryden fully reveals or presents himself, declaring his independence from private dissidence. To quote Winn again, poetry's 'capacity for irony, metaphor and wit can easily accommodate [a number of] theories at once', and 'explaining that Stonehenge was a temple or sanctuary when it sheltered the fugitive Charles', it is now a throne 'not because Charleton has restored it intellectually, but because Charles has restored it politically'.¹²⁷ It is created by history not private conviction, and that is how Dryden comes to stand where he does.

The political subtext of 'To Dr Charleton' is unsurprising: *Chorea Gigantum* itself was dedicated to Charles and so the poem undoubtedly echoes Charleton's own tribute to the king; indeed, Charleton's praise for a royal judge 'whose Reasons are Demonstrations, whose Enquiries are the best Directions unto Truth, whose Assent always is a sign of Truth' could hardly be ignored by Dryden, nor could the providential symbolism of 'that Gigantick Pile' in the flight from the 'bloody Jaws of those *Monsters of Sin and Cruelty*'.¹²⁸ Moreover, Charleton (who had been physician in ordinary to Charles I) had espoused pro-monarchical views in his earlier, pre-Restoration philosophical writings, most notably in *Physiologia* (1654) where he champions those 'assertors of philosophical liberty' who 'admit of no Monarchy in Philosophy, beside that

¹²⁷ Winn, p. 135.

¹²⁸ *Chorea Gigantum, or, The most Famous Antiquity of Great-Britan, Vulgarly called Stone-heng [...] Restored to the Danes* (London, 1663), pp.4-6.

of Truth'.¹²⁹ With Winn's comment about the capacity of poetic language in mind, it was natural, if not necessary, for Dryden to evoke this rhetoric, political sympathies apart.

However, it would be a mistake to present Dryden as simply following Charleton's lead here, because Charleton's sentiments had been Dryden's own for some time. In 'To my Honoured Friend Sir Robert Howard on his Excellent Poems', written three years before in 1660, he employed a similar tactic to that of 'To Dr Charleton', praising Howard's revival of moral poesy by equating, via a topical metaphor, revived monarchical rule with the revival of literary culture: 'Like some brave captain, your successful pen / Restores the exiled to her crown again' (*Poems*, I, 33; 49-50). In his Restoration panegyrics, this quality of Dryden's poetic imagination seemed almost prophetic; adumbrating a policy of imperial expansion, *Astraea Redux*, for instance, presents discovery and knowledge as among the king's main concerns: 'Abroad your empire shall no limits know, / But like the sea in boundless circles flow' (*Poems*, I, 53; 298-99). Lines 99-100 of *To His Sacred Majesty* likewise anticipate the king's imperial agenda: 'Born to command the mistress of the seas, / Your thoughts in that blue empire please' (*Poems*, I, 59; 99-100). What the occasion of 'To Dr. Charleton' gave him was an opportunity to articulate these political convictions in a discourse which formalised the connection between national identity and science, and between scientific scepticism and poetry. In the following lines, Francis Bacon is celebrated not just as the progenitor of the inductive method, but as a national hero – an English Columbus; in scientific terms, he ranks alongside the liberator Charles, presiding over an empire of knowledge which promises to be as boundless as the political empire that it serves:

Among th' assertors of free reason's claim,
Th' English are not the least in worth or fame.

¹²⁹ *Physiologia Epicuro-Gassendo-Charltoniana, or, A Fabrick of Science Natural, upon the Hypothesis of Atoms founded by Epicurus* (London, 1654), p. 3.

The world to Bacon does not only owe
 Its present knowledge, but its future too.
 (*Poems*, I, 71; 21-24)

Dryden's next poem, *Annus Mirabilis*, gives a much more comprehensive understanding of the culture of thought out of which scepticism had emerged, but in broadening his focus, Dryden compromises his eulogistic aims. Disjuncture is noticeable from the outset. Written in Gondibert stanzas and chronicling the events of 1666 (the Year of Wonders which the Latin title designates), *Annus Mirabilis* is, according to Dryden, a historical poem in the dress of an epic: 'I have called my poem historical, not epic, though both the actions and actors are as much heroic as any poem can contain' (*Poems*, I, p. 114). Significantly, blurring the lines of distinction between the two genres, he blurs his readers' expectations. Firstly, history and epic do not preclude one another; rather they go hand in hand. Both the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* (29-19 BCE) to which Dryden subsequently alludes are epic poems detailing the painful history of the Greek and Roman nations. Secondly, *Annus Mirabilis* deals exclusively with contemporary concerns, looking not to the struggles of the past but to an idealised and trouble-free future. In some important respects, it is a history-in-the-making, and references to the advancement of British knowledge and to the work of the Royal Society show consciousness of this fact:

But what so long in vain, and yet unknown,
 By poor mankind's benighted wit is sought,
 Shall in this age to Britain first be shown,
 And hence be to admiring nations taught.

The ebbs of tides, and their mysterious flow,
 We as art's elements shall understand;
 And as by line upon the ocean go,
 Whose paths shall be familiar as the land.
 (*Poems*, I, 170; 641-48)

and

Then we upon our globe's last verge shall go,

And view the ocean leaning on the sky;
 From thence our rolling neighbours we shall know,
 And on the lunar world securely pry.

This I foretell from your auspicious care,
 Who great in search of God and nature grow;
 Who best your wise Creator's praise declare,
 Since best to praise his works is best to know.
 (*Poems*, I, 170; 653-60)

Equating the discoveries that Britain is expected to make (mastery of the tides and navigation) with a policy of cultural imperialism (teaching admiring nations), Dryden enlarges his vision of an empire glorified by science. Active, single-syllable verbs, 'flow', 'grow' and 'go' (repeated twice) give the stanzas a sense of dynamic movement, befitting the maritime enterprises it describes whilst at the same time qualifying the end of such enterprises – to know. What is missing, though, is the sense of poetic play which encapsulates the versatility of approach that defined the scepticism of 'To Dr Charleton'. In fact, remarking on Dryden's interest in the 'description of any naval fight in the proper terms which are used at sea' (*Poems*, I, p. 117), expressed in the preface, Helen Burke finds that the poem's style is complicit with the mode of communication endorsed by the Royal Society – with Sprat's conception of a mathematical language comprehensible to all: 'His argument here for the use of a more technical language suggest he is consciously trying to achieve the objectivity that was the ideological project of the new scientists'.¹³⁰ In his essay, 'Dryden: the Classicist as Sceptic', Paul Hammond offers a different interpretation of the scepticism in *Annus Mirabilis*, stating that the poem is

designedly incapable [...] of coherence, because it is attempting to understand events as they happen, and is aware of the awkward discrepancies which arise between our experience and the interpretations which we would like to make of it.

Hammond realises the true significance of the poem's alleged historicity: it is historical 'because it attends to the events of history as they are experienced [...] reproducing the confusion and

¹³⁰ 'Annus Mirabilis and the Ideology of the New Science', *ELH*, 57 (1990), 307-34 (p. 311)

partial comprehension which is the lot of each participant in history'.¹³¹ Scepticism in this sense relates to the limits of perception (an example of how judgement does not proceed from some innate principles of reason but is constrained by subjectivity), not really recognised until John Locke had put empiricism on the philosophical map. 'Experiments and historical observations we may have', says Locke in Book IV of his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), 'but beyond this I fear our Talents reach not, nor are our Faculties, as I guess, able to advance'.¹³²

If the scepticism of *Annus Mirabilis* reflects the experiences of the present moment through its composition, it is also very much of the moment in its sources. Dryden's analogy between the pursuit of knowledge and praise of God ('Since best to praise his works is best to know') parallels such writings as *The Vanity of Dogmatising* (1661) by contemporary Society apologist of methodological scepticism, Joseph Glanvill. To know, Glanvill reasons, is to know God, and learning is bound up with the business of redeeming a world which fell with Adam, as the introductory pages of *The Vanity of Dogmatising* imply:

The Eternal Wisdome having made that Creature whose crown it was to be like his Maker, enrich't him with those ennoblements which were worthy him that gave them, and made no less for the benefit of their receiver, then the glory of their Author.¹³³

Arguably, the scepticism of the poem is also of the moment, politically. Jackson Cope questions Glanvill's epistemological integrity, finding that he put the 'philosophies of his age to the service of his particular ideology', especially that pertaining to his 'fear of and disgust for rebellious

¹³¹ 'Dryden: the Classicist as Sceptic', *Seventeenth Century*, 4 (1989), 165-87 (p. 169).

¹³² *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* ed. by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 645.

¹³³ Glanvill, in *Collected Works of Joseph Glanvill* vol. III, p. 3.

nonconformity and what he felt was its ultimate outcome, atheism'.¹³⁴ Dryden would not explicitly address matters of religion and belief for another sixteen years, but in principle the same charge might be levelled at him. In the lines which follow his coverage of the Society, the poet reminds his reader that imperial success presupposes success in the Dutch War. And yet conflict with the Dutch (which underlies the poem throughout) is presented with a casualness that will allow no anxiety about its outcome. It is a casualness which ignores political reality:

But first the toils of war we must endure,
And from th' injurious Dutch redeem the seas.
War makes the valiant of his right secure,
And gives up fraud to be chastised with ease.
(*Poems*, I, 170; 653-60)

As Miner observes, Dryden's 'panegyric always lauds the object of praise [...] by the standard of what it should be, not necessarily of what it actually is'.¹³⁵ Here the quasi-philosophical terms of the preceding stanzas resonate in unequivocal military ones: just as science will have its intrepid voyagers, so the navy has its warriors of the sea; and just as knowledge evokes God, so valour evokes 'right'. However, war with Holland, initially backed in parliament, was becoming increasingly untenable at the time Dryden was writing the poem: failure to capitalise on the victory of the first battle off Lowestoft in 1663 provoked accusations of, as Coward's makes clear, 'maladministration in the navy and corruption in the government', and the alliance of France and Denmark with the Dutch in early 1666, resulted in fears about diplomatic isolation.¹³⁶ The jingoism of Dryden's lines neatly deflects attention away from these problems, rallying its readers under a decidedly nationalistic banner and asking them to participate in an imperial fantasy where Britain's independence is assumed, never questioned.

¹³⁴ 'Anglican Apologist: Old Ideas and New Style in the Restoration', *PMLA*, 69 (1954), 223-50 (p. 223)

¹³⁵ *Dryden's Poetry* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1967), p. 30.

¹³⁶ *The Stuart Age*, p. 301.

In *Of Dramatic Poesy*, Dryden's scepticism is more intricate still. Undoubtedly, the dialectical inductivism of Society scepticism plays a more active and influential part in the essay than it had done in *Annus Mirabilis* and 'To Dr Charleton' before it. A critical debate about the merits – relative to each other – of classical, modern French, and pre- and post-Restoration dramatic aesthetics, its structure, implies what Johnson described as the 'successive representations of opposite probabilities'.¹³⁷ Moreover, the text consciously sees itself as an example of the 'Experiments of Philosophy', which had already laid bare 'Noble Secrets in Opticks, Medicine, Anatomy [and] Astronomy' (*Works*, XVII, p. 15). Yet as Brown states, 'Dryden helps to shape the literary praise of empire that characterizes England's first age of expansion whilst providing 'a paradigm for its critique'.¹³⁸ It does this in two respects. Firstly, *Of Dramatic Poesy* blends fictional and non-fictional elements in a way that consistently undermines its purported methodology. Secondly, it is framed by a history that is hardly flattering to either the English or to the epistemological cause that the text putatively embraces; indeed, references to anxieties relating to the Dutch war are more explicit than in *Annus Mirabilis*.

Given the broad sweep of ideas that the essay encompasses, it is necessary to provide a short exposition of its major points before elaborating on its sceptical implications. Written as a conversation between literary friends – Crites, Eugenius, Lisideius, and Neander – and taking place on a barge on 'that memorable day, in the first Summer of that late War, when our navy ingag'd the *Dutch* (*Works*, XVII, p. 8), each speaker represents a particular dramatic theory and

¹³⁷ Samuel Johnson, *Lives of English Poets*, vol. II, ed. by Roger Lonsdale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 119.

¹³⁸ 'Dryden and the Imperial Imagination', in *The Cambridge Companion to John Dryden*, ed. by Steven N. Zwicker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 59-74 (p. 74).

refers to a practising playwright of the period.¹³⁹ Thus, Crites, who represents Robert Howard, is a devotee of the classical school: but for some largely concessionary remarks on the accomplishments of Elizabethan drama later on in the essay, his views consist in the dogmatic belief that only the ‘Ancients have been faithful Imitators and wise Observers of [...] Nature’ (*Works*, XVII, p. 8). By contrast, Eugenius, representing Lord Buckhurst, celebrates the achievements of modern English dramatists – in particular, their break with the apparently unimpeachable rules established by Aristotle and the classical tradition: ‘for (had we sate down with a dull imitation of them) we might then have lost somewhat of the old perfection, but never acquir’d any that was new’ (*Works*, XVII, p. 22). The well-born Lisideius (a Latin anagram) who embodies the views of Charles Sedley, champions contemporary French drama and the beauty of tragedies written in rhyme (*Works*, XVII, p. 43). Into the role of Neander (‘new man’), Dryden casts himself, and, as his cognomen in part suggests, he is the only dramatist among the company who is not of aristocratic birth.

This detail is particularly well-suited to the structure of the dialogue, since, speaking last, he sets up his formulations on the foundations of his social superiors. Like Eugenius he holds that the Elizabethan generation of Jonson, Fletcher and Shakespeare were exemplary as ‘not onely we shall never equal them, but they could never equal themselves were they to rise and write again. We acknowledge them our Fathers in wit’ (*Works*, XVIII, pp. 72-73). And like Lisideius he favours rhymed tragedy, for ‘Tragedy [...] is wont to image to us the minds and fortunes of noble persons, and to portray these exactly’ and ‘rhyme is nearest nature, as being the noblest kind of modern verse’ (*Works*, XVII, p. 74). In an important sense, though, Neander has his role

¹³⁹ See *John Dryden: The Major Works*, ed. by Keith Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 871.

and his convictions delegated to him by Eugenius; this immediately limits the opportunity for novel insights that Neander might bring:

Though, says, *Eugenius*, I am at all times ready to defend the honour of my Countrey against the *French*, and to maintain, we are as well able to vanquish them with our Pens as our Ancestours have been with their swords; yet, if you please, added he, looking upon *Neander*, I will commit this cause to my friend's management; his opinion of our Plays is the same as mine. (*Works*, XVII, p. 74)

Crucially, *Of Dramatic Poesy* provided a platform to defend heroic drama, and Dryden's revival of heroic themes was largely an individual project, as too was its use in his plays of rhymed iambic pentameter lines. But with Neander he presents himself as a subordinate voice in his own critical writing. Consequently, the value which Dryden invests in the text's dialectic appears to yield somewhat diminished returns. Far from simply 'presenting two opposing ways of reasoning', which Harth regards as the exclusive trait of the essay's scepticism, the interchange between its characters involves rhetorical strategies that emphasise the role of shared cultural and political assumptions.¹⁴⁰ Going back to the first pages, we can see that this was the case all along. Three of the four interlocutors accept as the defining premise of their discussion the view that a play 'ought to be, *a just and lively Image of Human Nature, representing its Passions and Humours, and the Changes of Fortune to which it is subject; for the Delight and Instruction of Mankind*' (*Works*, XVII, p. 15). Underpinning the putatively scientific aim of understanding how this is best achieved is a claim (a convention or central tenet of drama advanced by Aristotle) meant to be taken as a statement of fact; only Crites raises the 'Logical Objection [...] that it was onely a *genere & fine*, and so not altogether perfect' (*Works*, XVII, p. 15).

It is interesting to speculate about what Dryden is trying to achieve here. When he described his discourse as 'sceptical, [...] a dialogue sustained by persons of several opinions, all of them left

¹⁴⁰ Harth, p. 8.

doubtful, to be determined by the readers in general' (*Works*, IX, p.15), he highlights something of the impasse that he in his capacity of Neander, and Howard's in *Crites*, had reached: '*Crites*, I have endeavour'd to answer your objections; it remains onely that I should vindicate Argument for Verse, which you have gone about to overthrow' (*Works*, XVII, p. 78). A case of life imitating art (given that he was replying to Howard's accusation of haughtiness in criticism), we might on this point question Harth's belief that Dryden had intended to generate a 'positiveness of opinion'.¹⁴¹ More significantly, though, in advertising Neander's affinities with Eugenius, Dryden recalls the stated aim of the text at the moment of composition – that of national pride:

THE drift of the ensuing Discourse was chiefly to vindicate the honour of our English Writers, from the censure of those who unjustly prefer the French before them. This I intimate, least any should think me so exceeding vain, as to teach others on Art which they understand much better than my self. (*Works*, XVII, p. 78)

The two objectives of the discourse are mutually exclusive. Not even on the point of artistic modesty can they be reconciled: where Dryden had latterly stated that 'his way of reasoning' was imitative of the modest inquiries of the Royal Society, he had formerly attempted to anticipate a largely non-philosophical charge of vanity. Clearly Dryden – with Neander as his mouthpiece – was proposing that the creation of a new dramatic aesthetic and the way the nation must henceforth see itself as being alike imperative; and it is for these reasons of nation, not for their own sake, that every new development is accounted as significant. All the positive concomitants of scientifically-based inquiry and of trade, which the *Essay*'s form and setting respectively imply, reflects the imperial grandeur to which Restoration England aspired. Later Neander advocates that the future of drama needed to be built not on classical models, but on ground cleared of the inhibiting ideological structures of the recent past; in his words echoes of the Charleton poem can be heard:

¹⁴¹ Harth, p. 9.

Be it spoken to the honour of the *English*, our Nation can never want in any Age such who are able to dispute the Empire of Wit with any people in the Universe. And though the fury of a Civil War, and Power for twenty years together abandon'd to a barbarous race of men, Enemies of all good Learning had buried the Muses under the ruins of Monarchy, yet with the restoration of our happiness, we see reviv'd Poesie lifting up its head, & already shaking off the rubbish which lay so heavy on it. (*Works*, XVII, p. 63)

Politically self-aware, Restoration writers and thinkers exercised their claims on a lost heritage by making it their own, in much the same way as Charles II had exercised his right to regal authority with policies intended to reinforce his sovereignty and, of course, his imperial ambition.

Poets and playwrights who were looking to rise from the dirt and breathe again also felt assured that they could produce a progressive literary form. As Helgerson states, 'as new writers were proclaiming their ancient lineage, they were contributing to the manifestation of a system that has no precise counterpart in antiquity'.¹⁴² This climate was decisive in shaping Dryden's identity as public poet. Reaching artistic maturity in the early years of the Restoration, Dryden was able to exploit the turning point of history for his own ends. Throughout *Of Dramatic Poesy* his argument is defined by historical division, and even though writers of the Elizabethan period were mythologised as having belonged to a golden age, the repeated emphasis upon, in reality, the gap of one generation, creates the impression of achieving a clean break in which to make new. However with a new start came new fears, and a poetics emphasising change that implies a scepticism of an altogether more negative kind. This can clearly be discerned in *Annus Mirabilis*. Balancing his vision of a world mastered by British maritime prowess is Dryden's depiction of humanity in the London fire, a scene which culminates in the King's prayer in which Charles implores:

¹⁴² *Self-Crowned Laureates*, p. 3.

O pass not, Lord, an absolute decree,
 Or bind thy sentence unconditional;
 But in thy sentence our remorse foresee,
 And in that foresight this thy doom recall.
 (*Poems*, I, 193; 1073-76)

Britain's fortunes, as this quatrain attests, is contingent on God's will: even the king has been cut down to size. Yet, bound by the dictates of circumstance, Dryden attempts to deal with negativity by subverting it; recalling the warrior David's prayer in Chronicles 21:17, Charles is the catalyst of God's mercy: 'At length th' Almighty cast a pitying eye' (*Poems*, I, 193; 1117).

At some point between the compositions of *Annus Mirabilis* and *Of Dramatic Poesy* something had changed, for not only is a mood of negativity in the latter unmistakable, it is willingly indulged. The following passage of the essay relates the opinions of Crites and Lisideius about Britain's engagement with the Dutch. Shared before the debate gets underway, they provide a striking contrast to the tone of the essay's more formal purpose:

Crites [...] could scarce have wish'd the Victory at the price he knew he must pay for it, in being subject to the reading and hearing of so many ill verses as he was sure would be made on that Subject; adding that no Argument could scape some of those eternal Rhimers, who watch a Battel with more diligence then the Ravens and birds of Prey [...]. There are some of those impertinent people of whom you speak, answer'd *Lisideius*, who to my knowledg, are already so provided, either way, that they can produce not onely a Panegirick upon the Victory, but, if needed, a funeral elegy on the Duke: wherein after they have crown'd his valour with many Lawrels, they will at last deplore the odds under which he fell; concluding that his courage deserv'd a better destiny.
 (*Works*, XVII, p. 9)

For a poet jostling for position in the public sphere these are ironic if not hypocritical words. Had not *Annus Mirabilis* sought to crown royal valour with many laurels? To quote line 659 of that poem again: 'War makes the valiant of his right secure' (*Poems*, I, 170; 659). Of course, Dryden's views about creativity must be considered in their own right. The scavenger birds that wait to pick over the flesh and bones of fallen heroes make for grim comparison with the life-

affirming vitality of the spaniel bounding after its game in the ‘account’ of *Annus Mirabilis*: Talentless literary opportunism is unpalatable; far more preferable is the poet that is willing to sweat for his or her plaudits. Even so, disenchantment about the poetic vocation itself is impossible to deny. As Cedric D. Reverand II asks:

In that world where men are dying [...] where the fate of a nation is being decided, who can hear the voices of these poets who have ‘disingag’d themselves’ (p. 8) from anchored vessels? And who cares about the things that Lisideius, Eugenius, Crites, and Neander say in their drifting boat?¹⁴³

Again, Pyrrhonic claims regarding anti-rationalism seem relevant. Each debater has come down from their ivory tower to assume their place on that barge (procured for them by a servant of Lisideius) only to burst the bubble of heroic promise themselves. But again, Pyrrhonism is too simplistic an explanation for the approach that Dryden takes. Anti-rationalism should not be confused with disillusion. What these moments in the essay reveal is another, subsidiary scepticism, no less important for being less prominent. This scepticism, as Parker explains, is ‘advanced as positive opinions’ which

implicitly rebut more positive formulations of the significance and importance of intellectual achievement. In this respect they connect formal scepticism, whereby a theoretical position is found wanting, with the expression of a (in the looser sense) sceptical disillusioned attitude of mind.¹⁴⁴

Parker’s insights here may need to be reframed to account for differences between eighteenth-century scepticism, which is his primary subject, and that of the Restoration. Unless we accept that the divide between Neander’s and Crites’s theoretical formulations is unbridgeable, for example, the essay and the sceptical method it adopts cannot be thought of as wanting. Moreover, by intellectual achievement, Parker means purely epistemological achievement: ‘man’s power to know, his status as a thinking being, and his ability to give an account of the

¹⁴³ ‘Dryden’s “Essay of Dramatick Poesie”: The Poet and the World of Affairs’, *SEL*, 22 (1982), 375-93 (p. 380).

¹⁴⁴ Parker, p. 13.

significance of his life'.¹⁴⁵ In Dryden's age, the lines of distinction between epistemology and politics are not so boldly circumscribed, and, as such, Dryden is unable to 'play the sceptic with his adversaries' as the 'Enlightenment thinker' can – from the basis of a 'positive, more or less, rationalist programme'.¹⁴⁶ Achievement is justified by its significance in public and political affairs, or as Reverand puts it: 'The question is how can the voice of the poet both remain [...] away from the din of society and [...] at the same time be a significant and effective voice in that world of action'.¹⁴⁷

The extent to which Dryden's literary aspirations were entwined with the new era of monarchical politics should not be underestimated; nor should Dryden's explicit identification with Charles II. Indeed, on the evidence of his first compositions, it is clear that Dryden was attracted to the cosmic qualities of the myth of kingship: notwithstanding the tension between celebration and concern in *Astraea Redux*, as well as the irreconcilable paradoxes that punctuate the poem throughout, Dryden was unequivocal about committing himself to the cause of his king, to the point that, as Winn observes, the restoration moment 'inspired' the poet to adopt all the tropes of 'a Golden Age [...] even long after the explicit political hopes of [...] 1660 had proven false'.¹⁴⁸ However, what lay at the heart of this inspiration was not blind faith in the new monarch, but a careful consideration of Britain's political destiny. This becomes apparent in the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* and *Annus Mirabilis*, which both ostensibly imagine Britain's supremacy in the rarefied world of European politics, whilst, at the same time, entertaining anxieties about the

¹⁴⁵ Parker, p. 13.

¹⁴⁶ Parker, p. 13.

¹⁴⁷ 'Dryden's "Essay of Dramatick Poesie": The Poet and the World of Affairs', p. 381

¹⁴⁸ Winn, p. 106.

reality of ever achieving this.¹⁴⁹ Behind the philosophical calm of the *Essay* are the distant shots of war over trade routes, an ironic reminder that, on its path to greatness, the nation is far from secure. Similarly *Annus Mirabilis* magnifies the heroic resolve of the king and the British people in a way that ultimately draws attention to Britain's vulnerability on the world stage. In all the texts considered in this chapter, scepticism plays a dual role; this is a defining role. Dryden understood that progressive literature was a desirable ideal in Restoration England; however he also knew that its success presupposed the creation of a fully politically independent state. Consequently he responds to the present moment, mapping the political and cultural changes as they happen, and characterising the spirit of the age in his own voice.

¹⁴⁹ *Lives of the Poets*, p. 298.

Between Hero and Dictator: Tracing the *Leviathan* in Dryden's Plays and Poems, 1665-1684

This chapter analyses the influence of Hobbesian scepticism in some selected plays and political poetry written by Dryden between 1665 and 1684. The selection is guided by the need to isolate two strands of Dryden's thought: the 'public' need to answer the influence of Thomas Hobbes, and also the inescapable attraction, both aesthetic and philosophical, of Hobbes's political propositions. It has been my argument in chapter one of this thesis that the early-modern sceptical impulse largely supported the political status quo, or else supported the means by which it was thought political stability and civil peace would be most expediently achieved. At the heart of Montaigne's 'Apology of Raimond Sebond', I have shown, was a Pyrrhonism that recognised the legitimacy of established political authority, deferring to the Catholic Church in points of faith and, necessarily, to the forms of political government sanctioned by the Church. Similarly, I have shown that, despite the integrity of its philosophical aims, Glanvill's model of speculative scientific investigation supported the establishment – the Anglican Church and the Stuart monarchy – of his day, insofar as the Royal Society member defined his epistemological premises from within an ideological framework that would ultimately benefit from epistemology's practical ends. I have then gone on to demonstrate the ways in which both the dialecticism of Montaigne's essay form and the speculative approach of the Royal scientists informed Dryden's thinking in the early 1660s.

In turning to the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes it should be noted that, in many respects, it is the most extreme example of the early-modern sceptical impulse, for unlike other systems of thought in the period it provides a critique of the human condition which is based on

conflicting conclusions. On the one hand, claims such as ‘The skill of making, and maintaining Common-wealths [...] consisteth in certain Rules, as doth Arithmetique and Geometry’ have at their core the conviction that, with the right reasoning, the human individual is able to secure for him or herself a contented existence; owing, as the language suggests, much to Cartesian methodological scepticism, such claims exemplify Hobbes’s own attempt to close the gap between ignorance and enlightenment, encoding a theory of political absolutism in the absolutely indubitable logic of first philosophical principles.¹⁵⁰ And yet, on the other hand, claims such as ‘the natural condition of Man [...] is a condition of Warre’, a condition where ‘it followeth [...] every man has a Right to everything; even to one another’s body’, encourage the belief that humanity is always apt to get things hopelessly wrong.¹⁵¹ Insofar as a ‘surprising confidence of assertion’ is set against ‘a reasoned emphasis on the severe limitations of human reason’, this is a paradox that might be said to anticipate the easy philosophical detachment of Parker’s eighteenth-century sceptic.¹⁵² Jon Parkin finds that ‘Hobbes’s theories were curiously indeterminate, hinting at dramatically heterodox conclusions drawn from quite conventional premises’ and were ‘deliberately formulated in terms of a series of paradoxes’.¹⁵³ However, Hobbesian thought was very much a direct product of the problems it attempted to resolve, and though it may belong to the tradition of positive epistemological endeavour – flourishing in the vacuum left by Aristotelian dogmatism – it knowingly works with pessimism rather than optimism, with crisis rather than hope. As Alan Ryan states, ‘Hobbes’s science of politics is a form of blueprint making’ that ‘sets out a rational strategy for individuals placed in the

¹⁵⁰ Hobbes, p. 91.

¹⁵¹ Hobbes, p. 145.

¹⁵² Parker, p. 53.

¹⁵³ *Taming the Leviathan* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 14.

dangerous and anxiety-ridden state of nature’, relying ‘for its rhetorical power on the fact that men have so often failed to do what the blueprint dictates’.¹⁵⁴

Dryden, who from before the Restoration to the late 1680s had considered many different sides of political and religious debate, was certainly predisposed to Hobbes’s theory of absolutism. Becoming poet laureate in 1668 and Historiographer Royal two years later, his many defences of the active proponent of absolute authority, Charles II, seemed to typify characteristically Hobbesian insights. Moreover, and as I began to show in my previous chapter, most if not all of Dryden’s political proclamations emphasise the need for strong, even-handed and pragmatic authority, an authority which Hobbes deemed imperative to the effective government of a nation or commonwealth, and which, above all, was a defining factor in a scepticism ultimately concerning itself with the failing dogma of obedience for its own sake. When Dryden composed *The Conquest of Granada*, his most successful dramatisation of political conflict of the 1670s, he opened himself to the charge of Hobbism on two counts: firstly for representing ‘Men in a *Hobbian* State of War’, and secondly for deriving his ‘Political Ornamentals from Mr *Hobs*’.¹⁵⁵ For Richard Leigh, the author of these criticisms, Dryden’s involvement with Hobbesian thought was symptomatic of the poet’s much larger aesthetic failings, particularly his failure to elevate the status of poetry to the level of philosophy, which had been the concern of his sceptical writings of the early 1660s: ‘the World may judge whether the notions of Poets [...] were more satisfactory, then those of Philosophers and Divines’.¹⁵⁶ Whether or not Leigh’s appraisal is fair is extremely debatable, but he did expose Dryden’s willingness to explore Hobbes’s ideas. More

¹⁵⁴ ‘Hobbes’s Political Philosophy’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 208-45 (p. 213).

¹⁵⁵ Richard Leigh, *The Censvre of the Rota on Mr. Driden’s Conquest of Granada*, pp.15-16.

¹⁵⁶ *The Censvre of the Rota*, p. 15.

importantly, given Dryden's increasing prominence as public poet, Leigh exposed the political anxieties Dryden may have been suffering from and put them in direct conflict with the intellectual confidence to which the composer of heroic plays aspired.

Of course, it need hardly be said that to equate Dryden's philosophical sensibilities with any strictly original Hobbesian formulation can be to misunderstand or exaggerate the latter's influence on the former. Hobbes's theory about how the physiological make-up of humanity bears upon its political destiny was never a primary consideration for Dryden. Nor, it should also be stated, was he seduced by the popular picture of Hobbes; as Hopkins tells us, no 'opportunistic use of [...] Hobbist sentiment in a play by Dryden [...] can be used to demonstrate that the Mind of the Age was being [...] diseased by [...] Hobbist assumptions'.¹⁵⁷ Rather, what interested Dryden about Hobbes was his understanding of how a rational theory of centralised government, and, equally, a justified dictatorship on the part of the sovereign, might serve the state in its function as protector of the People. In fact, I believe this was an example which so appealed to Dryden's political frame of mind that he repeatedly explored its potential through the most politically serviceable genres at his disposal, that is, through heroic poetry and heroic drama. Crucially, considering political rationalism alongside such ideas as the innate greatness of political or politically effective leaders, Dryden allowed himself a certain degree of speculative licence, not inconsistent with the theoretical approach to which he apparently committed himself in *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*. As a result, Dryden's doubts about Britain's political stability, and his hopes about her ability to compete with Europe in science and literature, came together with unique aesthetic vision.

¹⁵⁷ *John Dryden*, p. 12.

That the hero and the ‘dictator’ could be perceived as one and the same figure was made clear in the ‘Heroic Stanzas on the Death of Cromwell’. As I indicated in my previous chapter, Dryden mythologised Cromwell’s years as Lord Protector of the Commonwealth precisely because the late Republican had demonstrated that his political temper was equal to every crisis with which he had had to contend; attributing to Cromwell the classical virtues of honour and valour, Dryden judges rightful authority on the basis of political pragmatism:

For from all tempers he could service draw:
The worth of each, with its allay, he knew,
And as the confidant of Nature, saw
How she complexions did divide and brew.
(*Poems*, I, 26; 197-200)

As I will show here, Dryden continued to promote the natural dignity of well-reasoned and strong leadership as a political ideal, though his drama draws on the fabled and the fantastical (safely removing him from the pitfalls of discussing the political realities of his own world) to illustrate his examples. However, before I begin my analysis of Dryden’s Hobbesian moments, I shall examine the ways in which Hobbes’s philosophy was generally received in the seventeenth century. In many respects, the difference between what Hobbes wrote and how he was interpreted in the Restoration years can be related back to a deep-seated sense of intellectual scepticism throughout the period; as Parkin has recently said, Hobbes was ‘read as a champion of rebellion and as a proponent of arbitrary government, as a dangerous exponent of the new science and as someone who really hadn’t grasped what the new science was about’.¹⁵⁸ Necessarily, I shall be seeking to redress some of the more commonplace critical assumptions about the impact of Hobbes upon late seventeenth-century literature, with a view to clarifying the context in which Dryden was reading and responding to him.

¹⁵⁸ *Taming the Leviathan*, p. 10.

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, a small group of latitudinarian philosophers, including Samuel Clarke, Richard Bentley and Richard Baxter, gave a series of lectures that adopted the theory of gravity in order to bolster their beliefs about the political and moral welfare of contemporary society.¹⁵⁹ Known as the Boyle Lectures, these orations equated the new and unanimously accepted cosmological perspective with what Jacob has defined as the emerging liberal Protestant social values, which consists in a religious framework that advocated ‘stability within the society it served to cement’, and, to this end, the belief that ‘self-interest will work, provided God allows it to do so’.¹⁶⁰ As Richard Bentley’s *A Confutation of Atheism* (1692) shows, the Newtonian concept of the physical laws of motion supplied late Stuart thought with the convenient metaphysical claim that the laws of nature are everywhere a reflection of God’s defining, universal presence:

For if we consider the Phenomena of that Material World with a due and serious attention, we shall plainly perceive, that its present frame and constitution and the established Laws of Nature are constituted and preserved by Gravitation alone [...] Without that the whole universe, if we suppose an undetermin’d power of motion infused into Matter, would have been a confused chaos, without Beauty or order, and never stable and permanent in any condition. Now it may be proved in its due place, that this Gravity, the great basis of all mechanism is not it self Mechanical; but the immediate *Fiat* and finger of God, and the Execution of the Divine Law.¹⁶¹

Though essentially ‘mechanical’ in their approach, the Boyle Lecturers proposed a radical revision to the theory of mechanical philosophy given by Hobbes. In fact, many of the political and religious arguments of these early champions of liberal Protestant thought were founded

¹⁵⁹ M.C. Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution 1689-1720* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press; London: Harvester Press, 1976), p. 162. These lectures were commissioned by Robert Boyle in July 1691, and were to be given eight times a year ‘for proving the Christian Religion against notorious infidels viz. Atheists, Theists, Pagans, Jews and Mahometans’ (p. 144). Latitudinarianism was the name (initially pejorative) given to a number of late seventeenth-century Anglican clergy who emphasised a reasoned faith and a policy of ecclesiastical moderation.

¹⁶⁰ *The Newtonians and the English Revolution*, p. 167, p.185.

¹⁶¹ Richard Bentley, *A Confutation of Atheism, from the Structure and Origin of Humane Bodies*, (London, 1692), pp. 5-6.

upon a somewhat vociferous refutation of Hobbes's mechanical worldview, or at least, the ethical implications of that view.¹⁶² For Hobbes, whose *Leviathan* (1651) set out a hypothesis that inferred ethical conclusions from material premises, the 'whole masse of things that are, is corporeal, that is [...] Body; and that which is not Body, is no part of the Universe [...] is *Nothing*, and consequently *no where*'.¹⁶³ In his system, materialism presupposed not order, but chaos and confusion, which is to say, the confusion that apparently inevitably arises from the physiologically deterministic nature of self-interest. Only the binding force of a civil contract upon human ambition, he argued, can keep us from pursuing a course contrary to the more desirable state of liberty and sustained peace, quite apart from the 'Execution of Divine Law'. Introducing the second part of *Leviathan* with the principle that everyone must submit his or her private reason to the public good, so as to secure the interests of all, Hobbes wrote:

The finall Cause, End, or Designe of men, (who naturally love Liberty, and Dominion over others) in the introduction of that restraint upon themselves, (in which wee see them live in Common-wealths,) is the foresight of their own preservation, and of a more contented life thereby; that is to say, of getting themselves out from that miserable condition of Warre, which is necessarily consequent [...] to the naturall Passions of men, when there is no visible Power to keep them in awe, and tye them by fear of punishment to the performance of their Covenants, and observation of those Lawes of Nature [...]. For the Lawes of Nature (as *Justice, Equity, Modesty, Mercy*, and (in summe) *doing to others, as wee would be done to,*) of themselves, without the terrour of some Power, to cause them to be observed, are contrary to our naturall Passions, that carry us to our Partiality, Pride, Revenge, and the like. And Covenants, without the Sword, are but Words, and of no strength to secure a man at all.¹⁶⁴

In ethical terms, Hobbes's need for a visible power, capable of tying people by fear of punishment to the performance of their covenants, was, perhaps, his most arrant declaration of unbelief. For if in the last resort covenants are kept by the sword, the conventional understanding of God (whose word alone had been supposed to provide a safeguard from those natural

¹⁶² *The Newtonians and the English Revolution 1689-1720*, pp. 197-200.

¹⁶³ Hobbes, p. 463.

¹⁶⁴ Hobbes, p. 117.

passions, partiality, pride, revenge) was no longer viable. Having weighed the idea of an invisible, objective and unimpeachable moral directive against the perceptible things in the political world of cause and effect, Hobbes indeed found it wanting.

Significantly, though, where Hobbes may be said to differ from other thinkers discussed in this study is precisely in his rejection of traditional, rather than specifically God-given, authority. For Montaigne, the Catholic Church, with the Pope as absolute judge, was the safest (if not always the surest) embodiment of knowledge and political and providential favour. Providence in Hobbesian philosophy, however, existed only insofar as God was thought to justify an otherwise entirely secular formulation of political duty. In Part III of *Leviathan*, for example, Hobbes succinctly qualified his argument for the superiority of temporal authority with an outline of how such authority underwrites the harmony of human actions, which end itself was, in his view, the fulfilment of God's will:

All lawfull Power is of God, immediatly in the Supreme Governour, and mediately in those that have Authority under him [...]. For Jurisdiction is the Power of hearing and determining Causes between man and man; and can belong to none, but him that hath the Power to prescribe the Rules of Right and Wrong [...] which none can lawfully do, but the Civill Sovereign.¹⁶⁵

A civil government that has the people's sanction, and is presided over by a single or absolute sovereign, had, for Hobbes, clearly replaced the quasi-metaphysical explanation of monarchical authority that had been expounded in pre-civil war Stuart propaganda; and though clearly a construct, his system of checks and balances was of itself to be regarded as a politically legitimate, even legitimating, imposition. Reminiscent of, if maybe not directly identifiable with, the Academic scepticism of Sebastian Castellio, and, to a lesser degree, with that of Erasmus,

¹⁶⁵ Hobbes, p. 391-92.

Hobbes reduced rightful authority to the (single) universal law of self-preservation. Crucially, this law transcended all claims against it, including those of religion; as Mintz comments, Hobbes's rational scheme held the state's supremacy in 'all matters affecting religion' as a categorical prerequisite, lest the 'power of the sovereign to protect the security of his subjects [...] be eroded by religious factionalism'.¹⁶⁶

Of course, as I suggested in my first chapter, to analyse the history of philosophical thought is to analyse a history of changing political and social circumstances. Therefore any discussion of sceptical thought from one period to the next must account for such permutations. Indeed, putting the possibility of his personal conviction aside, Montaigne had written in a world dominated by religious conflict, and therefore a reassertion of the traditional religious order may have seemed an obvious recourse, particularly as the conflict directly concerned the authority of the Catholic Church. In much the same way, the comparative political and economic calm of the 1690s had allowed the non-sceptical Boyle lecturers to posit a theory that explained celestial regulation and a social world of regulated competition exclusively in terms of God. However, Hobbes was writing in the 1640s and early 1650s, a period in which traditional conventional monarchy was most in crisis. In the absence of such an institution aiming to unite all under its power, the belief that unfettered human inclinations culminate in civil war was, naturally, his fundamental premise.

Keeping this issue of political uncertainty in mind, Hobbes's model of ethical rationalism must have seemed as relevant in the Restoration as it ever had in the preceding years, anticipating, as it appeared to do, the problems of an essentially ambiguous, constitutionally unresolved political

¹⁶⁶ Samuel Mintz, *The Hunting of Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 28.

outcome. Though the monarch as head of State and Church was back in a commanding position, the political settlement of 1660 hardly returned the kind of absolute sovereignty thought necessary for continued stability. The inevitable conflict of interests within the British ruling class first became apparent in 1673, when the Test Act, prohibiting Catholics, including those who supported the king, from holding public office, was passed, and, concomitantly, when the Earl of Shaftesbury and the Whigs began their campaign of blocking a Catholic succession – that is to say, when they sought to prevent the succession of the heir apparent, Charles’s brother and new Catholic convert, James Duke of York. Also in 1673, Parliament refused Charles ‘ship money’ to continue the trade wars with Holland; although Parliament’s main objection to the Dutch Wars was Holland’s Protestantism (which made the Dutch, its members believed, a natural ally of Britain), it was clear that success at sea would have given the king the financial means to rule more independently. Ultimately, dividing loyalties between those looking to return to a more or less orthodox system of government, and those ‘forerunner Newtonians’ (amongst other progressive thinkers) attracted to new, potentially more radical alternatives, the political conflicts that characterised the first half of the seventeenth century showed no immediate sign of abating, with, as far as any Hobbesian analysis might have been concerned, militant self-interest once again masquerading behind the subterfuge of religion. The general cultural outlook of this period was astutely captured by such texts as John Oldham’s ‘A Satyr Touching Nobility’ (composed 1681-1682):

[...] how can you with any sense expect
 That I should be so silly to respect
 The ghost of Honor, perish’d long ago,
 That’s quite extinct; and lives no more in you?
 Such gaudy Trifles with the Fools may pass,
 Caught with mere shew, and vain Appearances:

Virtue's the certain Mark, by Heav'n design'd.¹⁶⁷

However, far from recognising how Hobbesian thinking might have informed the struggle for a workable political and theological arrangement, the majority of his seventeenth-century readers focussed their attention upon the negative implications of his moral conclusions; in fact most of his critics had argued that Hobbesian philosophy represented a threat to any hope of political and theological stability. Accordingly, the common response to Hobbesian thought was cautionary, circumspect and sceptical in the sense that, as Noggle states, scepticism in the period was 'more a principle of application than a settled meaning'.¹⁶⁸ As early as 1662, for example, and before a convincing philosophical antithesis could be found to counter Hobbes, Robert Boyle had sought to deny, as well as disparage, what he identified as the secular philosopher's persuasive, but nonetheless essentially bogus assumptions:

The dangerous Opinions about some important, if not fundamental Articles of Religion I had met with in his *Leviathan*, and some other of his Writings, having made but too great Impression upon divers persons, (who, though said to be for the most part either of greater *Quality*, or of greater *Wit* than Learning, do yet divers of them deserve better Principles) these Errors being chiefly recommended by the Opinion they had of Mr *Hobbs's* demonstrative way of Philosophy; it might possibly prove some service to higher Truths than those in Controversie between him and me to shew that in Physicks themselves his Opinions, and even his Ratiocinations, have no such great advantage over those of some Orthodox Christian Naturalists'.¹⁶⁹

Unpalatable to the most fundamental Christian philosophical sensibilities, Hobbesian thought and a growing tendency to atheism came to be regarded as two sides of the same coin. 'The

¹⁶⁷ *The Poems of John Oldham*, ed. by Harold F. Brooks and Raman Selden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 223.

¹⁶⁸ Noggle, p. 15.

¹⁶⁹ *Robert Boyle, New Experiments Physico-Experimental, Touching The Spring of the Air, and its Effects* (London, 1662), sig. a3.

principal objection to him, the one to which all other criticisms of him can be reduced', concludes Mintz, 'was that he was an atheist'.¹⁷⁰

For reasons that were perhaps more aesthetic than philosophical, it was this version of Hobbes that appealed most to the poets and playwrights of the Restoration period. Certainly, finding sympathy with an emerging generation of writers who were responding to, in their experience, yet another change in the political climate, Hobbes's theory about self-interest provided the impetus for an altogether new attitude of philosophical and artistic radicalism. These Restoration writers used his conclusions to celebrate the most unpleasant aspects of the human condition, concentrating their efforts in exploring, and indeed exploiting Hobbes's 'dangerous Opinions'. In the process, they made his philosophy their own. As Robert Hume has argued, the character of Dorimant in George Etherege's archetypal Restoration comedy, *The Man of Mode* (1676), exemplifies a sort of 'Hobbesian aggressiveness' – that is, an attitude which 'without respect to the Example, and profit to come, is a triumph or a glorifying in the hurt of another, tending to no end'.¹⁷¹ More recently, Warren Chernaik's study of libertine poets and playwrights, *Sexual Freedom in Restoration Literature* (1995), finds that Hobbes inspired many Restoration writers to present man as a 'power-seeking animal [whose] life in society is defined by ruthless, unending competition'.¹⁷² Subverting Hobbes's assumption that guaranteed peace is the rational aim of all in society, poets like the Earl of Rochester had, for Chernaik, considered, even revelled in the irrationality of human motivation, suggesting that human conflict is unavoidable. Chernaik

¹⁷⁰ *The Hunting of Leviathan*, p. vii.

¹⁷¹ Robert D. Hume, *The Development of English Drama in the Late Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 95.

¹⁷² *Sexual Freedom in Restoration Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 27.

quotes the following lines from Rochester's *A Satyre Against Mankind* (1674) to illustrate an archetypal Restoration response to Hobbes's scrutiny of human psychology:

Wherein *Mans* VVisdom, Pow'r, and Glory joyn;
 The good he acts, the ill he does endure;
 'Tis all for fear, to make himself secure.
 Meerly for safety, after Fame we thirst,
 For all Men, wou'd be *Cowards* if they durst.
 And honesty's against all common sense,
Men must be *Knaves*, 'tis in their own defence.
 (157-60)¹⁷³

With his philosophy thus reduced to the logic of common cowardice and knavery, Hobbes became a *leitmotif* of Restoration licentiousness, a byword for the libertine sensibility of the rakish protagonist in many plays and poems of the 1670s and 1680s. Viewed in a wider perspective, Hobbesian philosophy also became synonymous with a philosophy of unyielding immorality, and a sceptical temper of a singularly hostile, irreligious and, often, sacrilegious kind.

Such literary interpretations, or, to use Chernaik's phrase, 'creative misunderstandings', of Hobbesian philosophy should be regarded as valid social and political comment in their own right. Responding to the crisis of his own time, Hobbes at once diagnosed a social condition and invented the language through which that condition could be expressed. Before his model of selfish individualism had exposed the supposedly black heart of humanity, stage representations of egotistical single-mindedness, godlessness and wanton, or even material, acquisitiveness would in the end be contained by the narrative of the text, which always sought to reaffirm dominant or conventional values: any character who deliberately subverted the social mores of

¹⁷³ 'A Satyre Against Mankind', in *The Works of John Wilmot Earl of Rochester*, ed. by Harold Love (Oxford: Clarendon University Press, 1999), p. 61.

the world they inhabited was condemned for his or her immorality, or else ridiculed as unattractive (if not always unlovable) figures of fun.¹⁷⁴

Quite how these political comments should be interpreted, though, is a matter of ongoing debate. The old view that the Restoration period was debilitated, decadent, and lacking in a certain steadfast heroism has been, it seems, all but completely dismissed in recent years.¹⁷⁵ To Thomas Fujimura, for example, heroic drama, together with those moments of ‘heroic idealism’ he perceives in the lives of ‘libertine courtiers like Rochester’, belie the theory that Restoration cultural sensibilities were simple in their expression, superficial in their perspective.¹⁷⁶ With Fujimura and the work of other, equally enlightening critics, challenging such generalisations, it is clear that the direct association of ‘Hobbism’ with a gay unthinking licentiousness was always a limited one.

However, what is less easy to deny is the connection between Hobbesian philosophy and late seventeenth-century sceptical intelligence; indeed as Michael Hunter has recognised, much of what was ‘loosely described as ‘Hobbism’ was a more general scepticism [...] arguably due to the commonness of a mentality to which his ideas appealed’.¹⁷⁷ Moreover, for all its apparent negativity, Hobbesian thought had, in Jacob’s words, initially grown ‘in popularity because he spoke to contemporary needs and circumstances’.¹⁷⁸ Given Hobbes’s uncertain yet nonetheless established place in the late seventeenth-century intellectual scheme of things, the Boyle

¹⁷⁴ Consider, for example, William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (1607) or Falstaff’s humiliation in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1597).

¹⁷⁵ See in particular Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of English Drama, 1660-1690* (Cambridge University Press, 1952), p. 88.

¹⁷⁶ ‘The Appeal of Dryden’s Heroic Plays’, *PMLA* 75:1 (1960), 37-45 (p. 37).

¹⁷⁷ *Science and Society in Restoration England*, p. 168.

¹⁷⁸ *The Newtonians and the English Revolution*, p. 169

Lecturers had no choice but to denounce him by first of all adopting him – that is to say, by using materialistic philosophy as the basis for their metaphysical speculations. Whether or not Hobbes ultimately posed a threat to Restoration society, his scientific approach to politics did not predate the problems it was seeking to resolve. And after the succession of William and Mary when British politics finally began to stabilise, Hobbesian philosophy could be safely assimilated into the political and religious fabric of society in a way that was not possible before the Revolution of 1688; as Jon Parkin finds, debates such as the one considering the ‘immortality of the soul’ with which the philosopher was associated still ‘discouraged open acknowledgement of Hobbes’s work’, but in a new age, where radical thought no longer posed such a potent threat, a ‘new generations of thinkers’ were encouraged ‘to consider Hobbes afresh’.¹⁷⁹

As I have already stated, it is easy to exaggerate Hobbes’s influence upon Dryden beyond the obvious recognition that they both shared an interest in the political concerns of the nation. However, a direct correlation between them can be traced. Perhaps the most noticeable intellectual debt that Dryden owed Hobbes was the 1684 postscript to his translation of Maimbourg’s *History of the League*, a commentary on the religious wars in France during the sixteenth century, which Dryden used to condemn the religious dissent of his own time. Opening with the statement ‘That Government generally considered is of divine authority, will admit of no dispute’ (*Works*, XVIII, p. 393), Dryden was adopting the scepticism of the sixteenth-century Catholic Apologists – those Apologists of whom, to include thinkers like Hugo Grotius in their number, Hobbes was the undoubted philosophical heir.¹⁸⁰ More significantly,

¹⁷⁹ *Taming of the Leviathan*, p. 409.

¹⁸⁰ The influence of Hugo Grotius on seventeenth-century political theory is beyond the scope of this study; however, writing out of the Academic sceptical tradition, which recognises the failure of Christian ‘Charity toward all the world’, Grotius posits the ‘need of a Moderator, [when] it might appear, *Neither nothing, nor every thing is*

though, the general argument of the postscript reveals that the thrust of Dryden's insights regarding the legitimacy of absolute authority derived its force of conviction (and much of its rhetoric) from Hobbes's analysis of power. Compare, for example, the following passage from the postscript with Hobbes's description of absolute sovereignty, quoted above:

Subjects [...] are accountable to superiors, and the Superior to Him alone. For the sovereign being once invested with lawful Authority, the subject has irrevocably given up his power, and the dependence of a monarch is alone on God [but] In the kingdom of men, the power of the king is from the People, because the people make the king. (*Works*, XVIII, p. 393)

Here, there are no allusions to Hobbes's material premises, or to the fundamentally self-interested, wicked, or 'knaveish' nature of humanity. Yet, the language used evokes his political apparatus, consciously recalling the claim that 'all lawful power is of God', and his model of a commonwealth, in which 'the *Unity* of the Representer, not the *Unity* of the Represented [...] maketh the Person *One*'.¹⁸¹

Similarly, Dryden seems to have shared with Hobbes the view that religion was all too often used as a means to vindicate a spirit of rebellion against civil authority. Although Hobbes sought chiefly to expose the private ambitions of the papacy to this end, he also argued that the Presbyterians in England ultimately expected what 'the Popes expected: to have a Sovereign Power over the People'.¹⁸² Taking the considerations of history still further, Dryden distinguished between (seemingly all) differences of denomination in order to efface them, providing a theory of politics that attributed rebellion to largely unchanging human nature, rather than to changing social and political forces:

lawfull'. This is a need which will later be identified with Hobbes's political philosophy. Hugo Grotius: *The Illustrious Hugo Grotius Of the Law of Warre and Peace* trans. by Clement Barksdale (London, 1655), p. 3.

¹⁸¹ Hobbes, p. 391 and p. 114.

¹⁸² Hobbes, p. 476.

Every man has seen the Parallel of the *Holy League*, and our *Covenant*; and cannot but observe, that besides the Names of the Countreys, *France* and *England*, and the Names of Religions, *Protestant* and *Papist*, there is scarcely to be found the least difference, in the project of the whole, and in the substance of the Articles. In the mean time I cannot but take notice, that our Rebels have left this eternal Brand upon their Memories, that while all their pretence was for the setting up the *Protestant* Religion, and pulling down of Popery, they have borrow'd from *Papists* both the Model of their Design, and their Arguments to defend it. And not from loyal, well principled *Papists*; but from the worst the most bigotted, and most violent of that Religion [...] Their Tenets in Politicks are the same; both of them hate Monarchy, and love Democracy: both of them are superlatively violent; they are inveterate haters of each other in Religion, and yet agree in the Principles of Government. (*Works*, XVIII, pp. 402-403)

Particularly striking here is Dryden's seeming nominalism, which again might be linked back to Hobbes: however one rebellious coterie chooses to designate itself, and whatever doctrinal position it decides to embrace, its inherently iniquitous designs invariably betray it as fundamentally no different from the next. The natural conclusion for Dryden, as it had been for Hobbes, was that matters of religion must be subordinated to the affairs of state.

Admittedly, this kind of frank political sermonising was not typical of Dryden, especially before the 1680s.¹⁸³ Nevertheless it does typify his prevailing belief that any claims (especially those made in the name of religion) against traditional or established authority were by their very nature morally unsound; to echo Myers's observation, Dryden may have 'disliked republican constitutions such as those of ancient Rome and Venice, but he acknowledged their legitimacy'.¹⁸⁴ When Dryden does depart from blind faith in established religion, it is because of his anxiety about how that authority is being (or will be) exercised in the face of strong opposition. As I showed in my analysis of *Astraea Redux* in the previous chapter, this anxiety amounted to a scepticism directly bound up with the political problems, as he perceived them, of

¹⁸³ However, the eviscerating condemnation of the Rebellion also found therein is typical. The fact that he was writing in his capacity of Historiographer Royal, and, therefore, as royal propagandist, may explain why the postscript was an exception

¹⁸⁴ *Restoration and Revolution*, p. 19.

the present moment. To the king he urged caution – the need to keep about him his pragmatic head for his subjects’ sake: ‘Not tied to rules of policy, you find / Revenge less sweet than a forgiving mind’ (*Poems*, I, 51; 260-61). To the king’s subjects he intimated the inherent lawfulness of monarchical authority: ‘The discontented now are only they / Whose crimes before did your just cause betray’ (*Poems*, I, 53; 314-15). Although this reciprocity between ruler and ruled may not have been set out in the terms of Hobbesian contract theory, it did emphasise the role of personal sacrifice and suppression of personal differences in achieving peace.

Reconsidering the Restoration poems from the perspective of Dryden’s later works, *Astraea Redux* set a precedent for further expressions of political anxiety – for a scepticism bound up with the political moment, from one moment to the next. In many ways anticipating the full expression of Hobbesian conclusions in the *History of the League*, Dryden increasingly came to articulate ideas that may also be properly called Hobbesian – from Hobbes’s rational solution to the conflict between self-interest and the State, to ideas about how faith can be embedded in government, and, concomitantly, to the question of how individual passions to this end might be subdued. For the remainder of this chapter I shall examine Hobbes’s influence on Dryden according to these three conceptual distinctions, beginning with *The Indian Queen* (1665), Dryden’s first successful rhymed heroic play, written in collaboration with his brother-in-law, Robert Howard, before moving on to *The Conquest of Granada* (1672) and 1675 play *Aureng-Zebe* (1675) and concluding with an examination of his Exclusion crisis poems *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681) and *The Medal* (1682).

As James Winn has observed, Charles II's 'well-known preference for rhyme, and [...] the ideal of an "'heroic" drama', played a decisive role in shaping the development of late seventeenth-century literary drama'.¹⁸⁵ With the *Indian Queen* the king's partialities for grandiose displays of regal sway and conscience were suitably met. And yet, viewed in the context of its writing and first production, the play was hardly intended as an act of royal flattery. As Dryden embraced what was effectively a literary genre put to the service of the status quo, so he found occasion to undermine the often misplaced idealism of that genre, examining the folly of improper conduct and overweening conceit in both ruler and the ruled. Set during the Mexican campaign against the Incas, *The Indian Queen* opens on the conflict between the Ynca of Peru and his victorious General, Montezuma. In return for his services against the invading Mexicans, Montezuma (who was unwittingly, and therefore, ironically, the rightful heir of the Mexican throne) requests the hand of the royal daughter, Orazia; however, having promised him a 'Guift as may for ever bind / Thy service to my Empire and to me' (*Works*, VIII, I. 1. 14-15), the Ynca denies the 'Young man of unknown Race' (*Works*, VIII, I. 1. 38) all hope of such an aristocratic union, maintaining that a new kingdom (or choice of kingdoms) is a prize more befitting a warrior hero. In his turn, Montezuma disdains those 'Empires [...] my sword can gain' (*Works*, VIII, I. 1. 30) and continues to press his original demand. What ensues is an argument in which personal conviction is shored up by what each perceives as the natural order of the world:

Ynca. Thou deserv's't to die.
 O thou great Author of our Progeny,
 Thou glorious Sun, dost thou not blush to shine,
 While such base blood attempts to mix with thine!
Mont. That Sun thou speakst of did not hide his face,
 When he beheld me Conquering for his Race.

Ynca. My Fortunes gave thee thy success in Fight;
 Convey thy boasted Valour from my sight;

¹⁸⁵ Winn, p. 145.

I can o'come without thy feeble aid.

(*Works*, VIII, I. 1. 47-55)

To its initial audience, such conflicts of political interest and speculation about the long-term providential plan would have been immediately striking. With the king's marital infidelities becoming widely known, the plague of 1665, and an ill-conceived and mismanaged trade war with the Dutch undermining national pride (when it had sought to promote it), the old belief that the people often suffered God's wrath for the monarch's sins had inevitably been reawakened.¹⁸⁶ Furthermore, the play's setting (far removed from the concerns of seventeenth-century history) seems to bring all allusions to the ongoing uncertainty of Britain's political destiny, and to Charles's transgressions to this end, into sharp focus. In writing *The Indian Queen*, and exploring the problems of power that its narrative so candidly entertains, Dryden appeals to reason at every turn. For instance, through Acacis, Montezuma's prisoner and son of usurping Indian Queen, Zempoalla, he advocated the desirability of personal restraint and an acceptance of the established political hierarchy. Almost Stoical in his outlook, Acacis's deference to a practical, measured, if somewhat undefined course of reasonable behaviour takes precedence over all passionate reaction:

Aca. No, I must your Rage prevent,
From doing what your Reason wou'd repent;
Like the vast Seas, your Mind no limits knows,
Like them lies open to each Wind that blows.
(*Works*, VIII, I. 1. 59-62)

For Acacis, actions without the solid foundation of reason underpinning them make one a victim of changeability to the point of repentance. As in *Astraea Redux*, Dryden adopted the metaphor of the weather as a motif to insinuate the possibility of an impending moment of political unrest, albeit by anticipating Montezuma's impetuous humour. Also as in that poem, the idea of

¹⁸⁶ See, for example, the description in John Kenyon's *The Popish Plot* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972), pp. 10-15.

resisting kingship as a legitimate response to adversity side-stepped a debate about justice. Contemplating the question of whether ‘a Revenge that is so just [can] be ill’ (63), Montezuma decides to hold the Ynca to ransom, taking ‘the conquest to the conquered side’ (71), that is to the Mexicans; in his turn Acacis urges that justice consists (mostly) in obedience to the ruler. The result is something of a paradox, at least, when read from a Hobbesian perspective:

Aca. Your honor is oblig’d to keep your trust.
Mont. He broke that bond in ceasing to be just.
Aca. Subjects to Kings shou’d more obedience pay.
Mont. Subjects are bound, not strangers to obey.
 (*Works*, VIII, I. 1. 74-77)

Montezuma’s statement of line 77 is curious. Insofar as it can be taken as a declaration of political individualism, it is consistent with Hobbes’s claim that subjects will only allow themselves to become *subjected* if they can benefit more from relinquishing control to a representative that advances their self-interest on their behalf, which, to quote *Leviathan*, amounts to a covenant where ‘every particular man is the Author of all the Sovereigne doth; and [therefore] he that complaineth of injury from his Soverainge, complaineth of that whereof he himselfe is Author’.¹⁸⁷ Without the sanction of his or her subjects, a sovereign authority cannot justifiably command allegiance, and is, as such, but a stranger. Yet, on the other side, Acacis’s belief that subjects are obliged to give more (as opposed to all) of their obedience to their king, suggests that Montezuma by duty owes more to the Ynca than to himself – in short, he owes the sacrifice of self-interest to the representative of public good. In *Leviathan* the very problem with which Montezuma contends was raised, but then avoided with a passage that seeks to promote the synchronisation of public and private interest, and as such, the problem is never resolved:

And though he be carefull in his politique Person to procure the common interest; yet he is more, or no lesse carefull to procure the private good of himselfe, his family, kindred

¹⁸⁷ Hobbes, p. 124.

and friends; and for the most part, if the publique interest chance to crosse the private, he prefers the private: for the Passions of men are commonly more potent than their Reason. From whence it follows, that where the publique and private interest are most closely united, there is the publique most advanced.¹⁸⁸

In many ways this philosophical impasse is crucial. As Laura Brown observes, Dryden's dramas, particularly his tragedies, are generally characterised by a love-honour paradigm, or conflict, in which 'honor requires the strict performance of duty to a friend, father, king, or country, and love demands unqualified allegiance to a lover'. Stating further that 'the choice of honor results in the loss of love [and] the choice of love results in the loss of honor', Brown argues that this inescapable paradox provides 'the formal and rhetorical framework for a repeated evocation of imperial loss', as typified by such works as *The Indian Emperour* (1665), also featuring Montezuma, and *All for Love* (1677).¹⁸⁹ The outcome for Montezuma in *The Indian Emperour* and Antony in *All for Love* is the fulfilment of tragic inevitability in which neither escapes with their lives. However, Montezuma in *The Indian Queen* transcends this problem of honour by making his private interest the public good. His shifts of allegiance undermine the cause of both the legitimate and illegitimate embodiments of power, winning, as he does, the support of the people, who recognise, to quote Pauline Kewes, the 'justice of his cause'.¹⁹⁰ As Hobbes states in part I of *Leviathan*, to 'obey, is to Honour; because no man obeyes them, whom they think have no power to help, or hurt them'.¹⁹¹ Montezuma's appeal is most succinctly observed by Zempoalla's messenger in Act I scene ii:

The Troops gaze on him, as if some bright star
Shot to their Aids; call him the God of War
Whilst he, as if all Conquest did of right
Belong to him, bids them prepare to fight;

¹⁸⁸ Hobbes, p. 131.

¹⁸⁹ Laura Brown, 'Dryden and the Imperial Imagination', in *Companion*, p. 70.

¹⁹⁰ Pauline Kewes 'Dryden's Theatre and the Passion of Politics', in *Companion*, p. 136.

¹⁹¹ Hobbes, p. 64.

He'l leave them to their Dangers or their Fears,
 And shame (which is th' ignoble Cowards choice.)
 At this the army seem'd to have one voice
 United in a shout, and call'd upon
 The God-like Stranger, *Lead us, lead us on.*
 (*Works*, VIII, I. 2. 67-76)¹⁹²

Able to subdue and dictate to his political superiors, Montezuma is clearly an example of the hero-dictator who, naturally disposed to leadership, is able to command on his own terms. Only at the end of the play, when it is revealed that he is the son of the lawful Mexican queen, Amexia, does it emerge that the providential order has been working in his favour all along; and, of course, this *deus ex machina* merely emphasises the threatening uncertainty and political insecurity of the preceding action.

As Kewes argues, *The Indian Queen* 'demonstrates the pitfalls of royal highhandedness in alienating a powerful subject or ally', but it also serves as a reminder of the 'unstable loyalties of the English'.¹⁹³ At no point is this more apparent than in the play's subplot, where the implications of political defiance are more fully explored. Indeed, focusing on the would-be usurper queen Zempoalla, and Traxalla, her submissive and un-heroic general (particularly in contrast with Montezuma), this subplot becomes a study of unrestrained egoism; self-seeking ambition is made manifest by the attempt to secure power through popular consent – as Act I scene 2 reveals:

Trax. If ere *Traxalla* so successful proves,

¹⁹² The instinctive recognition of heroic promise is echoed in *Threnodia Augustalis*:

No neighing of the warrior steeds,
 No Drum, or louder trumpet needs
 T'inspire the coward, warm the old,
 His voice, his sole appearance make 'em bold.
 (*Poems II.* 474-77)

¹⁹³ Hobbes, p. 152.

May he then say he hopes as well as Loves;
 And that aspiring Passion boldly own,
 Which gave my Prince his Fate, and you his Throne?
 I did not feel Remorse to see his Blood
 Flow from the spring of life into a flood;
 Nor did it look like Treason, since to me
 You were a Sovereign much more great than he.

Zemp. He was my Brother, yet I scorn'd to pay
 Natures mean debts, but threw those bonds away;
 When his own Issue did my hopes remove,
 Not only from his Empire, but his Love.
 You that in all my wrongs then bore a part,
 Now need not doubt a place within my heart:
 I cou'd not offer you my Crown and Bed,
 Till Fame and Envy with long time were dead;
 But Fortune now does happily present
 Occasions fit to second my intent.
 Your Valour may regain the Publick Love,
 And make the Peoples Choice their Queens approve.
 (*Works*, VIII, I. 2. 26-45)

Contrasted to the integrity of reason here is the despotism of aspiring passion, which, in the treasonable pursuit of a Crown, makes victims of all in the aggressor's path, even those tied by blood. Zempoalla's condemnation of her brother in lines 34-37 (referring to Acacis) is, in the strictest sense, a denunciation of all fraternal or familial loyalties; the fact that Acacis is the son rather than the brother of Zempoalla suggests that this conflict is generational, and, as such, comparisons with the Civil War can be made.¹⁹⁴ Yet, the sacrifice of personal affection in favour of 'Publick love' is central, reminding the audience that there is a natural order of things: 'yet I scorn'd to pay / Natures mean debts, but threw those bonds away'. Like Acacis, the prophet, Ismeron (a generally inconsequential character in the play), recommends a policy of reason: 'Reason only can make Passions less'. (*Works*, VIII, III. 2. 132), he replies, to Zempoalla in Act III, when asked for 'Some means to ease the Passions of the Mind'. (*Works*, VIII, III. 2.

¹⁹⁴ Winn makes the same observation. See Winn, pp. 152-53.

135) Again Hobbes's influence upon Dryden may be discerned: working from the premise that the 'source of every crime, is some [...] error in Reasoning; or some sudden force of the Passions', Hobbes maintains that the effects of 'Passion, of Hate, Lust, Ambition, and Covetousnesse', cannot be hindered, but by extraordinary use of Reason or a constant severity in punishing them.¹⁹⁵

What *The Indian Queen* appears to offer, above all, is a commentary on kingship. Though perhaps predominantly directed at a king whose initial popularity was declining after the honeymoon years of the Restoration, the play would no doubt have also struck a chord with those older members of its audience who had held that one of Charles I's failures was an ignorance of his people. However, in the end, Dryden's didacticism worked on a number of different levels. Neither committed to Montezuma's impulsive attitude of Will, nor to the Ynca's supposedly unimpeachable dogmatism, he arraigned them both for zealously hubristic conduct, or, in Hobbesian terms, their self-interest. The victory, if one can be found at all, is in the moral conflict, a victory which, of course, belongs to Acacis; in the final scene of the play, Montezuma was at last paid the tribute he demanded, but not before Acacis's act of self-sacrifice (his suicide) has set the standard of selfless service to which all must aspire, as Montezuma and the play's closing lines imply: 'Love crowns the dead, and death Crowns him that lives, / Each gains the Conquest which the other gives' (*Works*, VIII, V. 1. 309-10). Through Acacis, Dryden dramatised his ongoing understanding of the all too problematic circumstances in which political obedience is typically owed and demanded. Again reminiscent of *Astraea Redux*, where the poet insisted that 'not tied to rules of policy' Charles will find 'revenge less sweet than a forgiving mind' (*Poems*, I, 51; 260-61), Dryden had the Ynca realise the practical benefits of mercy:

¹⁹⁵ Hobbes, p.202 and p. 206.

‘King’s best revenge their wrongs when they forgive’ (*Works*, VIII, V. 1. 271). At the same time, he had Montezuma recognise and cede to the authority that was over him, with a statement which acknowledges that the reasonable-minded Acacis shall endure in his own memory as a moral apotheosis: ‘O that you wou’d believe / *Acacis* lives in me, and cease to grieve’ (*Works*, VIII, V. 1. 284-85). The basic concern remains, though: how potentially viable would or could this ideal turn out to be?

As Dryden’s dramatic abilities matured, his treatment of Hobbesian philosophy evolved. In *The Conquest of Granada by the Spaniards*, written in two parts and printed in 1672, a matter of months before the Test Act was passed, Dryden presented a similar conflict between king and general, this time involving Boabdelin, the king of Granada, and the impetuous Almanzor. Like Montezuma, Almanzor has been ‘rais’d by valour from a birth unknown’ (*Works*, XI, pt I. I. 1. 257), and like his heroic predecessor he wishes to assume political control of the kingdom of which he has been the most valiant (if not always the most patriotic, or selfless) protector. Like Montezuma, again, Almanzor exemplifies a number of typically Hobbesian attitudes; however, there is evidence to suggest that in *The Conquest of Granada*, Dryden was more consciously exploring the potential of Hobbesian philosophy through this hero’s political proclamations.

With a more complicated plot than anything Dryden had attempted hitherto (its two parts run to ten acts), the play begins with the civil war between the rival Moorish tribes Abencerrages and Zegrys. Making his entrance on stage in Act I scene 1 of the first part, Almanzor’s first action is to intercede in a chance street brawl between the two sides; killing Gomel, a Zegry, he is seized and, by the unthinking Boabdelin, ordered dead, so that he might ‘attone you all’ (*Works*, XI, pt

I. I. 1. 189). What follows from Almanzor is a condemnation of the king, in a speech that explicitly derives from Hobbes's account of humanity in the state of nature:

No man has more contempt than I, of breath;
 But whence hast thou the right to give me death?
 Obey'd as Sovereign by thy subjects be,
 But know, that I alone am King of me.
 I am as free as Nature first made man
 'Ere the base Laws of Servitude began
 When wild in woods the noble Savage ran.
 (*Works*, XI, pt I. I. 1. 203-209)

Likewise differentiating between Dryden's appropriation of Hobbesian ideas and the 'dangerous and atheistical thinker' Hobbes was thought to have been in the seventeenth century, Winn regards this dramatic illustration of his philosophy as an ironic exaggeration from which Dryden ultimately distanced himself.¹⁹⁶ Furthermore, resisting the 'view of life which his character announces', and, we might infer, a complete sympathy with Hobbes that Dryden might otherwise have implied, the play's ending 'deliberately integrates' Almanzor (along with his love-interest, Almahide) into an 'ethical and political system opposed to the ideological excesses popularly associated with Hobbes'.¹⁹⁷ However, although Almanzor is by no means an out-and-out Hobbist, his avowed noble savagery should be regarded as serious in its own right as it underpins a personal conflict with which he is forced to negotiate throughout the two parts.

Indeed, subsequently claiming that he had joined the brawl to protect the weaker of Boabdelin's subjects, Almanzor at once reveals that he is not the exemplar of self-interestedness that Hobbes's man in the state of nature was thought to be: 'I saw th'opprest, and thought it did belong / To a King's office to redress the wrong' (*Works*, XI, pt I. I. 1. 218-19). Then, when the Duke of Arcos looks to secure Granada for Spain, Almanzor (who, it later emerges, is Arcos's

¹⁹⁶ Winn, p. 216-17.

¹⁹⁷ Winn, p. 217.

long-lost son) quickly identifies Spanish acquisitiveness as tyrannical, an attitude that he cannot reconcile with his considerably more natural and more noble sense of honour. Once more, he steps in on Boabdelin's behalf, and, by the beginning of Act II of the first part, makes a transition (albeit unwittingly) from noble savage to the very embodiment of Hobbes's sovereign protector, as Abdalla, Boabdelin's brother and Almanzor's onetime apologist, intimates:

This happy day does to *Granada* bring
 A lasting peace; and triumphs to the King:
 The two fierce factions will no longer jarr,
 Since they have now been brothers in the war:
 Those, who apart in Emulation fought,
 The common danger to one body brought;
 And to his cost the proud *Castillian* finds
 Our Moorish Courage in united minds.
 (*Works*, XI, pt I. II. 2. 1-8)

Displaying the passions of humanity in the state of nature Almanzor may have purported to do, but he is too politically conscientious to remain in a condition in which for Hobbes 'every man has a Right to every thing; even to one anothers body'.¹⁹⁸ Far from enduring a short and brutish existence, he alone determines whether or not Granada can get itself out of that miserable condition of war, switching his allegiance from king to invader to insurgent numerous times throughout the play. Significantly (and somewhat contrary to the absolutism of Hobbesian theory) Almanzor's heroic qualities are here reflected in Abdalla's recognition that the sovereign-head consists of two parts. This duality, together with Almanzor's restlessness, ultimately reflects back on the weakness of Boabdelin, giving Almanzor's Hobbesian-informed heroism still more prominence.

Boabdelin, who initially condemns Almanzor to the fate of his own philosophy – that is, to death by Almanzor's 'own law' (*Works*, XI, pt I. I. 1. 210-13) – seemingly lacks the courage to execute

¹⁹⁸ Hobbes, p. 91.

his verdict. Attempting to refute Arcos's demands several scenes on, this inaction becomes both his immediate undoing and redemption, his subsequent claims to the authority of hereditary monarchy sounding hollow and futile, but beginning to resonate with Almanzor: 'By long possession of eight hundred years. / When first my Ancestors from *Affrique* sail'd, / In *Rodrigues* death your *Gothique* title fail'd' (*Works*, XI, pt I. I. 1. 296-98). Not realising his own powerlessness, Boabdelin tries to put off the 'discourse' with Arcos until 'some other day' (*Works*, XI, pt I. I. 1. 314), and then at last declares that he is prepared to surrender his lands, but will 'dye a king' (*Works*, XI, pt I. I. 1. 353). Facing war, only Almanzor can justify the would-be absolutist's rather eloquent monarchical convictions. In Hobbesian terms, the unification of minds is a union of action with ideas, as part II of *Leviathan* states: 'For the Actions of men proceed from their Opinions; and in the well governing of Opinions, consisteth the well governing of mens Actions, in order to their Peace, and Concord'.¹⁹⁹

Insofar as the state of nature implies natural virtue, Almanzor's Hobbism can indeed be interpreted as ironic. Like Jean-Jacques Rousseau over eighty years after the first performance of *The Conquest of Granada*, Dryden appears to be equating vice with the declining, largely decadent society of the play's setting.²⁰⁰ Crucially, this can be read in terms of the history of his own times. For Stuart Sherman, Almanzor makes 'it possible for the audience to reconcile a whole-hearted identification with royalty [...] with the less comfortable memory of their own oscillations'.²⁰¹ However, towards the end of the second part, his resounding statement of natural

¹⁹⁹ Hobbes, p. 124.

²⁰⁰ As Rousseau, no doubt with Hobbes in mind, stated in his *A Discourse on Inequality* (1754): 'The philosophers who have examined the foundations of society have all felt it necessary to go back to the state of nature, but none of them has succeeded in getting there [...] all [of them] talking ceaselessly of need, greed, oppression, desire and pride have transported into the state of nature concepts formed in society. They speak of savage man and they depict civilized man', trans. by Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin Books, 1984, p. 78).

²⁰¹ Stuart Sherman, 'Dryden and the Theatrical Imagination', in *Companion*, pp. 15-36 (p. 20).

freedom disintegrates into complete disillusionment, an emotion that would have been no less familiar to the audience that Sherman has in mind. Having spoken to the ghost of his mother in Act VIII, what Almanzor finally offers is a subdued note of sceptical resignation; the virtues of natural man, when viewed from this perspective, are but an ignorance of civilised society and the wearisome concerns of nation:

Almanz. Oh Heav'n, how dark a Riddle's thy Decree,
Which bounds our Wills, yet seems to leave 'em free!
Since thy fore-knowledge cannot be in vain,
Our choice must be what thou didst first ordain:
Thus, like a Captive in an Isle confin'd,
Man walks at large, a Pris'ner of the Mind.
(*Works*, XI, pt II. IV. 3. 143-48)

More importantly, Almanzor's bleak insights are the culmination of a philosophical and religious attitude that Dryden hints at throughout the play. When, for instance, Abdalla is physically and intellectually seduced by Lyndaraxa, he too is left to ponder the regrettable lot of man:

Ah, why did Heav'n leave Man so weak defence
To trust frail reason with the rule of Sence?
'Tis over-pois'd and kick'd up in the Air,
While sence weighs down the Scale; and keeps it there.
Or, like a Captive King, 'tis born away:
And forc'd to count'nance its own Rebels sway.
(*Works*, XI, pt I. III. 1. 58-63)

As Winn astutely observes, the connection Dryden makes between 'the usurpation of Abdalla's reason by the force of "Sence" [...] the usurpation of the kingdom of Granada, which Abdalla seeks in order to win [Lyndaraxa's] hand' and the 'usurpation of [...] England by Cromwell' intimated by line 62, all suggest Hobbes's association of 'civil disorder with the body politic and psychological disorder within one man's mind'.²⁰² However, Winn's conclusion that Abdalla was 'killed as a result of his stage Hobbism' only provides part of the picture.²⁰³ In fact, the

²⁰² Winn, p. 217-18.

²⁰³ Winn, p. 218.

usurpation of Abdalla's reason is the usurpation of his no less Hobbesian conviction that 'Reason was giv'n to curb our headstrong will' (*Works*, XI, pt I. II. 2. 214), or, as he subsequently states: 'In curst ambition I no rest should find / But must for ever lose my peace of mind' (*Works*, XI, pt I, II. 2. 220-21).

In this conflict between reason and passion, and between heroic strength and the ultimate helplessness of the individual, Dryden appears to be exploring a scepticism that goes beyond the scope of Hobbes's political rationalism. This scepticism is, perhaps, most akin to Brown's notion of 'the aesthetic codification of anxiety', which reflects the problems that Dryden finds in seeking to shore up 'the stability of an old system with the supports of an irreconcilable new one'.²⁰⁴ Despite Abdalla's initial political morality, and despite Almanzor's innate sense of political instinct, the ways of the world finally deny both the peace and security of mind that they thought they had.²⁰⁵ As Kewes states, the 'seemingly unambiguous tribute to Stuart kingship' in *The Conquest of Granada* 'registers fissures within the royalist ethos'.²⁰⁶ For the most part, Dryden's 'guarded criticism' points back to Boabdelin's fundamental weakness.²⁰⁷

Two years later, in his 1675 play *Aureng-Zebe: A Tragedy*, Dryden had occasion to explore the conflict between the state and the individual in much greater depth. Reflecting on the crisis that was to define British politics of the 1670s (and thereafter), *Aureng-Zebe* centres on four rival claimants to the Indian throne, the brothers, Aureng-Zebe, Darah, Sujat and Morat. Its

²⁰⁴ 'The Ideology of Restoration Poetic Form: John Dryden', p. 398.

²⁰⁵ At the end of the second part, it is Almanzor who becomes king of Granada, as well as, rather unexpectedly, heir to the Spanish throne. This is a far less secure possession and is perhaps unexpected.

²⁰⁶ 'Dryden's Theatre and the Passion of Politics', in *Companion*, pp. 131-55 (p. 139).

²⁰⁷ 'Dryden's Theatre and the Passion of Politics', p. 139.

eponymous hero, loyal to his father's cause and the cause of legitimate succession, is, by the courtiers of the current emperor, held to be the best among them, as Arimant, the governor of Agra, states:

But *Aureng-Zebe*, by no strong passion sway'd
 Except his love, more temp'rate is, and weigh'd.
 This *Atlas* must our sinking State uphold;
 In Council cool, but in performance bold:
 He sums their Virtues in himself alone,
 And adds the greatest, of a Loyal Son;
 His Father's Cause upon his Sword he wears,
 And with his Arms, we hope, his Fortune bears.
 (*Works*, XII, I. 1. 102-109)

When, earlier in the scene, the Emperor expresses a disdain for Aureng-Zebe (provoked by his love for Indamora, Aureng-Zebe's betrothed), Arimant replies by defending the elder son with an accolade that identifies his heroism with his Hobbism:

He aims at fame, but fame from serving you.
 'Tis said; Ambition in his breast does rage:
 Who would not be the Hero of an Age?
 (*Works*, XII, I. 1. 220-22)

Here, Arimant's words are a culmination of that example, describing a hero, stoical in nature, who has successfully redirected his strong passions onto the battlefield, thus proving himself a worthy protector. Shortly after, such heroism is identified more deliberately with a natural morality, albeit vague and uncertain:

Aur. When thou wert form'd, Heav'n did a Man begin;
 But the brute Soul, by chance, was shuffl'd in.
 In Woods and Wilds thy Monarchy maintain:
 Where valiant Beasts, by force and rapine reign.
 In Life's next scene, if Transmigration be,
 Some Bear or Lion is reserv'd for thee.
 (*Works*, XII, III. 1. 304-309)

However, in the following Act, Aureng-Zebe himself gives a different insight into his political nature, one that offsets his own virtue with the vice of an age that is not merely wanting for a

hero, but also for a conviction in the value of heroism. Comparisons with the Hobbism attributed to the libertine poets and playwrights discussed above seem appropriate:

Aur. How vain is Virtue which directs our ways
 Through certain danger, to uncertain praise!
 Barren and aery name! thee Fortune flies;
 With thy lean Train, the Pious and the Wise.
 And lets thee poorly be thy own reward.
 Heav'n takes thee at thy word, without regard,
 The World is made for the bold impious man;
 Who stops at nothing, seizes all he can.
 Justice to merit does weak aid afford;
 She trusts her Balance, and neglects her Sword.
 (*Works*, XII, I. 1. 504-13)

Like Rochester's description (quoted earlier in this chapter) of knaves acting by necessity to make themselves secure, Aureng-Zebe describes a world lacking a basic code of moral virtue. The lone enforcer of justice is supplanted by the collective will of the self-interested, whose seizing of all they can goes unpunished by the natural order of the world. Here is the endgame of Hobbesian reasoning, and the expression of Dryden's own ultimate scepticism about the effectiveness of Hobbes's system. Without a sense of virtue, there is nothing to motivate them to political organisation (still less a mutually binding contract), the miserable condition of war notwithstanding.

There is, here, a deep concern that a flight from Hobbes's conclusions would result in ungovernability. According to Paulina Kewes, Dryden displays an 'ambivalence towards popular power' which finds a 'curious expression in the apparently inconsistent behaviour of his heroes, from Montezuma and Almanzor to Aureng-Zebe'.²⁰⁸ Persuasively contending that Dryden's heroic plays prior to the Exclusion Crisis do not concern themselves 'exclusively [with] the province of high politics' but also exhibit 'the role of the people in bringing about and resolving

²⁰⁸ Paulina Kewes, 'The Staging of Popular Politics', in *Tercentenary Essays*, pp. 57-91 (p. 67).

political conflict', Kewes's essay identifies a characteristic of Dryden's political attitude – which is to say, she identifies his belief in the reciprocal duty between ruler and ruled that had been evident since *Astraea Redux*.²⁰⁹ Indeed, without the support of the populace, Montezuma's triumph in *The Indian Queen* would not have been possible; in much the same way, Almanzor, who declares 'I alone am King of me' (*Works*, XI, pt I. I. 1. 206), perceives early the role of the people in maintaining political stability, and at the same time perceives the danger of this situation: 'Empire, thou poor and despicable thing, / When such as these unmake or make a king!' (*Works*, XI, pt I. I. 1. 285-86); and Aureng-Zebe's final pessimism reflects his frustration with the very people he depends upon to justify his legitimate (in the moralistic sense) political crusading. In *Aureng-Zebe* too, the role of factionalism foregrounds the apparent dangers of the involvement of the common people, as Solyman, an Indian Lord attached to the Emperor's court, avows, in a statement that also seems to derive from Hobbes:

The little Courtiers, who ne'r come to know
 The depths of Factions, as in Mazes go,
 Where Int'rests meet and cross so oft, that they
 With too much care are wilder'd in their way.
 (*Works*, XII, I. 1. 63-66)

It would appear, after vacillating between positive affirmation of and cautious reserve about the people's role in state politics, Dryden came out on the side of hard-line monarchical dogmatism rather than rule of-and-by the many. Significantly, Dryden's rejection of a political attitude that was essentially central to Hobbes's contract theory (the absolute sovereign was after all the people's choice) also coincided with his loss of faith in the heroic ideal, or at least in the literary manifestation of the heroic ideal. *Aureng-Zebe* was Dryden's last play to be have been written in his (largely self-styled) heroic mode, his rejection of the form being bound up with a recognition

²⁰⁹ Kewes makes this connection earlier in her essay, noting that in *Astraea Redux* 'the Vulgar' who had been 'gull'd into Rebellion' 'by their designing Leaders', are transformed into the swarms of English' going to fetch their monarch from Holland', 'The Staging of Popular Politics', p. 61.

that individuals are too changeable and too enthused by self-serving ambition to be anything but submissive subjects to an established monarch.

More significantly still, this change appears to have marked a new turn in Dryden's sceptical perspective, a turn that openly exhibits the influence of Montaigne, as the following passage, from Dryden's dedication to *Aureng-Zebe*, addressed to the Earl of Mulgrave, reveals:

'Tis a severe Reflection which *Montaigne* has made on Princes, That we ought not, in reason, to have any expectations of Favour from them; and that 'tis kindness enough, if they leave us in possession of our own. The boldness of the Censure shows the free Spirit of the Author: And the Subjects of *England* may justly congratulate to themselves, that both the Nature of our Government, and the Clemency of our King, secure us from any such Complaint [...] And *Montaigne*, in other places, tells us, what effects he found of their good Natures. He describes them such, whose Ambition, Lust, or private Interest, seem to be the onely end of their Creation. If good accrue to any from them, 'tis onely in order to their own designs [...] The truth is, the consideration of so vain a Creature as man, is not worth our pains. I have fool enough at home without looking for it abroad: and am a sufficient Theater to my self of ridiculous actions, without expecting company, either in a Court, a Town, or Play-house. 'Tis on this account that I am weary with drawing the deformities of Life, and Lazars of the People, where every figure of imperfection more resembles me than it can do others. If I must be condemn'd to Rhyme, I should find some ease in my change of punishment [...] As I am a Man, I must be changeable: and sometimes the gravest of us all are so, even upon ridiculous accidents. Our minds are perpetually wrought on by the temperament of our Bodies [...] An ill Dream, or a Cloudy day, has power to change this wretched Creature, who is so proud of a reasonable Soul, and make him think what he thought not yesterday. (*Works*, XII, pp. 149-57)

Having gone from the view that heroic literature is 'noble, the most pleasant and instructive way of writing in verse [...] and the highest pattern of human life', which he had stated in his 1672 'Essay Of Heroique Playes' (*Works*, XI, p. 11), to the view that human life is vain or changeable, full of imperfections and subject to ridiculous accidents, Dryden politicises his own turnaround in aesthetic thought and intimates a new direction with new political priorities at one and the same time. Furthermore, despite the prevailing philosophical emphasis of this diatribe against human reason (through which, citing his own changeability as a particular example of a more

general problem, he implicates himself), Dryden ultimately resorts to typically sceptical conclusions regarding the legitimate power of the status quo, defending, as he does, the ‘Clemency of our king’ as a privilege for which his subjects had no rightful expectation. Interestingly, Dryden seems to depart from Hobbes’s political reasoning, insofar as he departs from the uniformity of Hobbes’s physiological assumptions, which underpinned his political theory: both the sincerity of human action and the source of human fancy come under scrutiny here.

But, again, political circumstances are equally if not more indicative of why a given sceptical assertion is being made. Having written *Aureng-Zebe* in a country whose political destiny was changed by the Test Act, Dryden was no doubt responding to a resultant change in national mood. Importantly, it is this change that would appear to account for Dryden’s ultimate suspicion of the influence of the populace in matters of politics – as Abdalla intimates in *The Conquest of Granada*, not because of the danger they represent in-and-of themselves, but because of their vulnerability to the claims of usurpers and demagogues:

The Majesty of Kings we should not blame,
 When Royal minds adorn the Royal name:
 The vulgar, greatness too much idolize,
 But haughty Subjects it too much despise.
 (Works, XI, pt I. III. 1. 31-34)

The matter of haughty subjects was to preoccupy Dryden in his Exclusion Crisis propaganda writings of the 1670s, where, recognising that politics had become so stormy that the ship of state was near to being overturned, he gives full support to his king. In the prologue to *Aureng-Zebe*, Dryden had described himself as being ‘betwixt two Ages cast’ (*Works*, XII, p.17), a further indication that the transition he had been undergoing in his literary outlook was, in part at

least, brought about by external pressures and circumstances. Dryden's preferred medium for the new age was satire, the 'true end of which', he held in the preface to his mock-biblical satire, *Absalom and Achitophel*, is the 'amendment of vice by correction' (*Poems*, I, p. 453). No longer examining questions regarding the natural virtue and natural reason of humanity, Dryden relinquished the Hobbesian pragmatism which afforded him the scope to conceptualise and explore such questions. In *Absalom and Achitophel* he adapts the Old Testament book, Samuel I, in order to combat the dangerous allure of demagogic or popular rule at the height of Shaftesbury's campaign to overrule James II's expected succession to the throne.²¹⁰ All the themes about the nature of the human condition are cast into an explicitly biblical context, and secular philosophy falls by the wayside as Dryden reverts to the dogma of divine authority, as the following two passages from the poem reveal:

Those very Jews who, at their very best
 Their humour more than loyalty expressed,
 Now wondered why so long they had obeyed
 An idol monarch which their hands had made;
 Thought they might ruin him they could create,
 Or melt him to that golden calf, a state.
 (*Poems*, I, 460; 61-66)

and

But for he knew his title not allowed
 Would keep him still depending on the crowd,
 That kingly power, thus ebbing out, might be
 Drawn to the dregs of democracy.
 (*Poems*, I, 475; 224-27)

Dryden likens the formation of a state to the extreme idolatry of the Israelites in the wilderness.²¹¹ The creation and worship of the golden calf isolates them from God's favour, and

²¹⁰For an illumination of Stuart Political Theory and its specific treatment in 'Absalom and Achitophel', see *Poems I*, p.460n. For a more comprehensive discussion of Dryden's pro-monarchical polemics during the 1680s, see Philip Harth, *Pen for a Party: Dryden's Tory Propaganda in its Contexts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. xi, p. 352.

²¹¹ See Exodus 32: 1-25.

therefore his blessing. Ironically, Moses is on Mount Sinai, receiving from God's own hand the Law, which, if they were obedient, would direct the people towards God's greater blessing. Engraved as precepts on tables of stone, God's commandments are at once civil and spiritual, distinguishing the Israelites as God's chosen people. Yet later, the Israelites request a king to make them like other nations.²¹² Saul, the first of the Jewish kings, was anointed by Samuel, and proves too interested in pleasing the people to obey God implicitly. The upshot of these rebellions is, of course, a kind of political fall from grace, requiring a conscious effort to seek out and obey the will of God anew, but with an awareness that spiritual and political circumstances have changed.²¹³ The parallel that Dryden is drawing between this Old Testament incident and Shaftesbury and the Whig party of his own time is adumbrated in the preface of the poem:

'Tis true, they are still to be accounted dangerous, because though they are dispers'd at present, and without an Head, yet time and lenity may furnish them again with a Commander: And all men are satisfied that the debauch'd Party of them, have no principle of Godliness to restrain them from Violence and Murders [...] for 'tis an action of Piety in them to destroy their Enemies, having first pronounc'd them Enemies of God. (*Poems*, I, p. 156)

Dryden's fear that popular assent is not the correct way to secure God's blessing on the nation underwrites his increasing disdain for secular, and specifically in this case, democratic leadership. As Saul (led by rather than leading his people) is forsaken by God, so Dryden differentiates between worldly power and heavenly command: 'Desire of power, on earth a vicious weed, / Yet sprung from high is of celestial seed' (*Poems*, I, 479; 305-306). Interestingly, Dryden's typological parallel had also been adopted by Hobbes to make exactly the same point:

In short, the Kingdome of God is a Civill Kingdome; which consisted, first in the obligation of the people of Israel to those Laws, which Moses should bring unto them

²¹² See Samuel I 8.5.

²¹³ See Samuel I 15: 23-24. 'For rebellion *is as* the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness *is as* iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the LORD, he hath also rejected thee from *being* king. And Saul said unto Samuel, I have sinned: for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD, and thy words: because I feared the people, and obeyed their voice'.

from Mount Sinai [...] and which Kingdome having been cast off, in the election of Saul, the Prophets foretold, should be restored by Christ [...] If the Kingdome of God [...] were not a Kingdome which God by his Lieutenants, or Vicars [...] there would not have been so much contention, and warre, about who it is, by whom God speaketh to us; neither would many Priests have troubled themselves with Spirituall Jurisdiction, nor any King have denied it them.²¹⁴

To say that Dryden and Hobbes shared the same spiritual or scriptural outlook on this point would be to underestimate the general influence of religion upon political realities, as most seventeenth-century intellectuals and writers understood them. Such realities were confusing enough, but were made more so by the proliferation of largely divergent competing religious ideas throughout the century. However, Hobbes and Dryden did share the conviction that speculation on the nature of rightful authority would inevitably lead to the realisation that a kind of sanctioned monarchy might be the only way forward.

In his analysis of Dryden's strategy in *Absalom and Achitophel*, George de Forest Lord locates a Restoration myth of 'renewal and restoration following a crisis of civil war, defeat, destruction, or exile'.²¹⁵ For him the poem identifies a recurrent vortex of historical forces that resolve into an acceptance of the Fall: 'Apocalypse riveted its vision on the immediate future and emphasized the need to act; the conservative myth saw the present in the past and emphasised passive acceptance'.²¹⁶ It is tempting to regard the poem just in this light, as it follows on from the choice of analogues – both Davidic and Augustan – that help structure its narrative. Dryden concludes: 'If the body politic have any analogy to the natural, in my weak judgement, an Act of Oblivion were as necessary in a hot, distempered state, as an opiate would be in a raging fever' (*Poems*, I, p. 453). Just as opiates fail to calm fevers, clemency would be useless in establishing

²¹⁴ Hobbes, p. 448.

²¹⁵ 'Absalom and Achitophel and Dryden's Political Cosmos', in *John Dryden: Writers and their Background*, ed. by Earl Miner (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1975), p.159.

²¹⁶ 'Absalom and Achitophel and Dryden's Political Cosmos', p. 159.

political stability. Early in the poem, the forces of sedition, composed of even royal kinsmen alongside ‘pardoned rebels’ are seen as ‘raised in power and public office’ (*Poems* I, 466; 147-48). Foremost amongst these is Achitophel, who, usurping ‘a patriot’s all-atoning name’ (*Poems* I, 471; 179), rises to high notice. Dryden then reflects upon the ambiguities of such prominence:

So easy still it proves in factious times
 With public zeal to cancel private crimes:
 How safe is treason, and how sacred ill,
 Where none can sin against the peoples will;
 Where crowds can wink; and no offence be known,
 Since in another’s guilt they find their own.
 (*Poems*, I, 472; 180-85)

To all intents and purposes, this is an assault on those who had escaped full censure after the Exclusion Crisis, yet its force contributes to an undertone in the poem, where the difficulties in identifying ethical public responsibility grow more resolute as the poem progresses. Charles’s predicament is to be caught up in the public straitjacket of expectation, and be a target for all those who pose as being a ‘champion of the public good’, and yet who use it to announce the old watchwords of ‘Religion, Commonwealth, and Liberty’ (*Poems*, I, 479; 292-93). In this same passage, Dryden pits the cry for ‘public liberty’ against the ‘unquestioned right’ of Charles’s reign (*Poems*, I, 480; 316-17) and more than once in these opening exchanges does Dryden identify the unethical power of ‘public scorn’ (*Poems*, I, lines 275 and 400).

Dryden does not stop there; completely against the grain of any of his Hobbesian formulations, his real target in the poem is the contract theory of government, where (eventually) the people will ‘have a right supreme / To make their kings, for kings are made for them’ (*Poems*, I, 484-85; 409-10). This would seem to be a consistent distinction: the definition of the ‘public’ role is elided with an unruly populism, yet the poem’s conclusion rescue the term from that mire.

Edward Hyde, the Hushai of the Davidic parallel, is praised for his support of Charles ‘in public storms of manly steadfastness’ (*Poems*, I, 525; 889). He enters the fray and the state is all the better for it. However, the clearest declaration of this alternative meaning of public duty is in David’s climactic peroration on the royal prerogative: ‘kings are the public pillars of the state, / Born to sustain and prop the nation’s weight’ (*Poems*, I, 528; 953-54). These paternal virtues exist to prevent wayward sons from shaking the fabric of society to its foundations.

Nevertheless, the prevailing atmosphere of the poem is not so affirmative; the coda where ‘willing Nations knew their Lawfull Lord’ (*Poems*, I, 532; 1031) at David’s restoration is, if applied to Charles’s own experience, wishful thinking. As Lord realises about the poem, in order to achieve the desired resolution, we have to ‘de-emphasise the myth’ of David’s success, ‘in view of historical realities’.²¹⁷ Certainly, in *The Medal*, Dryden’s other major poem of this period, this more positive hope for a publicly responsive throne is almost non-existent. Inspired by an almost personal dislike of Shaftesbury and the Whigs, it is at once furiously vindictive and fanciful – yet rarely complex. The opposition merely co-opt ‘the public hate’ (*Poems*, II, 20; 76) to aid an advance to power, driving ‘down the current with a popular gale’ (*Poems*, II, 21; 80). The gradual erosion of royal power is also an erosion of necessary order, where Shaftesbury exhibits unbecoming eagerness in directing such lawlessness. Although tentative, it is still possible to discern the more acceptable public roles of both monarch and bard: tackling the complexities of such roles are of great importance, indeed, are imperative, as with the Hyde/Hushai’s ‘manly stedfastness’.

²¹⁷ ‘*Absalom and Achitophel* and Dryden’s Political Cosmos’, p. 190.

In *The Medal*, all aspects of Christian morality are condensed into a basic message about the interrelationship of political and human dignity. Referring to the medal struck in celebration of Shaftesbury's acquittal of treason by a biased sheriff court, this poem often reads like a ruthless character assassination; Shaftesbury becomes an example of clandestine fanatical behaviour that must be exposed as shameless, insincere, disloyal, dishonest – in short, as the sin of rebellion that is tantamount to the witchcraft more overtly suggested by the political power struggles of

Absalom and Achitophel:

Power was his aim, but thrown from that pretence
 The wretch turned loyal in his own defence,
 And malice reconciled him to his Prince.
 Him in the anguish of his soul he served,
 Rewarded faster still than he deserved.
 Behold him now exalted into trust,
 His counsel's oft convenient, seldom just:
 Ev'n in the most sincere advice he gave
 He had a grudging still to be a knave;
 The frauds he learnt in his fanatic years
 Made him uneasy in his lawful gears;
 At best, as little honest as he could,
 And like white witches, mischievously good;
 To his first bias longingly he leans,
 And rather would be great by wicked means.
 (*Poems*, II, 19-20; 50-64)

And again, Dryden's conclusions regarding legitimate power culminate in a meditation upon the role of kingship, this time focussing on the practical necessity, indeed, inviolability, of absolute authority:

Then Cyclop-like in human flesh to deal,
 Chop up a minister at every meal;
 Perhaps not wholly to melt down the king,
 But clip his regal right within the ring;
 From thence to assume the power of peace and war,
 And ease him from degrees of public care.
 Yet to consult his dignity and fame
 He should have leave to exercise the name,
 And hold the cards while Commons played the game.

(*Poems*, II, 28; 226-34)

Censuring religious intolerance and political ambition, Dryden is here specifically drawing attention to parliament's increasing tendency to alter the balance of power in its own favour, and, more extremely, to the suggestion of anarchy. Significantly, Dryden's condemnations led directly back to those governable few, potentially many, who succumb to the passions that arise from self-interest: 'They for God's cause their monarch dare dethrone, / And they'll be sure to make his cause their own' (199-200). *The Medal* is a defence, not just of Charles II, but also of monarchy as a principle of government. Equally, it is a defence of monarchy as God's preferred way of delivering government: the motives of dissenting subjects correlating with the view that all ideas of democracy are profane.

Dryden, Scepticism and the Religious Climate of the 1680s

This chapter examines the instances of scepticism in Dryden's religious poems, *Religio Laici* (1682) and *The Hind and the Panther* (1687). For reasons that will become clear, I shall undertake a comparative analysis of both texts, showing how Dryden pulls together elements from a number of early-modern sceptical theories to provide a commentary which addresses the theological and political concerns of the moment. It is not my intention to identify any new or hitherto critically unacknowledged impulse of scepticism in such works; in fact, so extensive and so controversial has been the debate on Dryden's intellectual sympathies in matters of religion that it would not be possible to do so. However, where necessary, I will be looking to reassess previous claims about Dryden's approach in the two poems with a view to clarifying exactly which traditions or strains of early-modern scepticism inform his understanding of the issues involved; inevitably, this will lead to a re-assessment of the poems' rhetorical strategies. I will also evaluate the degree to which Dryden's explorations of religious belief reflect a turn inwards, to personal questions of faith and to a consideration of his own place in the universal scheme of things. Looking ahead to my next chapter on Dryden's translations of the Epicurean poem, *De Rerum Natura*, by the Roman, Lucretius (c. 99-55 BCE), my argument will be that Dryden had become increasingly disillusioned with his obligations as a public poet, and that his new interest in devotional and doctrinal theology exemplifies, in Hopkins's phrase, a 'spiritual metamorphosis' where the sense of the public is itself opened up to sceptical scrutiny.²¹⁸

As I observed in the first chapter of this study, contemporary critics of seventeenth-century literature generally agree that Dryden's scepticism was merely a facet of a precisely theorised

²¹⁸ *John Dryden*, p. 90.

dialectical inductivism, equivalent ‘to that of the “modern free philosophers” in science’, and employed only provisionally, in those areas of secular knowledge which are accepted as open to further philosophical investigation.²¹⁹ First advocated by Phillip Harth, whose comprehensive analysis of Dryden’s intellectual affinities explores the connection between his critical writings and the Baconian method of sceptical free inquiry promulgated by Royal Society scientists like Joseph Glanvill and Robert Boyle, this view supplanted the theory of Pyrrhonism ascribed to the poet by Bredvold in 1936. Far from being a sign of ‘antirationalism’, runs his argument, such ‘scepticism is a confident affirmation of the powers of human reason’.²²⁰

However, it should by now be evident that Harth’s thesis gives a limited idea of the presence of scepticism in Dryden’s work. As I showed in my second chapter, Dryden’s poetry throughout the first half of the 1660s displays an anxiety or apprehension about Britain’s political destiny which cannot be easily reconciled with strictly epistemological formulations of sceptical thought. *Annus Mirabilis*, for example, clearly admits doubts about Britain’s political destiny through the poem’s tension between the hard realities of diplomatic isolation and imperial fantasies of national independence. Similarly, Dryden’s critical essay, *Of Dramatic Poesy*, encodes specifically non-scientific and non-philosophical modes of thought into the fabric of the text’s dialectical argument, producing a poetics that destabilises the progressive and positively patriotic aesthetic ideals which Dryden otherwise seeks to promote.

Equally, as my previous chapter argues, a number of Dryden’s plays, and his Exclusion crisis satires *Absalom and Achitophel* and *The Medal*, consistently undercut the notion of the heroic

²¹⁹ Harth, p. 31.

²²⁰ Harth, p. 31.

and other neoclassical principles that celebrate the pinnacle of human achievements with a critique about whether these values can ever be fully attained. Owing much to Montaigne and such apparently secular political apologists as Thomas Hobbes (a thinker whose politically-progressive worldview consisted in the sceptical idea that self-serving passion is a defining characteristic of human nature), Dryden, in this respect, drew from a tradition of philosophical scepticism where the sceptical intelligence worked in a number of directions and where doubt and certitude were frequently voiced together.

That scepticism as a critical concept in Dryden's writings is resistant to easy definition is the point to emphasise here. Found across the whole spectrum of human experience, scepticism took many different forms and was adapted to many different (and often apparently contradictory) intellectual ends. To echo Parker's insights, 'scepticism questions man's pretensions to knowledge [...] his status as a thinking being, and his ability to give an account of the significance of his life and the value of his achievements', whilst, in another context, and by the same thinker, it might be employed as 'a local tactical weapon, a way of breaking down support for one position in order to give breathing-space for another'.²²¹ Typically paradoxical, pluralistic and protean in nature, sceptical arguments of every kind undoubtedly reflect the historical circumstances of the period in which they are made and the intellectual proclivities of the individual thinker that is making them; therefore, just as the method of scientific inquiry in seventeenth-century England now figures alongside the Pyrrhonism of sixteenth-century Catholic apologetics in this study's conception of how early-modern scepticism applies to Dryden, so those more general moments of doubt and uncertainty and, contrariwise, those moments of hope and optimism must be included in the understanding of the term.

²²¹ Parker, p. 13 and p.14.

It is with this multifarious nature of scepticism in mind that I turn to Dryden's religious writings of the 1680s – the apparently Anglican poem *Religio Laici*, which was written in the final years of Charles II's reign, and his Catholic beast fable, *The Hind and the Panther*, written shortly after the accession of Charles's Catholic brother, James II, and around the time of Dryden's own conversion to Catholicism.²²² Like his writings of the 1660s and 1670s, these texts broach many of the more important issues on the contemporary political and religious agenda, and can in part be read as exhortations to rally behind the establishment that Dryden was serving as laureate. In *Religio Laici*, for example, he provides an apparently conventional defence of Anglican theology at a time when the established Church of England was becoming threatened by potentially subversive developments – in particular, by the translation into English of Father Richard Simon's *Critique de Vieux Testament*, which promoted the Catholic church's authority in matters of faith on the basis that the text of Scripture has been transmitted with errors, and by the teachings of Deism, which denies religious revelation, holding that reason alone is sufficient to understand God's essential nature. In *The Hind and the Panther*, a theological dialectic written in allegory between The Church of England and the Church of Rome, he seeks to persuade the Anglican faithful to extend an accepting hand to Catholics in England, endorsing The Declaration of Indulgence (1687), James II's attempt to engender a policy of religious toleration and a policy of oblivion for past misdemeanours.

Despite the differences between their denominational ends, both poems address the problems of partisanship – the division between the loyal 'we' and the rebellious 'they' – and both poems

²²² The exact date and circumstances of Dryden's conversion have never been known, but he had been seen 'attending mass in 1686', Winn, p. 420.

seek to communicate across ideological divides. And yet, also like in his previous writings, Dryden is no simple apologist for the ruling elite, but is actively involved with contemporary religious debates for their own sake, even where this involvement might give him cause to compromise his commitment to the official royal line. As Winn states, the ‘ultimate resolution he found in Catholicism was earned by a careful consideration of all the rival systems of belief, including a proud unbelief grounded on reason’.²²³

For Dryden, then, scepticism was the instrument of a compelling pragmatism, allowing him to test models of understanding in a tough and confusing world of intellectual ideas. However, the theological emphasis of *Religio Laici* and *The Hind and the Panther* has invited comparisons with a culture of thought where scepticism is regarded, if at all, as a system or methodological approach, a culture which is more philosophical than literary in its outlook. As a result, the presence of sceptical thought at the local or textual level and the immediate purposes to which scepticism is put have been largely ignored. Mapping, as he did, the place of Dryden’s religious writings in the history of ideas, Bredvold began this practice, doing so in favour of an all-encompassing philosophically sceptical interpretation; to him *Religio Laici* and *The Hind and the Panther* are testament to the fact that the poet belonged to ‘an important tradition of Christian apologetics’, one which he regarded as jointly fideistic and Catholic in nature:

Such is the historical fact; for although such anti-rationalistic thought has often developed within Protestantism, and in seventeenth-century England was particularly prolific among the more ‘enthusiastic’ dissenting sects, it was the Roman Catholic controversialists who used the [fideistic] argument with real skill and raised it to the level of learning and philosophy [...]. In the seventeenth century such attack on the authority of the reason came therefore to be recognized as a distinctly Roman Catholic manœuvre.²²⁴

²²³ Winn, p. 405.

²²⁴ Bredvold, p. 73.

This supposedly thoroughgoing fideism has, as my first chapter outlines, been a major point of contention in Dryden criticism, not least because, to repeat Harth's insight, it gives 'a single relatively simple explanation for a highly complex series of thoughts and actions for which Dryden was responsible'.²²⁵ And yet, attempts to refute it, and the Pyrrhonism with which it is associated in Bredvold's thesis, have led commentators to resist the possibility of finding any form of scepticism in *Religio Laici* and *The Hind and the Panther* almost completely.²²⁶ Critical responses to the poems since have predominantly concentrated on emphasising their complexity, cataloguing the sources that Dryden consulted and putting the case for how the poet used these to his own rationalistic or political ends. Very rarely has sceptical thinking re-emerged as a plausible interpretation of the enterprise he undertakes in exploring the religious positions that he does, and more rarely still has scepticism been acknowledged as a potentially significant theological principle during the 1680s.

It is necessary to sketch in the details of some of these responses for they shall serve as frames for reference to my own study of the poems. The commonly accepted critical view of *Religio Laici* today is that the poem is a more or less conventional work of Anglican apologetics which reflects influences of an emerging tradition of religious rationalism within the Church. Fujimura, for instance, argues that its theology is entirely consistent with the basic tenets of Anglican belief, promoting the 'adequacy of the Scriptures, and of the few clear articles of faith on which salvation depends'.²²⁷ Insofar as Dryden argues that 'heathens were not predestined to damnation because of their ignorance of the name of Christ, and that virtuous heathens might be saved', the

²²⁵ Harth, p. 2. For an outline of what historians of early-modern philosophy mean by the term 'fideism' and therefore the implications of its use in the context of this thesis, see my first chapter.

²²⁶ Bredvold, p. 121.

²²⁷ 'Dryden's *Religio Laici*: An Anglican Poem', *PMLA*, 76 (1961), 205-17 (p. 210).

poem might be thought of as ‘flirting with Arminianism’; but this position (which in the 1630s and 1640s had been associated with Charles I’s and Archbishop Laud’s perceived attempt to bring the English church closer to Rome), was, he reasons, ‘a common tendency among Anglican Latitudinarians in the Restoration’; ultimately for Fujimura, *Religio Laici* is consistent with what he perceives as ‘an orthodox statement of the Anglican position in the Restoration’.²²⁸

Donald Benson likewise finds that the poem ‘takes up in order the three valid centers of authority for religious commitment – reason, Scripture, and tradition’ and rejects ‘extreme views on all three [...] declaring for the *via media*’.²²⁹ However, Benson goes further than Fujimura in arguing that the occasion of the poem is largely political, ‘an attempt to discountenance on theological grounds the religious extremes outlined in the preface, and thus to destroy the religious foundations of political extremism’.²³⁰ Benson’s final conclusion is that the ‘rationalist tendency was more basic in [Dryden] than the skeptical’, and so the poet ‘cannot justly be called a “philosophical skeptic”’.²³¹

To Kenshur, *Religio Laici* transmutes ‘the discourse of theological controversy’ that was familiar at the time ‘into an argument for submission to established political authority’.²³² Arguing that Dryden manipulates ‘creeds and religious epistemologies’, he states that appropriate labels for the poem include (as the title of his essay first points out) ‘scriptural deism’ and ‘Erastianism’, a term which, based on the reading of a posthumously edited version of *Treatise of Erastus* (1589)

²²⁸ ‘Dryden’s *Religio Laici*’, p. 216 and p. 217. For a recent study that examines the affinity between Arminianism and Roman Catholicism see Michael Questier, ‘Arminianism, Catholicism, and Puritanism in England during the 1630s’, *Historical Journal*, 49 (2006), 53-78.

²²⁹ ‘Theology and Politics in Dryden’s Conversion’, *SEL*, 4 (1964), 393-412 (p. 396).

²³⁰ ‘Theology and Politics in Dryden’s Conversion’, p. 396.

²³¹ ‘Theology and Politics in Dryden’s Conversion’, p. 412.

²³² ‘Scriptural Deism and the Politics of Dryden’s *Religio Laici*’, *ELH*, 54 (1987), 869-92 (p. 890).

by Swiss physician and theologian Thomas Erastius (1524–1583), designates the belief that state control of the Church is justified. More recently a directly political reading of *Religio Laici* has been favoured by Zwicker; he says the ‘argument on behalf of charity and toleration [...] is the voice, or perhaps the strategic program, of Charles II’.²³³

Unsurprisingly, arguments against the presence of scepticism in Dryden’s religious works have been less decisive in readings of *The Hind and the Panther*. With its endorsements of papal infallibility (*Poems*, III, 56-58; I. 90-118 and 90-117; II. 60-662), the very theology of the poem seems to incline towards fideism. Nevertheless, most critics have downplayed or ignored the sceptical implications of the poem’s Catholic convictions, often viewing Dryden’s aims as a continuation of, or otherwise in connection with, that which he adopts in *Religio Laici*. Thus Benson holds that ‘the relation between the political and theological arguments’ in *The Hind and the Panther* is essentially the same as in the former poem, since its ‘theological argument undertakes to destroy the religious basis of political popularism and to assert a valid religious authority which will assure “common quiet”’.²³⁴ According to his explanation of the poem, ‘an infallible Roman Catholic tradition has replaced an infallible Scripture as the final appeal in public religious dispute’.²³⁵ Miner’s interpretation is similar interpretation; he finds that Dryden had moved from ‘an Anglican eclectic, commonsensical, personal idea of rational faith to a Catholic traditional, moderate, personal idea of a rational faith’.²³⁶ Rational faith, Miner suggests, can mean ‘reasonableness of the *grounds* of faith’, or the view that ‘the assent is of the

²³³ ‘How Many Religions did John Dryden Have?’, in *Enchanted Ground : Reimagining John Dryden*, ed. by Jayne Lewis and Maximillian E. Novak (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), pp. 171-84 (p.172).

²³⁴ ‘Theology and Politics in Dryden's Conversion’, *SEL*, 4 (1964), 393-412 (p. 409).

²³⁵ ‘Theology and Politics in Dryden's Conversion’, p.409.

²³⁶ *Dryden's Poetry*, p. 184.

reason, not of the will or passions'; nowhere, though, does Miner's analysis regard either set of views as connected with sceptical thought.²³⁷

For Harth there is no evidence of scepticism in *The Hind and the Panther* whatsoever. As my first chapter explains, Harth seeks to provide an alternative to Bredvold's theory of Pyrrhonism, and argues that Dryden was sceptical only in his use of the Baconian method of free inquiry in his early critical work, *The Essay of Dramatic Poesy*. By 'presenting two opposing ways of reasoning', he claims, the *Essay* generates new understanding about literary criticism, broadening the scope of critical inquiry by cultivating the habit of intellectual modesty, rather than closing it down in bold and unqualified assertion. Although much of *The Hind and the Panther* was is written in dialogue, he suggests that this should not be confused with methodological scepticism since, on the matters of political and religious thought with which the poem is concerned, 'dogmas are appropriate, traditional beliefs should be accepted, and a doubting attitude ought to be discouraged'.²³⁸ Accordingly, Harth dismisses the dialectic of the poem as a device that serves to strengthen the argument of its author's Catholic apology; having confined his analysis to this one area of Dryden's writing, he offers no other theory of scepticism in its place.

In recent years Dryden's religious writings have mainly been sidelined as a subject of serious investigation, treated as a matter of biographical fact requiring no further scrutiny or explanation. Winn, Dryden's most recent biographer, for instance, acknowledges that *Religio Laici* 'dramatizes a [...] personal struggle to define a sustaining faith', and that this reflects the

²³⁷ Dryden's *Poetry*, p. 184.

²³⁸ Harth, p. 34.

‘skeptical or “freethinking” approach to religious questions’ which had been topical in the coffeehouses he frequented.²³⁹ Yet, he voices no opinion about how scepticism might play a role in Dryden’s ‘refutation of deism as a system too dependent on the dim light of human reason’.²⁴⁰ In a related sense, Spurr contends that ‘Dryden’s cast of mind was skeptical and inquiring’ because his ‘imagination was suited to dialogues and debates; however, ‘it was the job of preachers, not playwrights and poets, to speak definitively in the later seventeenth century, and Dryden was assuredly no preacher’.²⁴¹

One study that has devoted some time to exploring Dryden’s scepticism is Noggle’s *The Skeptical Sublime* (2003). For Noggle, the ‘unsettling energy’ of scepticism enabled the poet to ‘hold competing positions uneasily together or make transitions in his career from one to another’.²⁴² With regard to matters of faith, this is an observation that promises to open up Dryden’s writings to new interpretative possibilities, going beyond the often subtle theological distinctions which scholars of the seventeenth century have made, and even returning us to formulations introduced by Bredvold, as the following observation on *Religio Laici* shows:

While Philip Harth and others justly note very similar sentiments among Latitudinarians like Tillotson (in part to refute Bredvold), Dryden’s diffidence and repeated expressions of reason’s insufficiency [...] occupy the sceptically unsettled territory where Anglican and Catholic polemics meet and part’.²⁴³

Central to Noggle’s claims is the belief that Dryden embraced the principles of mitigated scepticism as this ‘performs the work of social cohesion’.²⁴⁴ But, concentrating specifically on Alexander Pope and the Tory satirists of the following century, Noggle’s study largely treats

²³⁹ Winn, p. 377.

²⁴⁰ Winn, p. 377.

²⁴¹ *Companion*, p. 238.

²⁴² Noggle, p. 48.

²⁴³ Noggle, p.49.

²⁴⁴ Noggle, p. 23.

Dryden as the antecedent of a later culture of thought, one where the mitigating function of scepticism constitutes ‘an epistemological justification of what has been called the ideology of eighteenth-century liberalism’.²⁴⁵ The problem with describing Dryden’s writings in the 1680s as liberal in any sense is clear. The eighteenth century was liberal insofar that it was peaceful and accommodating; to quote Parker, it was a ‘period when philosophy and literature were on unusually friendly terms, and any line of demarcation between them sometimes disappeared altogether’.²⁴⁶ By contrast, the late seventeenth century was politically unsettled, especially during the years immediately before the revolution of 1688. Ongoing fears about James’s Catholicism – evident from the Exclusion crisis, and then, after his succession, from resistance to pro-Catholic legislation like the Declaration of Indulgence of 1687 – hardly encouraged the climate of intellectual felicity enjoyed by Pope, Jonathan Swift and others. When in *Religio Laici* Dryden advises not to ‘[...] seek beyond our pow’r to know’ (*Poems*, II, 132; 430) and when in *The Hind and the Panther* he maintains that ‘God [...] asserted, man is to believe / Beyond what sense and reason can conceive’ (*Poems*, III, 58; I. 118-19), he is speaking for a society which favoured intellectual restraint and the preservation of convention over open debate.

Although each commentator of both poems provides sufficient evidence to substantiate the claims they make, the discrepancies between them all are irreconcilable, leaving Dryden scholarship with a new set of questions: in embracing orthodoxy and rejecting religious extremes, how does Dryden differ from the intellectual stance taken by Catholic sceptics a century earlier? Does the emphasis on an infallible Scripture as opposed to an infallible Church tradition preclude the need for scepticism? And to what extent is the mitigated scepticism

²⁴⁵ Noggle, p. 23.

²⁴⁶ Parker, p. 5.

attributed to Dryden by Noggle a seventeenth-century manifestation of academic scepticism, given that this too performed the work of social cohesion?

Ironically, the absence of critical consensus on *Religio Laici* might lead its contemporary readers back to Bredvold's theory of Pyrrhonism; from the oxymoron of scriptural deism to the paradox of a personal yet universal faith based simultaneously on reason and tradition, the poem's arguments blur together in a way that seems to suggest that he was deliberately evading commitment to any one theory about the nature of the godhead. Of course, Dryden's compositional approach in this respect might merely be regarded as typical of his artistic response to the intellectual pluralism of the times. As I have shown, the main argument of poems like *Annus Mirabilis* and 'To Dr Charleton' is everywhere informed by a subtext which encourages their readers to find connections between politics and religion, between national identity and history, and between the numerous theories of knowledge that were in circulation in post-Restoration Britain. But as concerned as *Religio Laici* appears to be with established religion, pluralistic interpretations of truth could only offer so much before philosophical speculation must end and prescribed articles of faith begin. To ask too many questions of accepted wisdom or probe too deeply into matters unknown was to risk violating contemporary ecclesiastical injunctions on human inquiry. For his materialism Hobbes was denounced as an atheist and a libertine, despite, in Paganini's words, demonstrating his devotion to 'the "orthodox" doctrine of the Church as defined by the first four Ecumenical Councils'.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁷ 'Hobbes's Critique of the Doctrine of Essences and its Sources', in *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes's Leviathan*, ed. by Patricia Springborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 337-57 (p. 337).

Pyrrhonism, though, conceptualises the impasse between philosophy and the Church; it holds that the end of scrutiny is tranquillity of mind which is, paradoxically, unobtainable without the willingness to forgo the claims that philosophy makes upon us and live in accordance with everyday laws and observances. Montaigne, who finds the Pyrrhonist ‘humble, obedient, disciplinable, studious’ and therefore free ‘from vain and irreligious opinions introduced by false sects’, is, as I explained in my first chapter, the main precedent of Pyrrhonic thought in the early-modern period, and an author whose influence certainly can be traced in some of *Religio Laici*’s more pithy pronouncements.²⁴⁸ Compare, for instance, the comment, ‘Vain, wretched creature, how art thou misled / To think thy wit these godlike notions bred!’ (*Poems*, II, 113; 64-5) from the poem’s argument against the Deists, with the following from the ‘Apology’: ‘What can be more vain [...] than trying to make guesses about God from human analogies and own laws [...] are we to drag him down to our corruption and our Wretchedness?’²⁴⁹ More than this, though the core values of Pyrrhonism – that to quote Empiricus, by ‘the handing down of customs and laws, we accept, from an everyday point of view, that piety is good and impiety bad’ and that by ‘teaching of kinds of expertise we are not inactive in those which we accept’ – seems to be written into the poem from outset.²⁵⁰ These values certainly appear to be implied by Dryden’s now famous second declaration of scepticism where the Church is regarded as the custodian of religious belief:

Being naturally inclined to scepticism in philosophy, I have no reason to impose my opinions in a subject which is above it; but whatever they are I submit them with all reverence to my mother church, accounting them no further mine than as they are authorized, or at least uncondemned by her. (*Poems*, II, *Religio Laici*, The Preface, pp. 86-87)²⁵¹

²⁴⁸ Montaigne, pp. 199-200.

²⁴⁹ Montaigne, p. 572.

²⁵⁰ *Outlines of Scepticism*, p. 38.

²⁵¹ *Outlines of Scepticism*, p. 9.

For many historians of seventeenth-century philosophy, Pyrrhonism typically presupposed fideism, ‘the essential principles’, as Bredvold states, ‘on which the Roman Catholics of the time based their apologetics’.²⁵² Significantly, when Dryden states that ‘we have not lifted up ourselves to God by the weak pinions of our reason, but he has been pleased to descend to us’ (*Poems*, II, *Religio Laici*, The Preface, pp. 90-91), he apparently pre-empts what would become the accepted Catholic definition of fideism – ‘distrust in human reason, and the belief that human reason cannot of itself reach certitude in regard to any truth whatever’.²⁵³ Equally, when he reasons that ‘In doubtful questions ’tis the safest way / To learn what unsuspected ancients say’ because ‘’tis not likely we should higher soar / In search of heaven than all the church before’ (*Poems*, II, 132-33; 435-38) he apparently aligns himself with Catholicism in the fundamental sense of the word – that is, in the sense of universal religion.

However, as Carroll states, if fideism were ‘defined loosely as the idea that the truth about religious matters cannot be established by natural reason alone, then the vast majority of religious thought [...] would be fideistic’.²⁵⁴ In accordance with his argument against the misuse of natural reason by the deists, Dryden submits to the principles of ecclesiastic belief as it has been established by contemporary churchmen, rather than that of ‘the church before’. Throughout this part of the preface, he unreservedly identifies himself with ‘our own reverend divines of the Church of England’, particularly John Tillotson, who David Nichol Smith names as the ‘judicious and learned friend’ that Dryden had check over the poem before it was published (*Poems*, II, *Religio Laici*, The Preface, p. 86 and p. 87). Tillotson, whom was Dean of Canterbury in 1682, had emphasised ‘the great and necessary use of Reason, in matters of

²⁵² Bredvold, p. 120.

²⁵³ *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, vol. 6, 68.

²⁵⁴ Carroll, ‘The Traditions of Fideism’, *Religious Studies*, 44 (2008), 1-22 (p. 17).

Faith'.²⁵⁵ In contrast to the absolute fideism previously attributed to the poem, *Religio Laici* contains very definite echoes of this theology, and these are evident from the outset:

Dim as the borrowed beams of moon and stars
 To lonely, weary, wandering travellers
 Is reason to the soul: and as on high
 Those rolling fires discover but the sky
 Not light us here, so reason's glimmering ray
 Was lent, not to assure our doubtful way,
 But guide us upward to a better day.
 And as those nightly tapers disappear
 When day's bright lord ascends our hemisphere,
 So pale grows reason at religion's sight,
 So dies, and so dissolves in supernatural light.
 (*Poems*, II, 107-08; 1-11)

Read in isolation from the rest of the poem, and from Tillotson's *The Rule of Faith* (1666) that immediately influenced Dryden here, these famous lines may be superficially identified with fideism. Indeed, the 'Apology for Raimond Sebond' had similarly argued that 'we must accompany our faith with all the reason that lies within us [providing] that we never reckon [...] our efforts [...] can ever themselves attain to a knowledge so supernatural, so divine'.²⁵⁶ Moreover, as Hammond observes, Dryden's imagery evokes the poetics of John Serjeant's controversial Catholic apologetics *Sure Footing in Christianity* (1665), which describes reason's role in bringing the believer to faith as 'like a dimsighted man who us'd his Reason to find a trusty Friend to lead him in the twilight'.²⁵⁷ But the argument Dryden is setting up points to the role of reason in questions of belief when the Word of God is unclear or unforthcoming. Following, as Arthur Hoffman puts it, the 'simultaneous valuing and devaluing of Reason', in the opening lines, Dryden examines what Socrates said and Plato and Aristotle wrote about the godhead, and concludes that these great minds of antiquity ultimately fail in their ratiocinations:

²⁵⁵ 'Dryden's *Religio Laici*: An Anglican Poem', p. 207. John Tillotson, *Of Sincerity and Constancy in the Faith and Profession of the True Religion, in several Sermons* (London, 1695), p. 63.

²⁵⁶ Montaigne, p. 492.

²⁵⁷ *Sure-footing in Christianity, or Rational Discourses on the Rule of Faith* (London, 1665), p. 83.

‘Not Plato these, nor Aristotle found, / Nor he whose wisdom oracles renowned’ (*Poems*, II, 114; 74-75).²⁵⁸ What is missing from their speculations, he claims, is God’s revelation, arguing that the proper exercise of reason is that which brings us to an understanding of the reliability of Scripture. This he seeks to demonstrate in lines 140-43:

Whence but from heaven could men unskilled in arts,
In several ages born, in several parts,
Weave such agreeing truths? Or how, or why
Should all conspire to cheat us with a lie?
(*Poems*, II, 118; 140-43)

Accounting for this, and the ‘gross errors’ (*Poems* II.265) of the scribes down the ages, Dryden urges his readers to recognise the singularity of Scriptural claims, ‘the whole tenor of the work divine’ (*Poems*, II, 128; 330), to adopt his subsequent insight. His rhetorical questions here are the decisive element of his deduction, and they fulfil what he regarded as the poet’s role as a ‘kind of Law-giver’ (*Poems*, II. The Preface, 106; 443), illustrating the proof, as it were, of revelation. Having placed himself beyond the parameters of a simple unquestioning belief, Dryden had attempted to preserve the integrity of the Bible with a philosopher’s detachment.

Such moments in *Religio Laici* are explicitly intended as refutations of the deistical belief that, as Dryden states in lines 169-71: ‘No supernatural worship can be true, / Because a general law is that alone / Which must to all and everywhere be known’ and, as Benson states, by seeking to refute the deists in this way he ‘turns the deists’ own weapons against them – using reason to demonstrate the limits of reason’.²⁵⁹ Clearly, the paradox of Dryden’s argument is consistent with the ‘paradoxes of explanation’ that for Love are symptomatic of the breakdown of ‘a single,

²⁵⁸ Arthur W. Hoffman, *John Dryden's Imagery* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1962), pp. 56-61.

²⁵⁹ ‘Theology and Politics in Dryden's Conversion’, p. 400.

coherent theologico-philosophical system'.²⁶⁰ As such, it is indicative of a scepticism that exposes and explores contradiction: where fideism is involved with protecting received religious knowledge, Dryden's strategy is to generate understanding about religion. It is a response to late seventeenth-century British circumstances that makes use of a 'certain play of irony' usually associated with eighteenth-century sceptics.²⁶¹ The implications of Dryden's approach are all-encompassing. Not bound by the theory of fideism that has been imputed to him, Dryden applies his logic about the reasonableness of scripture to the dogma of the Catholic Church. Also in common with Tillotson, he accuses the Church of plugging the 'gaping fence' of religious understanding with 'vain traditions' (*Poems*, II, 124; 267) – an attack on the oral or unwritten tradition of Catholic theology, which had been enshrined by the Council of Trent (1545-63). Building on this criticism, Dryden then reasons that oral tradition, being fallible, must be tested against (ultimately subordinated to) that which is written in scripture:

Tradition written therefore more commends
 Authority than what from voice descends;
 And this, as perfect as its kind can be,
 Rolls down to us the sacred history,
 Which, from universal church received,
 Is tried, and after for itself believed.
 (*Poems*, II, 129; 350-55)

The effect of this argument derives not from faith, but from a kind of religious epistemology – a theory of belief grounded in certainty about what can be known beyond dispute about the nature of religious belief. This is made explicit in lines 439-40: 'Nor can we be deceived, unless we see / The scripture and the fathers disagree'. Although submission to the Church is urged by Dryden, the individual believer is not denied an active involvement in his or her belief. Only in 'doubtful

²⁶⁰ 'Dryden's Rationale of Paradox', p 303 and p. 298.

²⁶¹ Parker, p. 53.

questions' (435) should we 'learn' or accept 'what unsuspecting ancients say' (*Poems*, II, 133; 435-36).

If, as Harth, Fujimura and others have stated, *Religio Laici* typifies Anglican orthodoxy in this period, it clearly does not follow that Dryden was closed to the value of scepticism in composing the poem; nor does it follow that Anglican orthodoxy contained no element of sceptical thought at its heart. Quite apart from the 'paradox of explanation' attributed to him by Love, Dryden seems to have been writing out of a tradition of Anglican thought which embraces scepticism as a defining principle. In his 1676 essay, 'The Agreement of Reason and Religion', for example, Joseph Glanvill argues that 'OUR Reason is corrupted [...] the Faculty of Understanding [...] much weakened and impaired'.²⁶² Like Dryden, he emphasises the reciprocal relationship between faith and reason, and the authority of scripture in determining points of contention. Glanvill's conclusions to this end form part of his search for certitude in all knowable matters of the universe, a search where scepticism means critical analysis of received opinion, and avoidance of dogmatic assertion:

The first Relators *could not be deceived themselves, and would not deceive us*; nor indeed *could* in the main Matters, if they had designed it. And the certainty of the conveyance of those things to us is evinced also by numerous convictive Reasons: So that the matter of Fact is secure; and that such Doctrines were taught, as are ascribed to those Divine Persons; and those Persons inspired that penned them, are proved the same way: And so it follows from the whole, that the Gospel is the Word of God; and the Old Testament is confirmed by *that*. Thus Reason proves the Divine Authority of Scripture; and those other Arguments that use to be produced for it, from its *Stile*, and its *influence* upon the Souls of Men; from the *excellency* of its Design, and the *Providence of God* in preserving it; are of the same sort, though not of the same strength. Reason then proves the Scriptures, and *this only*; for that they are from God, is not known *immediately* by *Sense*; and there is no distinct *Revelation* that is certain and infallible to assure us of it; and so *Reason only* remains to demonstrate the Article. These two great Truths, *The Existence of God*, and *Authority of Scripture*, are the first in our Religion; and they are *Conclusions* of Reason, as well as *Foundations* of Faith. And thus

²⁶² 'Reason and Religion', in *Collected Essays* VI, p. 17.

briefly of those Principles of Religion that are *presupposed* unto it; we have seen how Reason serves for the Demonstration of them.²⁶³

Whether or not Dryden had read Glanvill is not evident, but both present faith and revelation as the interdependent recourse from complete doubt. Moreover, just as Dryden believed that faith illuminates reason, so Glanvill argued that faith and philosophical speculation were in agreement, providing, as he says in ‘The Usefulness of Real Philosophy to Religion’ (also 1676), that philosophy ‘Aids in the Concerns of Religion’ and awakens us to a ‘more attentive consideration of the wisdom and goodness’ of God’s works.²⁶⁴ Even Dryden’s somewhat implied exception to the role of religion in knowledge – the purely philosophical observation of the initial awareness of ‘some principal motion, our reason can apprehend’ (*Poems*, II, *Religio Laici*, The Preface, p. 91) concurs with Glanvill’s claim that the knowledge of God ‘must precede our Faith in Revelation [and] cannot be deduced from it [...] and so only Reason is left to assure us here’.²⁶⁵

More importantly, though, Dryden seemed instrumental in shaping the intellectual character of a later generation of prominent Anglican clergymen like John Pomfret. In 1699, Pomfret published his *The Sceptical Muse*, a poem that directly recalls *Religio Laici*:

The Cheats of sense will half our Learning share:
 And Preconceptions all our knowledge are.
 Reason 'tis true, should over sense preside,
 Correct our Notions and our Judgments guide;
 But false Opinions, rooted in the mind
 Hood-wink the Soul, and keep the Reason blind;
 Reason's a Taper, which but faintly burns:
 A Languid Flame that glows and dies by turns:
 We see't a while, and but a little way
 We travel by its Light, as Men by Day;

²⁶³ ‘Reason and Religion’, pp. 17-18.

²⁶⁴ ‘The Usefulness of Real Philosophy to Religion’, in *Collected Essays*, VI, p. 43.

²⁶⁵ ‘Reason and Religion’, p. 7.

But quickly dying, it forsakes us soon;
Like Morning Stars that never stay till Noon.²⁶⁶

Reason's a taper that should our judgments guide, a languid flame by which we travel as men by day, the morning stars which never stay till noon, *The Sceptical Muse* suggest that Pomfret was indebted to Dryden for his insight, and, perhaps, to some degree, thought him a sceptic. What confirms the connection between the two philosophical journeymen is not the imagery of their poems, but the logic of their reasoning, encapsulating, as the subtitle of *The Sceptical Muse* states, the 'paradox of humane understanding', which consists in knowledge made perspicacious by revelation. Parallel couplets from *The Sceptical Muse* and *Religio Laici* that show this include: 'Bless'd Revelation but for thee we might / Have travel'd thro' a dark and tedious night', and 'Revealed religion first informed thy sight, / And reason saw not till faith saw the light' (*Poems*, II, 129; 350-55).²⁶⁷

Although Dryden was responding to contemporary concerns, *Religio Laici* does display affinities with much older forms of scepticism, Pyrrhonism and fideism notwithstanding. This is most apparent when the poem seeks to engage us in matters of political obedience. The Exclusion crisis and the pursuit of toleration for Catholics throughout the 1670s, had stirred up old anxieties. Questions about the role that State and Church should be playing in the lives of ordinary believers were being raised again, and although, as Coward has suggested, Charles II 'harnessed the power of the crown with that of the Church of England' in the latter years of his reign, fears about James's expected succession and the ultimate outcome of the British

²⁶⁶ *The Sceptical Muse, or a Paradox of Humane Understanding* (London, 1699), p. 5.

²⁶⁷ *The Sceptical Muse*, pp. 9-10.

Reformation were widespread.²⁶⁸ In his *A Letter from a Person of Quality to his Friend in the Country* (published in 1675), the Earl of Shaftesbury condemns what he sees as an emerging ‘Government of the Church’, which ‘in requital to the Crown [declares] the Government absolute and Arbitrary, and allows Monarchy as well as Episcopacy to be *Juro Divino* and not to be bounded, or limited by human Laws’.²⁶⁹ Andrew Marvell, who also speaks of arbitrary government in his 1677 pamphlet, *An Account of the Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government in England*, opines that the ‘established Protestant Religion’ was being converted into ‘down-right Popery’.²⁷⁰ As Schmitter states, the idea behind such claims is that ‘sovereignty rests in the people’, and reflects a concerted attempt to ‘shrink the [royal] prerogative and expand the power of the Parliament’.²⁷¹ In support of the Crown and Church, Dryden seeks to counter such designs warning that ‘men believe more than they need’, he ‘will make of himself a creed’ (*Poems*, II, 133; 433-34). For him, a central ecclesiastic authority is a precondition of faith and necessary for a stable society; viewed from this perspective Dryden’s scepticism in *Religio Laici* is a function of his public role:

’Tis some relief that points not clearly known
 Without much hazard may be let alone;
 And after hearing what our church can say,
 If still our reason runs another way,
 That private reason ’tis more just to curb,
 Than by disputes the public peace disturb.
 (*Poems*, II, 133; 443-48)

It is not difficult to see why Benson and others offer a strictly politicised reading of the poem. Dryden’s theological conclusions seem always to point back to political obedience. In the passage above there are definite Hobbesian resonances, which are echoed all the more

²⁶⁸ *The Stuart Age*, p. 335.

²⁶⁹ *A Letter from a Person of Quality to His Friend in the Country* (1675), p. 1.

²⁷⁰ *An Account of the Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government in England* (Amsterdam, 1677), p. 12.

²⁷¹ ‘The Occasion for Marvell’s Growth of Popery’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 21 (1960), 568-70 (p. 568).

emphatically in the concluding line of this section of the poem: ‘But common quiet is mankind’s concern’ (*Poems*, II, 133; 450). However, to deny that these moments as sceptical is to overlook the tradition of thought from which Dryden (and indeed Hobbes) derives. Religious conflict since the Reformation was the catalyst for the revival of ancient scepticism; as Popkin observes, ‘The denial of the accepted criteria [eliminated] the sole basis for testing the truth of religious proposition’.²⁷² Dryden, in the seventeenth century, attempted to reassert the truth of the Church of England’s religious propositions – its dogma. Thus scepticism justifies religious orthodoxy, as he saw it. Looking back to the Reformation, it is clear that the argument which Dryden formulates is a seventeenth-century manifestation of the counter-Reformation reaction to religious change. Consider Dryden’s statement of scepticism in the preface to *Religio Laici* against the following from Erasmus’s *A Diatribe or Sermon Concerning Free Will* (1524), a work which contends that Martin Luther’s denial of free will was unscriptural:

In addition, so great is my dislike of assertions that I prefer the views of the sceptics whenever the inviolable authority of Scripture and the decision of the Church permit – a church to which at all times I willingly submit my views, whether I attain what she prescribes or not. And as a matter of fact I prefer this natural inclination to one I can observe in certain people who are so blindly addicted to one opinion that they cannot tolerate whatever differs from it. Whatever they read in Holy Scripture, they distort to serve the opinion to which they have once and for all enslaved themselves. Their case is like [...] those who in the heat of battle turn everything at hand, be it a pitcher or a plate, into a missile.²⁷³

Like Luther, Erasmus had pushed for a reform of the Church, but always fought shy of advocating a break with Church authority, since, he reasoned, amongst other things, that scripture alone could not provide the basis of salvation. Like Dryden after him, he places both Church authority and the role of scripture at the heart of the Christian faith. Here Erasmus makes a direct appeal to a sort of calculated intellectual resignation in order to refute on behalf of the

²⁷² Popkin, p. 3.

²⁷³ *A Diatribe or Sermon Concerning Free Will*, (1524), as cited in, *Erasmus and Luther: Discourse on Free Will*, ed. by Ernst F. Winter (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 4.

Church the growing acceptance of what he saw as a subversive development. Precisely which coterie of sceptics he associates himself with is not certain, but what is clear is that Erasmus's initial profession of dignified Christian conduct clearly lent itself to the vindication of doubt he was developing. Admitting his inability to comment with conviction on lofty theological matters in the name of scepticism, and for the sake of avoiding the temptation of an ultimately deceptive fanaticism, he submits to the Church making the ultimate sacrifice of personal opinion.

Placing *Religio Laici* in the wider context of early-modern sceptical thought in this way reveals other possible readings of the poem. Before the Reformation, Erasmus had thought scripture vulnerable to misinterpretation, and, indeed, deliberate misappropriation, by the clergy. In one of the most influential of his early works, the scathing satire, *Praise of Folly*, or *Moriae Encomium* (1509), he roundly condemned the repression of the Word of God (among other Clerical violations), maintaining that 'It's the generally accepted privilege of theologians [...] to stretch the heavens, that is, the scriptures, like tanners with a hide'.²⁷⁴ Almost as an extension of this complaint, Erasmus then argued for a humble Christian devotion, a piety free from any suggestion of rational or human justification. 'The Christian religion has a kind of kinship with Folly in some form', says Folly, addressing the Divines and dignitaries of the day, 'though it has none at all with wisdom'.²⁷⁵ His rather unconventional encomium of Folly (unconventional, because the eponymous Folly is her own encomiast) can be regarded as a sort of embryonic scepticism insofar as it presses for the observance of basic Christian ideals, playing devil's advocate with all detractors from the strict example of Christ, scripture and the Christian doctrine, as set down by the Apostles and early Church theologians, during the formative years

²⁷⁴ Desiderius Erasmus, 'Praise of Folly' (1511), in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 37, trans. by Betty Radice, ed. by A.H.T. Levi (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 1986), p. 145.

²⁷⁵ 'Praise of Folly', p. 149.

of the faith. Dryden similarly attacks ‘false conveyances’ (384) of the bible, and like Erasmus praises:

The unlettered Christian, who believes in gross,
 Plods on to heaven, and ne'er is at a loss;
 For the strait gate would be made straiter yet
 Were none admitted there but men of wit.
 (*Poems*, II, 127-28; 323-5)²⁷⁶

When Harth rules out scepticism in *Religio Laici* on the basis that scepticism means freedom of inquiry, and a diffidence in philosophy that is intended to answer any would-be critics of the poem ‘in advance’, he overlooks the significance of this Christian humility.²⁷⁷ Scholars, misguided theologians – indeed anyone ‘Occasioned by great zeal, and little thought’ (416) who ‘proudly seek beyond our power to know’ (430) open themselves to accusations of heresy. By assuming a layman’s persona, Dryden protects himself against such charges, just as Erasmus did in *A Diatribe or Sermon Concerning Free Will* when he states that there shall be no invective between him and Luther because ‘it does not behove Christians so to act’ and because ‘truth by excessive quarrelling is often lost’.²⁷⁸ so for Dryden, as for Erasmus, scepticism implied a measure of intellectual resignation, which paradoxically allowed some degree of autonomy to provide an apologetics of the faith.

As might be expected, the nature of Dryden’s intellectual character changed upon his conversion to Catholicism. The best indication of that change is his 1687 defence of the Catholic faith, *The Hind and the Panther*, a poem so unlike *Religio Laici* that any effort to compare the two may at first sight seem a fruitless exercise. Certainly, the compositional approach taken in *The Hind and*

²⁷⁶ Montaigne, pp. 544-55. Specifically, Montaigne was denying the exaltation of scholarship by the Roman rhetorician, Cicero.

²⁷⁷ Harth, p. 6.

²⁷⁸ *A Diatribe or Sermon Concerning Free Will*, p. 4.

the Panther may itself be regarded as a statement of sceptical thought. Largely written as an allegorical dialogue between a ‘milk-white Hind’ (*Poems*, III, 45; I. 1), which symbolises the Catholic Church, and a Panther, ‘fairest creature of the spotted kind’ (*Poems*, III, 71; I. 328), which symbolises the Anglican Church, this poem seems deliberately, almost self-consciously, abstruse.²⁷⁹ Its three parts, relating a complex theological debate on the true nature of Christianity, are by their very nature far removed from the plain organic style of Dryden’s exhortations to the laity, and, as Zwicker states, this poem, more than *Religio Laici*, is ‘evidence of the way in which Dryden linked poetic style and spiritual identity’.²⁸⁰

However, it is important to remember that when Dryden wrote *The Hind and the Panther* nothing about his core religious convictions had changed. As in *Religio Laici*, he holds religion above reason, as he intimates early on in the poem: ‘What weight of ancient witness can prevail / If private reason hold the public scale?’ (*Poems*, III, 53; I. 62-63). Moreover, this apparent confession of the heart displayed all the concerns for peace, order and obedience that the Anglican poem displayed – the more so perhaps, considering that it dealt with the legitimacy of the newly-crowned James II, and James’s Declaration of Indulgence to Tender Consciences (the policy which extended freedom of worship to Catholics and Protestants alike) in a very direct way. Thus, while questions regarding Dryden’s conversion to Catholicism have been numerous (if mostly unanswered), his intellectual and spiritual justification for converting does not necessarily imply a turnaround in thought. What can be inferred about his attitude to religion, though, is that, above all, Dryden seemed now to have consciously aligned himself with the

²⁷⁹ The interests of a number of minority religious views (among others, the Independents, the Quakers, and the Atheists) are also represented. See particularly, I.1-61, which discusses the need for a universal and unerring guide in faith.

²⁸⁰ *Politics and Language in Dryden’s Poetry: The Art of Disguise* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 127.

strictly fideistic scepticism that posited pure belief. Significantly, this fideism was to be his final judgement in matters of religion:

Good life be now my task: my doubts are done
 (What more could fright my faith than Three in One?).
 Can I believe eternal God could lie
 Disguised in mortal mould and infancy?
 That the great maker of the world could die?
 And after that, trust my imperfect sense
 Which calls in question his omnipotence?
 Can I my reason to my faith compel,
 And shall my sight, and touch, and taste rebel?
 Superior faculties are set aside:
 Shall their subservient organs be my guide?
 Then let the moon usurp the rule of day,
 And winking tapers show the sun his way;
 For what my senses can themselves perceive
 I need no revelation to believe.
 (*Poems*, III, 55-56; I. 78-92)

Belief in the godhead, and, specifically, God's incarnation in a mortal mould, was held against all the instruments of perception which might deny such seeming improbabilities; rather the physical world around him subvert its own laws than this new understanding of faith be compromised by imperfect sense. The rhetorical questions here ironically exemplify his knowing unknowingness.

Dryden's conclusion reveals the change he did undertake from *Religio Laici* to *The Hind and the Panther*. Where in the former poem he had attacked such papal abuses as parcelling 'out the bible by retail' (*Poems*, II, 130; 377), now he accounted his previous speculations about religion as vanity; the dim light of reason, which had been a limited but more or less reliable guide to his theological wanderings, had served its purpose, and, with the journey complete, was casually disregarded – its use, along with the pride that had basked in its artificial glow, repented:

My thoughtless youth was winged with vain desires,

My manhood, long misled by wandering fires,
 Followed false lights; and when their glimpse was gone,
 My pride struck out new sparkles of her own.
 Such was I, such by nature still I am,
 Be thine the glory, and be mine the shame.
 (Poems, III, 54-55; I. 72-7)

Any charge of hypocrisy that might be levelled at Dryden was met with his declaration of shame.

Dryden addresses the issue of hypocrisy within the Anglican faith, but only at a distance, through the Hind's reproach of the Panther's pretensions to religious truth:

ancient guides she taught us to disdain;
 And by that scripture which she once abused
 To reformation, stands herself accused.
 (Poems, III, 82; I. 471-73)

Like his own previous belief, Dryden argued, the Church of the Panther is too changeable to command the required authority in contentions of faith: 'If doubts arise she slips herself aside, / And leaves the private conscience for the guide' (Poems III, 82; I. 477-78).²⁸¹

Predictably, Dryden's change of heart required him to reconsider his opinions in all areas of human knowledge and philosophical endeavour. As, in his youth (not as thoughtless as he claimed), he had to a greater or lesser extent embraced the sceptical impulse of free inquiry, so, in *The Hind and the Panther*, he directed that scepticism against itself: 'Rest then, my soul, from endless anguish freed, / Nor sciences thy guide, nor sense thy creed' (Poems, III, 60; I. 146-47). However, there is more to Dryden's rebuff to the reliability of sense perception than meets the eye. Indeed, his rejection of science and a creed of sense must be interpreted in the context of the

²⁸¹ The more direct statement of the Panther's changeability comes in the third part of the poem, but this aspect of her religious character is everywhere implied: 'But yours is much of the chameleon hue, / To change the dye with every different view' (Poems, III, 156; III.788-9).

contemporary debate about Transubstantiation.²⁸² Dryden is here mindful of the political current that made a truly sceptical attitude difficult to hold in an atmosphere of free inquiry. The Test Act of 1673, which James had begun to overrule, had been pushed through parliament by the resolutely Protestant Whigs in order to exclude Catholics from high office, threatening, of course, James's own succession to the throne. The Hind's justification of Church infallibility in Part II of *The Hind and the Panther* shows how Dryden merges the political argument with the theological:

‘Suppose (though I disown it),’ said the Hind,
 ‘The certain mansion were not yet assigned,
 The doubtful residence no proof can bring
 Against the plain existence of the thing.
 Because philosophers may disagree
 If sight b’ emission or reception be,
 Shall it be thence inferred I do not see?
 But you require an answer positive,
 Which yet, when I demand, you dare not give,
 For fallacies in universals live.
 I then affirm that this unfailing guide
 In pope and general councils must reside;
 Both lawful, both combined: what one decrees,
 By numerous votes the other ratifies:
 On this undoubted sense the church relies.
 (*Poems*, III, 90-91; II. 70-84)

Elsewhere, Dryden plays the Consubstantiationists (those who held that the bread and water of the sacrament are but the representation of the body and blood of Christ) at their own game. As he did with the Deists in *Religio Laici*, he refutes them with a quick process of impressive reasoning: ‘Their contradicting terms she strives to join, / Sign shall be substance, substance shall be sign’ (*Poems*, III, 79; I. 412-13). Here, Dryden, through the poetic persona of the Hind, renounces human reason entirely. What is interesting about this passage is that Dryden oscillated

²⁸² Transubstantiation is the belief that the bread and wine of the sacrament becomes the body and the blood of Christ on the same terms as The Last Supper, in point of fact. See Matthew 26:26-8. In the Anglican Sacrament the bread and wine was held instead to be representative of the body and blood of Christ (Consubstantiation).

between his own inability to comprehend the plain existence of the (any) thing and the inherent fallacy of universals, that is, the fallacy of all grand philosophical claims. Reading between the lines, though, these two points appear interconnected at a very fundamental level. Paralleling his declaration, or confession of shame above, Dryden presented the subject of philosophy as the manifestation of human pride, an argument (as I have shown above) that he first made against the Deists in *Religio Laici*. His view that the undoubted sense of the unfailing guide on pope and general councils that the church relies upon is a concession he made to his new king, demonstrating that beyond philosophy no reconciliation between denominations can be achieved if a philosophical hypothesis is adopted in order to justify dissent.

Dryden's shame about the inconstancy of his own religious belief seems all the more significant, as orthodox Roman Catholicism would not permit him to countenance a personal scriptural interpretation of the bible any longer. The difficulty was a personal one. But, Dryden remained unchanged in the most fundamental of his convictions – that of the legitimate sovereign as the rightful authority and, therefore, as the only hope of civil peace. The best insight on this matter is provided in the preface to *The Hind and the Panther*, where Dryden presents the king as the natural protector of the people by explaining the importance of the Declaration of Indulgence:

This indulgence being granted to all the sects, it ought in reason to be expected that they should both receive it and receive it thankfully. For at this time of day to refuse the benefit, and adhere to those whom they have esteemed their persecutors, what it is else, but publicly to own that they suffered not before for conscience sake, but only out of pride and obstinacy to separate from a church for those impositions which they now judge may be lawfully obeyed?

Of the receiving this toleration thankfully, I shall say no more than they ought, and I doubt not they will consider from what hands they received it. 'Tis not from a Cyrus, a heathen prince and a foreigner, but from a Christian king, their native sovereign, who

expects a return *in specie* from them, that the kindness which he has graciously shown them may be retaliated on those of his persuasion.
(*Poems*, III, pp. 41-42)

Though Dryden had composed much of the poem before the Declaration was issued, these lines are written in the spirit of the whole. The word ‘retaliated’ encapsulates the war of words that will follow in the dialogue between the ‘milk-white Hind’ (*Poems*, III, 45; I. 1), that symbolises the Catholic Church, and the Panther, ‘fairest creature of the spotted kind’ (*Poems*, III, 71; I. 328), which symbolises the Anglican. The reference to Cyrus (6-5 century BCE), the Persian king who allowed the peoples that he conquered (including the Jewish nation) freedom to worship their own deities, is particularly telling, bringing the perceived unchristian conduct of the times into sharp focus whilst reminding the reader of the kind dispensation given by the native sovereign, he whom every member of the State is obliged to obey.²⁸³ Clearly, Dryden celebrates the Declaration as an act of enlightened benevolence on the king’s part, and refers to it in part to allay fears about Catholics being allowed to hold political office: ‘having found by comfortable experience [...] the doctrine of persecution is far from being an article of our faith’ (*Poems*, III, *The Hind and the Panther*, The Preface, p. 40). And yet, recalling Sebastian Castelli’s now well-known statement that ‘to kill a man is not to defend a doctrine, it is to kill a man’, this is an argument that derives from the same sceptical tradition that underpinned Dryden’s exhortations to peace in *Religio Laici*, one that, as Perez Zagorin states, ‘makes no attempt [...] to work out the problems connected with the relationship between civil government and religion’ but merely recognises that ‘persecution does great harm to religion’.²⁸⁴

²⁸³ The best study of Cyrus and the Persian Empire to date is J.M. Cook *The Persian Empire* (New York: Schocken Books), 1983

²⁸⁴ *How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 119-20.

After the accession of William and Mary, Dryden found a personal dimension in this since, as a Catholic, he became disenfranchised by the British political establishment, that he had diligently served – unable (as his new faith prescribed) to swear an oath of allegiance to a Protestant monarchy.²⁸⁵ He set out his position on this matter with distinct lucidity in his 1699 letter to his cousin Mrs Steward:

But the Court rather speaks kindly of me than does anything for me, though they promise largely; and perhaps they think I will advance as they go backward, in which they will be much deceived; for I can never go an inch beyond my conscience and my honour. If they will consider me as a man who has done my best to improve the language, and especially the poetry, and will be content with my acquiescence, under the present Government, and forbearing satire on it, that I can promise, because I can perform it; but I can neither take the oaths nor forsake my religion: because I know not what church to go to if I leave the Catholic; they are all so divided amongst themselves on matters of faith necessary to salvation, and yet all assuming the name of Protestants.²⁸⁶

Clearly, Dryden finds deep consolation in his belief that he has obeyed the dictates of his conscience on all points, both as a writer and as a believer, having lost none of the precision of earlier declarations in either, despite his advancing years. He is, for once, genuinely at a loss as to how to fulfil the natural demands of his overwhelmingly theocratic aspirations, impeded by Rome's unwillingness to endorse a Protestant monarchy. For Dryden, this concession to the *original* episcopal tradition is a view to which he ultimately proved susceptible, symptomatic of his ongoing need to 'embrace' truth. As he states in the letter to Mrs Steward: 'Truth is but one; & they who have once heard of it, can plead no Excuse, if they do not embrace it'.²⁸⁷ This 'Truth', though, is not a comfortable possession. The rhetorical question at "Can I my reason to my faith compel, / And shall my sight, and touch, and taste rebel?" (*Poems*, III, 56; I. 85-86) admits of no obvious answer. It shows an alertness to contemporary debates about the respective

²⁸⁵ *Poems*, III, p. 104n. As Hammond points out, the Catholic faithful was not permitted to swear an oath to Protestant monarchies, which the Pope deemed heretical.

²⁸⁶ Charles E. Ward, *The Letters of John Dryden, with Letters Addressed to Him* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1942), p. 120.

²⁸⁷ *The Letters of John Dryden*, p. 123.

needs of faith and reason first set in train by Spinoza in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670) and the *Ethics* of 1677, namely that biblical interpretation demanded scientific and sceptical enquiry.²⁸⁸ What stirs Dryden in *Religio Laici* to render the more abstruse tactics of enquiry as lucid to the lay eye is, in *The Hind and the Panther*, to be put by for the sake of a greater good, that of political stability. His praise of the Hind – ‘One in herself, not rent by schism, but sound, / Entire, one solid shining Diamond’ (*Poems*, III, 111; II. 526-27) – is no terminus of his more philosophical and sceptical searches, but rather the pragmatic solution to an urgent crisis in Church and civil government. It is in this spirit that Dryden wishes to dissociate the new realist in himself from a younger, ‘thoughtless’ (*Poems*, III, 54; I. 72), version (‘thoughtless’ only in that a younger self had not perhaps recognised the political and ‘public’ consequences of schism). These ‘wandering fires’ were signs of pride, yet they have not been repudiated fully – ‘Such was I, such by nature still I am’ (*Poems*, III, 55; I. 73 and 76). The sceptic remains ‘by nature’.

²⁸⁸ See the summary in Jonathan I. Israel’s *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 447-56. It is likely that Dryden encountered Spinoza’s thought via Richard Simon.

Dryden, Translation and Seventeenth-Century Responses to Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*

The history of late seventeenth-century translation literature is at once a history of literary revival, innovation and, no less, invention. Of course, educated men like Dryden, Nahum Tate, William Congreve and Thomas Creech, among many others, were familiar with translation as an academic exercise; writing specifically of Dryden's boyhood education, but also alluding to an impressive array of intellectual notables who had studied under Richard Busby at Westminster School, Winn notes that the 'practice of translation [...] was central to the Westminster routine'.²⁸⁹ The same, it would seem, can be said of the curriculum of Cambridge and Oxford Universities. However, in the late seventeenth century, translation became a cultural and, even, political enterprise in its own right. 'Through this discipline', says Hammond in his study *Dryden and the Traces of Classical Rome*, 'the languages became intricately linked [...]. English was Latin *in potentia*. And Latin was the key to power'.²⁹⁰

A now well-known account of translation's potential power in the seventeenth century was given by Aphra Behn in her dedicatory poem, 'To Mr Creech (Under The Name of Daphnis) On His Excellent Translation of Lucretius' (1683), which prefaced the second edition of Creech's *De Rerum Natura*. Here Behn was both applauding the young Oxford graduate for his skill in faithfully re-presenting *De Rerum Natura* for the enjoyment of a Modern English readership, and celebrating the importance of the text to women's cultural development. Not without a certain degree of delighted self-consciousness, Behn characterises this as a revolutionary moment:

²⁸⁹ Winn, p. 44.

²⁹⁰ Paul Hammond, *Dryden and the Traces of Classical Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 35.

Till now I curst my *Sex* and *Education*,
 And more the scanted customs of the Nation,
 Permitting not the Female sex to tread
 The Mighty Paths of learned *Heroes* Dead.
 The Godlike *Virgil* and great *Homers* Muse,
 Like Divine Mysteries are conceal'd from us,
 We are forbid all grateful Theams,
 No ravishing Thoughts approach our Ear
 The Fulsom Gingle of the Times,
 Is all we are allow'd to Understand, or Hear.²⁹¹

By raising the profile of women readers and writers in this way, Behn raised many other issues besides. Indeed, for Janet Todd, Behn found in Creech the opportunity to explain that women's 'exclusion from the classics' was 'based on custom not nature', demonstrating, in the process, that the translated text, not least by virtue of its new context, carried many additional sublevels of meaning.²⁹² Most striking in the above passage is Behn's professed intellectual empathy with the merits of the heroic, that genre of literature which, as my third chapter explained, exalted the virtues of fortitude, dignity and honour in the face of adversity; by implication, Behn was clearly claiming such qualities as those of her own self and her sex.

Of course neither Creech nor his male contemporaries in the field had strictly intended these gestures of inclusion; Creech, Todd finds, had received the Dedication 'with dismay'.²⁹³ Nevertheless Behn, a proficient translator in her own right, was part of a new generation of readers and writers that understood how the classics could be used to represent a new age.²⁹⁴ As Hammond shows, the place that Latin had traditionally held 'in a reasonably coherent symbolic order' had come under attack 'during the Commonwealth', when 'sectarians suspicious of

²⁹¹ Aphra Behn, 'To Mr Creech (under the name of Daphnis) on His Excellent Translation of Lucretius' in *The Works of Aphra Behn*, vol. I ed. by Janet Todd (London: William Pickering, 1992), pp. 25-26.

²⁹² Janet Todd, *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn*, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1996), pp. 291-94.

²⁹³ *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn*, p. 294.

²⁹⁴ Behn's most accomplished translation was that of her French contemporary François de La Rochefoucauld. She also contributed to the 1680 volume of Ovid's *Heroides* at Dryden's invitation. See *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn*, pp. 255-58 and pp. 371-73, respectively.

classical learning demanded the abolition of colleges where Latin and Greek were studied', and when a 'divinely inspired English became the correct mode of discourse'.²⁹⁵ After 1660, classical scholars were working in the intellectual climate that proved so congenial to the Restoration scientists and dramatists.

It has become apparent that the new intellectual climate encouraged new ways of thinking about translation. Not unlike post-Restoration dramatists, late seventeenth-century translators could claim to be distancing themselves from the moralising of a repressive culture by breaking with historical convention, that is, to adopt Tomlinson's words, by breaking 'with merely literal translation from the Classics and [...] that timid habit of reducing texts to moralistic tags'.²⁹⁶ And, as with the new drama, ideas about translation were sufficiently abundant to justify theoretical formulation. One early example of translation theory was *An Essay on Translated Verse* (1684) by Wentworth Dillon, the Earl of Roscommon. Aware first and foremost of the difficulties in reconciling two different languages, Roscommon advocates a kind of vicarious identification with the original author, a '*Sympathetick Bond*', a unity of '*Thoughts [...] Words [...] Stiles [...] Souls*' until the translator became no longer 'his *Interpreter*, but *He*'.²⁹⁷ In this way, he eschews the problem of literalism by maintaining faithfulness with an impersonating self which is both grounded and elevated by a sense of aesthetic emulation:

Take pains the *genuine* Meaning to explore,
There *Sweat*, there *Strain*, tug the laborious *Oar*:
Search *ev'ry Comment*, that your Care can find,
Some here, some there, may hit the Poets *Mind*;
Yet be not blindly guided by the *Throng*;

²⁹⁵ *Dryden and the Traces of Classical Rome*, pp. 35-36.

²⁹⁶ 'Why Dryden's Translations Matter', in *Translation and Literature: John Dryden Classicist and Translator*, ed. by Stuart Gillespie, 10 (2001), 3-20 (p.3).

²⁹⁷ *An Essay on Translated Verse*, (London: 1684), p. 7.

Which has been, and *is* often in the *Wrong*.
 When Things appear *unnatural* or *hard*,
 Consult your *Author*, with *Himself* compar'd;
 Who knows what Blessing *Phoebus* may bestow,
 And future Ages to your labour owe?²⁹⁸

Placing emphasis on innovation, but nevertheless highlighting the congeniality of the ancient and modern mind, this outlook was especially appealing to Dryden. In fact, the translator's identification with his or her source is one that Dryden explored in full. To Hammond – one of the most discerning commentators on Dryden's translation literature – the poet's turn to translation offset the cultural and political displacements that he personally had experienced throughout the seventeenth century; having been careful not to be gulled by the blind throng on any matter in the post-Restoration period, and having been mindful of the valuable legacy of classical literature from the days of his Republican leanings, Dryden had, for Hammond, become the exemplar of that resourceful translator who sought new inspiration in a literary heritage which offered a different perspective on enduring concerns, as he states:

translation provided Dryden with the ground which he could fashion for himself a territory where he was free to explore Roman insights about the gods, and sexuality, and death, and the loss of the homeland: it facilitated the fashioning of a self, the discovery of a voice through the suspension of a proud insistence on originality and selfhood.²⁹⁹

Similarly, for Judith Sloman, Dryden's translations were an extension of his own poetic persona, one which had always exhibited its debt to the ancients, as she suggests with reference to his *Fables: Ancient and Modern* (1700), written at a time – during the reign of William and Mary – when strict censorship laws suppressed open or explicit comment on the contemporary scene: 'Dryden needed a literary form through which he could reveal and conceal himself at the same time, and creative translation provided one answer'.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁸ *An Essay on Translated Verse*, p. 7.

²⁹⁹ *Dryden and the Traces of Classical Rome*, p. 21.

³⁰⁰ 'An Interpretation of Dryden's Fables', *Eighteenth Century Studies* 4 (1970-71), 199-211 (p. 207).

This scholarly understanding of the complexity of Dryden's translations is corroborated by Dryden's own attitude to translation theory. In the preface to his 1685 collection, *Sylvae*, Dryden acknowledged a debt to Roscommon's 'instructions' (*Poems*, II, p. 237), but what he cites as influential can largely be reckoned as modesty on his part; four years before the publication of *Essay on Translated Verse*, Dryden foreshadowed Roscommon with a still more elaborate theory of translation, marking out approaches and defining terms that for a time would become bywords of translation theory. The text was his 'Preface to *Ovid's Epistles translated by Several Hands*' (1680):

All translation I suppose may be reduced to [...] three heads. First, that of metaphrase, or turning an author word by word, and line by line, from one language into another [...]. The second way is that of paraphrase, or translation with latitude, where the author is kept in view by the translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense, and that too is admitted to be amplified [...]. The third way is that of imitation, where the translator (if now he has not lost that name) assumes the liberty not only to vary from the words and sense, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion; and taking only some general hints from the original, to run division on the ground-work as he pleases. (*Poems*, I, pp. 384-85)

Although primarily accounting for his approach to the translation of Ovid's epistles, Dryden was clearly setting down a general blueprint, the 'working notes of a practitioner', as Hopkins has put it, to which he would have future reference.³⁰¹ Steering a course between metaphrase, which he thought ill-disposed to 'the narrowness of the modern Tongues', (*Poems*, I, p. 386) and imitation, which he thought 'the most advantageous way for a translator to show himself, but the greatest wrong which can be done to the memory and reputation of the dead' (*Poems*, I, p. 388), he ultimately declared the moderate middle way as the best recourse in what he recognised as an unavoidably compromised activity. It comes as no surprise that there are two ways of reading this. On the one hand, the degree of latitude afforded by paraphrase allows the translator to

³⁰¹ 'From Reformation and Renaissance to Eighteenth Century', in *Translation: Theory and Practice: a Historical Reader*, ed. by Daniel Weissbort and Ástráður Eysteinnsson (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 144-59 (p. 144).

accommodate creative freedom with a respectful regard for the authority of his or her subject, since, as Dryden subsequently states, by ‘this means the spirit of an author may be transfused, and yet not lost’ (*Poems*, I, 389; 392-93). Exemplifying that very classical idea of the golden mean, it also exemplifies Dryden’s untiring policy of moderation, urging restraint in the last instance, where, also in deference to the hand that feeds, it is needed the most.

But if, in David Hopkins’s paraphrasing of Dryden’s definition of paraphrase, ‘successful translation characteristically occurs when the translator feels simultaneously intimate with and at some distance from his source’, then the rules of engagement (from one text, one verse, one line, even one word, to the next) are never non-negotiable.³⁰² And so, on the other hand, we may be assured that Dryden was not merely seeking to use the linguistic grey areas between English and Latin for aesthetic effect, but also to explore parallel themes, questions and concerns, which give such aesthetic effect its contemporary, and therefore, its most meaningful resonance.

Inevitably, any implications generated by Dryden’s relaxed method give the translated text a new independence. Words like ‘pious’, ‘mob’ and ‘state’ among many others that frequently appear in his translations carry an additional and often a different set of associations when read from within the context of a seventeenth-century system of signification.³⁰³ Likewise certain technical devices that might qualify as paraphrase provide another basis for interpretation. In particular, the practice of interpolation (inserting material into the translated text with no authority from the original) to which Dryden repeatedly resorts, and omissions (isolating significant moments from

³⁰² ‘The English Voices of Lucretius from Hutchinson to John Mason Good’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, ed. by Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 254-73 (p. 254).

³⁰³ See *Dryden and the Traces of Classical Rome*, pp. 36-37.

the context of their original argument), are sure indications of textual intervention that in some part demand to be understood on their own terms. It is in these grey areas that we encounter the spirit of Dryden himself, using, we can safely assume, the classical voice as a pretext for his own: 'the reader will here find most of the translations with some little latitude or variation from the author's sense' (*Poems*, I, p. 390) he states at the conclusion of the preface to the *Epistles*, but, he continues, 'For my own part I am ready to acknowledge that I have transgressed the rules which I have given, and taken more liberty than a just translation will allow' (*Poems*, I, p. 390).

What Dryden does not make clear is the extent to which he utilises the classical voice to distinctly sceptical ends, exploring, or else expanding upon, a literary, philosophical and political scepticism with which he sympathises. Dryden certainly attempted to distance himself from controversial thinkers like Lucretius, citing scepticism as a reason. In the preface to *Sylvae* he relinquishes all responsibility for his translations of the author of *De Rerum Natura*, stating that

I lay'd by my natural Diffidence and Scepticism for a while, to take up that Dogmatical way of his' and that 'I am only the Translatour, not the Inventor; so that the heaviest part of the censure falls upon *Lucretius*, before it reaches me. (*Poems*, II, p. 274)

However, the preface to the *Epistles* itself clearly owes a great deal to the sceptical sensibility that he adopted in the 1660s; in following Roscommon's example he insinuated that he was to some degree returning to and expanding upon the sceptical sensibility of *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*: 'I tried whether or no I was capable of following his rules, and of reducing the speculation into practice [... and] I am sure my reason is sufficiently convinced both of their truth and usefulness' (*Poems* II, p. 237). Just as the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* had done for heroic drama, this text provides the justification for a fresh theoretical perspective, posing a challenge to

accepted translation convention (as embodied, in this case, by John Denham and Abraham Cowley) by advocating a largely speculative approach:

Thus I have ventured to give my opinion on this subject against the authority of two great men, but I hope without offence to either of their memories, for I both loved them living, and reverence them now they are dead. But if after what I have urged, it be thought by better judges that the praise of a translation consists in adding new beauties to the piece, thereby to recompense the loss which it sustains by change of language, I shall be willing to be taught better, and to recant. (*Poems*, I, p. 390)

Though by no means writing dialectically, Dryden is in dialogue with both his predecessors and his contemporaries in the field; he is ready to accept modifications, even outright rejection, of the principles he sets down, thereby demonstrating his preference for free-flowing sceptical inquiry over the hard dogma of principle. Also important in this respect is Dryden's general attitude to language. In my analysis of the Charleton poem in the second chapter of this study, I have argued that the poet promulgated a sceptical view about the limited scope of plain description, as championed by Royal Society scientists like Sprat and Glanvill. Through paraphrase he hoped to find a way past obvious literalism in order to bring the ancient world to his contemporaries.

However, the scepticism in many of his translations itself represents a departure from that of Dryden's first years. As my previous chapter outlined, the early 1680s was a disconcerting time: the initial confidence of the 1660s had all but waned, and checks upon the king's power had escalated into the as yet unresolved outcome of the exclusion crisis. Classical poets writing of the political upheavals of the ancient world offered interesting sites of comparison which allowed Dryden to speculate safely about the nature of contemporary political circumstances. That Dryden's translations specifically reflected the mood of the moment in which they were produced is now critically accepted. In contrast to 'the early years of Charles II's reign', where the 'tropes of deferral and inheritance, had been part of a rhetorical engagement with Rome

which gave form and substance to Dryden's contribution to the new Restoration culture', Hammond, for example, notes that 'in the translations of *Sylvae*, darker tones had emerged, with classical language being used to enable meditations on death and Fortune, on the instability of life and selfhood'.³⁰⁴ More to the point, perhaps, the very interest in classical literature suggests a predisposition to scepticism. Hammond, again, is instructive in clarifying this fact, as he states in his essay 'Dryden: the Classicist as Sceptic': 'it was the literature of Greece and Rome which supplied his mind with much of its language. The mind was by training critical and by instinct sceptical'.³⁰⁵

During the 1680s, the one classical poet who above all exercised his influence on Dryden, inspiring in him a commitment to the sceptical instinct, was Lucretius (c.99-c.55 BCE). In *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius gave a consummate vision of the 'nature of things' (to adopt its translated title) in a very uncertain world. Drawing in his insights on the philosophy of the Greek Epicurus (341-270 BCE), he presents a jointly metaphysical and ethical worldview based on the three fundamental Epicurean assumptions – that the universe is made up of bodies and space (bodies being comprised of atoms, and space being the void which atoms do not occupy), that human perception and knowledge is exclusively sensory, and that the gods have no truck with human affairs.

Dryden, for his part, was increasingly attracted to Lucretius's philosophical conclusions; as Hopkins states, he 'had a long-standing interest in Epicurean atomic theory' and 'the intensification of his engagement with Lucretius in the 1680s was part of a larger body of religio-

³⁰⁴ *Dryden and the Traces of Classical Rome*, pp. 218-19.

³⁰⁵ Paul Hammond, 'John Dryden: The Classicist as Sceptic', *Seventeenth Century*, 4 (1989), 165-87 (p. 165).

philosophical stocktaking' where 'Christian and pagan elements came into various kinds of complex and paradoxical interaction'.³⁰⁶ For much of this chapter I will examine how Dryden exploits these, and explore how he makes Lucretius's voice his own in his translation of *De Rerum Natura*. Firstly, though, I examine how Dryden's contemporaries responded to Lucretius: from the Interregnum to the late seventeenth century, when the laureate finally turned to him, Lucretius had been read and interpreted in many different ways, and by defining his understanding of what Lucretius had to offer against these other responses, the value of Dryden's paraphrase art may be appreciated as a device with genuinely (and to this end, mature) sceptical vitality.

Rejected by Aristotelians because of its atomism, and Christian theologians because of its atheism, the Epicurean system was revived and Christianised by the early seventeenth-century French philosopher Pierre Gassendi.³⁰⁷ According to Popkin, Gassendi had sought to revise the unremitting Pyrrhonism of his contemporaries by 'seeking a *via media* between Pyrrhonism and Dogmatism'; this he found in 'his tentative hypothetical formulation of Epicurean atomism, a formulation which, in many respects, comes close to the empiricism of modern British philosophy'.³⁰⁸ Taking his lead directly from Gassendi's approach, Walter Charleton translated the extant fragments of *Epicurus's Morals* (1656) (deliberately avoiding the more contentious materialism of his metaphysics) with what he saw as a requisite degree of sceptical openness. The following is in his preface, 'An Apology for Epicurus':

³⁰⁶ 'The English Voices of Lucretius from Hutchinson to John Mason Good', p. 259.

³⁰⁷ Lucretius had had no real place in the earlier Christian canon of classical wisdom. But for two merely circumstantial allusions, for example, Augustine found little use for him in his *City of God*. See Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. by Henry Betterson (London: Penguin, 2003).

³⁰⁸ Popkin, p. 100.

First, I dare say, his *Piety*, in deriding the incompetency of those Conceptions, that men in his time commonly entertained of the supream Essence (for they ascribed generally unto it, all the selfe same passions and affections, which they perceived to be in themselves, and so copied out an imperfect Divinity, by the infinitely disproportionate Originall of Humanity) was much greater then his *Impiety* could be, in teaching, that the Deity was of so transcendently excellent a nature, as to be wholly unconcern'd in anything but it selfe, and far above all sentiments whatever, besides those of its own eternall and compleat Felicity; and consequently, that it was to be reverenc'd and worshiped solely and purely for its own sake, without the least mixture of selfe-Reflections.³⁰⁹

On the subject of a supreme essence, Charleton allows Epicurus the benefit of an ancient philosopher's doubt, applauding him for refusing to anthropomorphise the deity in the absence of divine revelation and honouring his recognition of God's transcendental nature – in short, he gives Epicurus his fideistic due. What he identifies in Epicurus is a kind of mitigated scepticism that will come to exemplify his own, insofar as he deals with the unknowable things of the material world whilst recognising the limits of materialist philosophy in the pre-Christian society of Hellenistic Greece: 'with what justice our Epicurus is so highly condemned [...] when he could steer the course of his judgment and beliefe by no other Starre, but that remote and pale one of the Light of Nature'.³¹⁰

With *Immortality of the Human Soul* – a dialogue between Lucretius, Athanasius (a Christian theologian from the patristic period) and the fictional Isodicastes – which was printed the following year in 1657, Charleton turns his attention specifically to Lucretius and develops his sceptical range. Indeed, the 'use of dialogue', as Barbour puts it, 'suits Charleton's promotion of an eirenic, moderately sceptical, and sociable exchange among learned gentlemen'.³¹¹ More than this, though, Charleton draws parallels between the political conflicts in the late Roman Republic

³⁰⁹ *Epicurus's Morals Collected Partly out of His Owne Greek Text* (London, 1656), pp. 14-15.

³¹⁰ *Epicurus's Morals*, pp. 6-7.

³¹¹ Reid Barbour, 'Moral and Political Philosophy: Readings of Lucretius from Virgil to Voltaire', in *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, pp. 149-66 (p. 159).

of Lucretius's day, and the political problems of his own times. As David West observes, where Epicurus's philosophical aim was generally concentrated upon the hedonistic pursuit of 'peace of mind', Lucretius's poem was composed with the underlying intention of saving 'men from the superstitious fears and political ambitions which could destroy that peace'.³¹² To read the poem in its original context: initial conflict over land reform in Rome had led to civil war between the ideologically opposed *optimates* and *populares* (simply defined, the aristocrats and the populists).³¹³ All the orthodoxies of the old regime declined quickly and Julius Caesar, the *novus homo*, or 'new man', prevailed as dictator over Rome, ending the Republic and beginning a new unprecedented period of empire. Inevitably, this transitional phase in Roman politics led to wholesale intellectual anxiety, and, for Lucretius, Epicurean philosophy offered the most appropriate consolation.³¹⁴ For Charleton, Lucretius could, to quote Barbour again, be used to teach the seventeenth century about 'immortality and providence, not least in the claim that the divine purpose of the civil war involved a disenchantment with theology and law that has promoted the advancement of natural knowledge'.³¹⁵ Accordingly, his discourse is as much political as philosophical:

And, as for your singular Humanity, and generous inclination to oblige, by doing good offices; the happy experience I have had of that, hath long since confirmed me, that, if there be any such thing as a perfect Friend left in the World, certainly you are that thing, where once you are pleas'd to professe a Dearenesse. But, why do I injure my selfe, in deferring that content, this faire opportunity offers me, in your conversation; while I endeavour to prevent your further profession of that sincerity and truth, I long ago knew to be inherent and essentiall to your very Souls? Pray therefore, let me borrow you, for an hour or two, from your meditations or other serious employments, that we may not onely solace our selves, with recalling to mind our ancient Caresses, in the dayes of youth, innocence and peace, and mutually congratulate each others health and safety, after so

³¹² David West, *The Imagery and the Poetry of Lucretius* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), p. vii.

³¹³ See in particular J.D. Minyard *Lucretius and the Late Republic: An Essay in Roman Intellectual History* (Leiden: Brill, 1985), pp. 13-22 and pp. 33-70.

³¹⁴ See W.H.D. Rouse and M.F. Smith's introduction to their translation of *De Rerum Natura*, in *Lucretius, De Rerum Natura* (Harvard University Press, 1966), which notes Lucretius's 'vehement attack' in the context of a 'sick' and 'corrupt' Roman society. (p. xxiii).

³¹⁵ 'Moral and Political Philosophy', p. 159.

many troubles, dangers, and changes of Fortune, as the late Civill Warres in *England* hath driven us upon: but also revive that *quondam* custome of ours, when we were Fellow-Collegiates in *Oxford*, of discoursing freely and calmely of some Argument or other in Philosophy.³¹⁶

Written during the Interregnum, it is of no small consequence that this dialogue is set in Paris, the principal place of exile for the Stuarts and their sympathisers during these years. And punctuating the philosophical debate with political associations that would have been very apparent to seventeenth-century readers (Oxford for instance was staunchly royalist during the civil wars), Charleton's Lucretius is an amiable Royalist, nostalgically recalling the supposedly freer days of pre-Cromwellian England.

However, the real Lucretius could not be fixed to one side of the political divide. Handing down the centuries his response to a society that was torn in two by warring political ideologies, he inspired the Puritan Lucy Hutchinson to provide an almost complete verse translation of *De Rerum Natura*, reflecting, in Norbrook's words, Lucretius's outrage at 'bloody rituals of expiation' and, as Hutchinson herself had stated, her own 'Protestant outrage at literal belief in eucharistic sacrifice'.³¹⁷ Testament to a kind of humanism in her intellectual convictions, Hutchinson's translation, (which only existed in manuscript) has recently provided historians with new insights about Puritan thought generally. Other significant pre-Restoration translators of Lucretius include the diarist and Royalist, John Evelyn, who, like Charleton, had been 'clearly inspired by Pierre Gassendi's recent reassessment of Epicureanism'.³¹⁸

³¹⁶ *The Immortality of the Human Soul, Demonstrated by the Light of Nature in Two Dialogues* (London, 1657), pp. 2-3.

³¹⁷ 'Lucy Hutchinson's Lucretius' (unpublished seminar paper given at Loughborough University, 14 March 2006). Norbrook's insight here refers to Lucretius' general disdain of superstition.

³¹⁸ Hopkins, 'English Voices of Lucretius', p. 256.

After the Restoration, responses to Lucretius and *De Rerum Natura* became more exaggerated, and more controversial. Following, the example of Charleton, the Royal Society member Thomas Creech, for example, translated *De Rerum Natura* in the hope of illuminating its value to science. However, where Charleton displayed an active and putatively objective critical engagement with the text's thoroughgoing atomism, Creech, as he states in the preface to his second edition, held that 'the Epicurean Hypothesis [...] *as it stands opposite to Religion*' must be overthrown by exposing '*a full system of it to publick view*'.³¹⁹ In the course of thirty or so years, opinions about what Lucretius might teach us had clearly changed:

First then a young gentleman (who hath no other pretence to judg of Lucretius, but because he is as mad as He) passionately declaims against the design; tis a venomed pill, and needs a Piety of strong constitution to swallow and digest it: This, methinks, is the most ill contrived Objection that could be railed, it recoils upon this man of Religion, and really accuseth him of all the Impiety [...] It supposeth something of strength in the cavil of an Atheist, tho David hath assured us he is a Fool; and indeed an Atheist must be a downright Sceptick, having (as Cartes observes) no certainty of his first conceptions; and till a wife, [...] and Good Creator be acknowledged, it being impossible to fix any certain Principles of science: And what can we fear of the uncircumsized philistine that carrys a sword against himself? What from his Disputes, when every proposition confutes him, and shows his dependence on that being which he endeavours to deny?³²⁰

There is a sense in which these protests are too excessive to be truly authentic, and as Hopkins finds, Creech himself had 'admitted to loving Lucretius *fere plus aequo* ('almost more than is right')' in the preface to his Latin edition of *De Rerum Natura*.³²¹ Furthermore, not only had an entire generation passed between the composition of *Immortality of the Human Soul* and Creech's first translation of Lucretius, but Creech was a much younger man (twenty-three in 1682) when he took up with the Roman poet: youthful enthusiasm and an eagerness to prove himself a respectable thinker in his own right could well have been defining factors in his

³¹⁹ T. Lucretius Carus the Epicurean Philosopher His Six Books De Natura Rerum Done into English Verse, sig. b2.

³²⁰ Lucretius His Six Books of Epicurean Philosophy and Manilius Translated into English Verse with Notes by Mr Tho. Creech (London, 1700), pp. 2-3.

³²¹ 'English Voices of Lucretius', p. 257.

response. This aside, Creech does seem to view the pre-modern and pre-Christian Epicurean through impossibly myopic contemporary lenses. To condemn Lucretius as an atheist, and a sceptic, on the grounds of recent theoretical science and revealed religion is to overlook the extent to which he himself is enjoying the benefits of discovery and revelation. Genuine scientific investigation seems to be superseded by a potentially counterproductive polemic.

And yet the scepticism and the atheism to which Creech was reacting were very real concerns. As Warren Chernaik shows in his study *Sexual Freedom in Restoration Literature*, libertine poets and playwrights like John Wilmot the Earl of Rochester, Edward Ward and George Etherege were also attracted to Lucretius because to them he exemplified ‘problems implicit in a philosophy of life which denies all restraint and sees men as ruled entirely by the tyranny of their own desires’.³²² In much the same way as Hobbes had apparently done, Lucretian philosophy represented a ‘dream of human freedom, recognised from the outset both as infinitely desirable and as unattainable’.³²³ For Todd, Behn’s response to Creech’s translation contains something of this libertine attitude, inasmuch as her Dedication seems to suggest a similar release from repression: ‘Released by Lucretian philosophy, Reason in her baroque vision has a libidinal, liberating quality playing like Cupid over all including faith’.³²⁴ Viewed from this perspective, Creech may well have been cautious about his translation of *De Rerum Natura* in order to keep his own reputation intact. Certainly, at their most extreme, libertine responses to Lucretius were apt to incite controversy at the mention of the poet’s name; he, like, Hobbes, seemed to have become synonymous with materialism. The following poem, ‘The Libertine’s Choice’ (1704) by

³²² *Sexual Freedom in Restoration Literature*, p.27

³²³ *Sexual Freedom in Restoration Literature*, p. 1.

³²⁴ *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn*, pp. 291-92.

Edward Ward, is a late example of the extent to which Lucretius was appropriated to serve libertine values:

O Great *Lucretius*, thou shalt be my Guide
 Like thee I'll live, and by thy Rules abide:
 Measure my *Pleasures* by my *Appetites*,
 And unconfin'd, pursue the *Worlds* Delights.
 For *liberty* makes every action sweet,
 And Relishes our *Joys*, as *Salt* our Meat [...]
 My Native Freedom, therefore I'll employ
 Chuse what I like, and what I like, Enjoy.³²⁵

Celebrating all forms of indulgence for its own sake (most apparent in the comment of the concluding line – ‘Chuse what I like, and what I like enjoy’), Ward inverts and satirises the Epicurean notion of attaining pleasure by living moderately; his emphasis here on sensual enjoyment is unquestionably ironic, making light of Lucretius’s *a priori* argument that sensory experience is our guide to knowledge.

Not all adaptations of Lucretian Epicureanism by Libertine poets were as falsifying as Ward’s satirical poem suggests. Rochester’s two translations of the opening four lines of Book I and lines 646-51 of Book II of *De Rerum Natura*, for instance, show a greater sensitivity to the original. In the first, the famous invocation to Venus is rendered with an uninhibited sensuousness that was also successful in promoting the world’s delights from a libertine perspective.³²⁶ In the second, the aristocratic amoralist gave a faithful translation of Lucretius’s account of the gods, which gives philosophical justification to the idea of liberty:

The *Gods*, by right of Nature, must possess
 An Everlasting Age, of perfect Peace:
 Far off remov'd from us, and our Affairs:
 Neither approach'd by *Dangers*, or by *Cares*:

³²⁵ Edward Ward, ‘The Libertine’s Choice or, *The Mistaken Happiness of the Fool in Fashion*’ (1704), from *Miscellaneous Writings*, vol. III (London 1712), p.24.

³²⁶ Hopkins, ‘The English Voices of Lucretius’, p. 256.

Rich in themselves, to whom we cannot add:
Not pleas'd by *Good Deeds*; nor provok'd by *Bad*.³²⁷

(I pray to you in peace,]for the very nature of divinity must necessarily enjoy immortal life in the deepest peace, far removed and separated from our affairs; for without any pain, without danger, itself mighty by its own resources, needing us not at all, it is neither propitiated with services nor touched by wrath) (p. 147)³²⁸

Gathered up in its short but perfectly self-contained lines is an entire theology, a moral worldview that neither effaces the conventional moral reference points of 'Good' and 'Bad', nor maintains the gods' importance to human affairs; fundamentally the same as contemporary deism, it is a passage that the author of *Religio Laici* had discreetly ignored.

It should be no surprise, then, that Dryden's responses to Lucretius also come out of a wider current of thought and reflect his own specific preoccupations and beliefs. Almost certainly influenced by Charleton, his first reference to *De Rerum Natura* appears in the preface to *Aureng-Zebe* (1676), that defining text in his *oeuvre* in which he forsakes heroic drama, citing a characteristically Montaignean changeableness. Preferring 'the easiness and quiet of retirement' to the court that has become accustomed to his praise, Dryden finds in Lucretius an epic alternative to his previous ideas about the age's capacity for heroic virtue, which he uses to illustrate his growing restlessness at public life and to justify his retreat from public affairs:

I am sure his Master *Epicurus*, and my better Master *Cowley*, prefer'd the solitude of a Garden, and the conversation of a friend to any consideration, so much as a regard, of those unhappy People, whom in our own wrong, we call the great. True greatness, if it be

³²⁷ John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, *The Works of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, p. 108.

³²⁸ (omnis enim per se divom natura necessesit
immortali aevo summa cum pace fruatur
semota ab nostris rebus seiunctaque longe;
nam privata dolore omni, privata periclis,
ipsa suis pollens opibus, nil indiga nostri,
nec bene promeritis capitur necque tangitur ira.)
(*De Rerum Natura*, II, bk II. 646–51)

On the Nature of Things trans. by W.H.D. Rouse and Martin F. Smith p. 147. This and all other translations of *De Rerum Natura* are taken from Loeb Classical Library edition of *On the Nature of Things*.

any where on Earth, is in a private Virtue; remov'd from the notion of Pomp and Vanity, confin'd to a contemplation of it self, and centring on it self.

Omnis enim per se Divum natura, necesse est
 Immortali aevo summâ cum pace fruatur;
 --- Curâ semota, metuque
 Ipsa suis pollens opibus---

If this be not the life of a Deity, because it cannot consist with Providence; 'tis at least a godlike life: I can be contented, (and I am sure I have your Lordship of my opinion) with an humbler station in the Temple of Virtue, than to be set on the Pinnacle of it. The truth is, the consideration of so vain a Creature as man, is not worth our pains. I have fool enough at home without looking for it abroad: and am a sufficient Theater to my self of ridiculous actions, without expecting company, either in a Court, a Town, or Play-house. 'Tis on this account that I am weary with drawing the deformities of Life, and Lazars of the People, where every figure of imperfection more resembles me than it can do others. If I must be condemn'd to Rhyme, I should find some ease in my change of punishment. I desire to be no longer the *Sisyphus* of the Stage; to rowl up a Stone with endless labour (which to follow the proverb, *gathers no Mosse*) and which is perpetually falling down again. (*Works*, XII, pp. 153-54)³²⁹

Significantly, Dryden uses the language of heroic literature and that of the theatre against itself. True greatness and virtue – the kind of qualities that are typically won and tested in the public arena (on a battlefield or in court) – are now the preserve of a quietly contemplative life. The models of virtue that Dryden had attempted to promote through his own stage heroes (Aureng-Zebe being the last after Montezeuma and Almanzor) are now entirely recast so that the human-being – a vain creature through and through – may only redress some of the deformities and imperfections that burdens him or her by recognising his or her own hopeless predicament when compared with the private life of God, so that the act of retirement itself constitutes enlightenment. Obscuring the distinctions he makes between himself and those he observes around him, Dryden, it can be said, is following Montaigne's model of scepticism, inasmuch as he holds a mirror up to himself in order to observe the vices that afflict the whole of humankind;

³²⁹ For translation of the Latin see previous footnote.

almost as if in retiring from public life (which Montaigne had also famously done to write his *Essays*) he is making of himself a kind of scapegoat that seeks redemption in its own isolation.

The comparison of his career as a dramatist to Sisyphus in the concluding lines of this extract is the only reference in which Dryden's awareness does not implicate the court, the town or the people around him: he not only recognises the load that burdens him, weighing him down without respite, as his own, but he identifies it as emblematic of a more general dissatisfaction with the demands of the stage and the tyranny of rhyme. However, when he turns his attention to *De Rerum Natura* in earnest, Dryden completely redraws this provisional line of distinction. In his own rendering of Lucretius' portrait of Sisyphus, which appears in Book III of *De Rerum Natura*, 'Against the Fear of Death', the Greek anti-hero (Sisyphus was renowned for his cunning) is every much the public figure, standing for anyone but the Lucretian speaker, and, we can assume, Dryden himself. Here, significantly, is a characteristic example of Dryden permitting himself 'more liberty than a just translation will allow' to bolster his own belief in private virtue:

The Sisyphus is he, whom noise and strife
 Seduce from all the soft retreats of life,
 To vex the government, disturb the laws,
 Drunk with the fumes of popular applause;
 He courts the giddy crowd to make him great,
 And sweats and toils in vain to mount the sovereign seat.
 For still to aim at power, and still to fail,
 Ever to strive and never to prevail,
 What is it, but in reason's true account
 To heave the stone against the rising mount;
 Which urged, and laboured, and forced up with pain,
 Recoils and rolls impetuous down, and smokes along the plain?
 (*Poems*, II, bk III, 326; 200-11)

(Sisyphus also appears in this life before our eyes, athirst to solicit from the people the lictor's rods and cruel axes, and always retiring defeated and full of gloom: for to solicit

power, an empty thing, which is never granted, and always to endure hard toil in the pursuit of it, this is to push laboriously up a hill the rock that still rolls down again from the very top, and in a rush recovers the levels of the open plain.) (p. 267)³³⁰

One need hardly read this translation in the context of the preface to *Aureng-Zebe* to recognise that the vices of public life expressed in these lines contain a distinctly Drydenian flavour. In the original, the vanity of soliciting power, the suffering it creates and the emptiness of its rewards, are only given in general terms: worldly success, Lucretius is saying, is achieved at such a cost that the promised stability eludes the aspirant, and always will. In Dryden's translation, the essence of this largely metaphysical statement cannot easily be considered apart from his own seventeenth-century inflections: the vexed government, a disturbance of the laws, and a giddy crowd, drunk with the fumes of popular applause, is the rhetoric of royalist Exclusion crisis propaganda; in fact, these are words that directly recall the 'public zeal' (181) and 'listening crowds' (211) of 'giddy Jews' (216) exploited by Dryden's Achitophel when he makes his claims to power in his speech in lines 180-476 of *Absalom and Achitophel*.³³¹ Clearly, like Hutchinson and Rochester, and to a lesser extent like Charleton, Dryden is making Lucretius speak for him. To the Roman poet's philosophical insight he adds political discontent, presenting, in the process, a public which, against the Epicurean example, can only be deplored.

³³⁰ (Sisyphus in vita quoque nobis ante oculos est,
 qui petere a populo fascas saevasque secures
 imbibit et semper victus tristisque recedit.
 nam petere imperium quod inanest nec datur umquam,
 atque in eo semper durum sufferre laborem,
 hoc est adverso nixantem trudere monte
 saxum quod tamen e summo iam vertice rursum
 volvitur et plani raptim petit aequora campi.)
 (*De Rerum Natura*, bk III, 266; 995-1003)

³³¹ See chapter three.

This is not to say, however, that Dryden is invoking Lucretius to promote social and political cohesion, as the practitioner of mitigating scepticism might do. In the first place, *De Rerum Natura* offers no authority figure worthy of praise that might balance his criticism of public life; Epicurus, who is revered by Lucretius, is at a very far remove from the warrior King David who doubles as Charles II in *Absalom and Achitophel*. As such, and very deliberately if we keep the preface to *Aureng-Zebe* in view, Dryden's aestheticised detachment is meant to be interpreted as absolute withdrawal from the world of affairs. As Hammond observes, 'Dryden is using Lucretius when he turns away from his public role to seek again the roots of his own nature'³³². Giving a more topical subtext to the largely generic and abstract original, Dryden's translation of lines 93-97 of Book IV, 'Concerning the Nature of Love' implies that heroic virtue of the Davidian kind is well lost:

They waste their strength in the venereal strife,
And to a woman's will enslave their life;
The estate runs out, and mortgages are made,
All offices of friendship are decayed,
Their fortune ruined, and their fame betrayed.
(*Poems*, II, bk IV, 337; 94-98)

(Add this also, that they consume their strength and kill themselves with the labour: add this, that one lives at the beck of another. Duties are neglected, good name totters and sickens. Meanwhile wealth vanishes [...]) (p. 363)³³³

To a king who produced many illegitimate children but no legitimate heir, to the many courtiers (not excluding Dryden) who had taken mistresses in and out of the theatre, even to Rochester, who, if contemporary speculation is to be believed, had dissolved his friendship (or at least affable acquaintance) with Dryden by ordering the laureate poet to be beaten over a seeming

³³² *Dryden and the Traces of Classical Rome*, p. 4.

³³³ (Adde quod absumunt viris pereuntque labore,
adde quod alterius sub nutu degitur aetas.
languent official atque aegrotat fama vacillans.
Labitur interea [...])
(*De Rerum Natura*, bk IV, 363; 1121-23)

slight, these words would have been unsettling. Symptomatic of the ‘lubric and adulterate age’ (Poems, III, 10; 63) that was, with Anne Killigrew, mourned in the ode dedicated to her, they equate decadence and ruin with a kind of unthinking carnality. Far from translating Lucretius exclusively for himself, Dryden was using the language of the Roman poet in order to put to work a ‘sceptical, dialogic intelligence’ on the arguments of the libertines in his acquaintance, recognising them here by their royalism, or, at least, by the trappings of aristocratic affluence.³³⁴ The addition of estates run out, mortgages being made, in connection with *fama vacillans* or ‘fame betrayed’, certainly suggests a class distinction more prominent than the neutral term *officia* or ‘duties’ in the source text. If Dryden were challenging such thinkers, he has already used Lucretius against them, celebrating, in Book II, the nobility of honest poverty; although this moment precedes lines 94-98 of Book IV, it can, nonetheless, be read in conjunction with them:

[...] vain fools ambitiously contend
 For wit and power, their lost endeavours bend
 T’ outshine each other, waste their time and health
 In search of honour, and pursuit of wealth.
 O wretched man! in what a mist of life,
 Enclosed with dangers and with noisy strife
 He spends his little span, and overfeeds
 His crammed desires with more than nature needs:
 For nature wisely stints our appetite,
 And craves no more than undisturbed delight,
 Which minds unmixed with cares and fears obtain,
 A soul serene, a body void of pain.
 So little this corporeal frame requires,
 So bounded are our natural desires,
 That wanting all, and setting pain aside,
 With bare privation sense is satisfied.
 (Poems, II, bk II, 313-14; 12-27)

([...] the strife of wits, the fight for precedence, all labouring night and day with surpassing toil to mount upon the pinnacle of riches and to lay hold on power. O pitiable minds of men, O blind intelligences! In what gloom of life, in how great perils is passed all your span of time! not to see that all nature barks for is this, that pain be removed away out of the body, and that the mind, kept away from care and fear, enjoy a feeling of

³³⁴ Paul Hammond, ‘Dryden, Milton, and Lucretius’, *Seventeenth Century*, 16 (2001), 158-76 (p.167).

delight! Therefore we see that few things altogether are necessary for the bodily nature, only such in each case as take pain away, and can also spread for our use many delights; nor does nature herself ever crave anything more pleasurable). (p. 95)³³⁵

Epicurean ideals (temperance, moderation, the pursuit of undisturbed delight and avoidance of pain to these ends) are obvious enough here, and, in being obvious, were meant alone to suffice as a counterclaim to anyone that might call on Lucretius in the name of an unthinking hedonism. However, the word ‘appetite’ (a more specific rendering of *corpoream ad naturam*) in line 20 betrays Dryden’s contemporary critical agenda. Made controversial by the first Book of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, ‘Of Man’, this word became a powerful signifier in libertine poetry, as in ‘Measure my *Pleasures* by my *Appetites*’ in Ward’s poem above, or ‘Your Reason hinders, mine helps to enjoy, / Renewing appetites yours would destroy’ in Rochester’s ‘A Satyre against Reason and Mankind’ (1675).³³⁶ Quite apart from the superficial philosophical mockery to which Ward and Rochester might be pandering, the appetite is to them a defining passion – the rule and reason – of human nature, and to repress it is to deny body and mind indulgences which, they proclaim, is humankind’s existential entitlement. To Dryden here, ‘our appetite’ jeopardises the quiet repose that human nature finds (can only find in Epicurean philosophy) in its natural

³³⁵ (certare ingenio, contendere nobilitate,
noctes atque dies niti praestante labore
ad summas emergere opes rerumque potiri!
o miseras hominum mentes, o pectora caeca!
qualibus in tenebris vitae quantisque periculis
degitur hoc aevi quodcumque! nonne videre
nil aliud sibi naturam latrare, nisi utqui
corpore seiunctus dolor-absit, mensque fruatur
iucundo sensu cura semota metuque?
Ergo corpoream ad naturam pauca videmus
esse opus omnino, quae demant cumque dolorem,
delicias quoque uti multas substernere possint;
gratius interdum neque natura ipsa requirit,
si non aurea sunt iuvenum simulacra per aedes
lampadas igniferas minibus retinentia dextris.)
(*De Rerum Natura*, bk II, 94-95; 11-25)

³³⁶ *The Works of John Wilmot Earl of Rochester*, p. 60.

state. Conveying this with such a familiar term, he reinforces the contrast between the public life (the society of ambitious contention) and the life of privations, where sense is satisfied by itself.

Interestingly, and despite their fundamental differences, both Dryden here and the libertines appear to be writing according to the sceptical impulse that was started by Montaigne. Rochester, for instance, begins *A Satyre against Reason and Mankind* by renouncing his humanity: 'I'de be a Dog, a Monky, or a Bear / Or any thing but that vain Animal / Who is so proud of being Rational' (5-7), which directly recalls the criticism of man in *Apology for Sebond*: 'Let him make me understand by the force of his reason, upon what foundations he has built those great advantages he thinks he has over other creatures'.³³⁷ Had Rochester identified targets categorically outside himself then his poem would have seemed more like a social satire, yet as his opening couplet regretfully reports: 'I [...] to my cost already am/ One of those strange, prodigious Creatures, Man' (1-2). Equally, whilst the conceit of human wishes is a theme that is implicit in *De Rerum Natura*, Dryden's decision to translate *o miseras hominum mentes*, or 'O pitiable minds of men', into the singular case ('O wretched Man!) invites us to regard the afflictions of humanity as universal in a way that (to keep the *Apology* in mind) is more of greater contemporary relevance than Lucretius's original lines. Small modifications of this kind may seem too incidental to mean very much, but the generic 'He' reflects a characteristically epistemological frame of reference. Sustaining the rhetorical effect over the succeeding three lines, Dryden's shift in number reveals that he was in part thinking in these terms, adding a much sharper philosophical insight to social observation by treading the same ground as Montaigne (and indeed, Hobbes) whose philosophical conclusions derive from an unflattering evaluation of the rational animal. When Dryden selected for translation his one passage of Book V of *De*

³³⁷ *The Works of John Wilmot Earl of Rochester*, p. 60, and Montaigne, pp. 130-31.

Rerum Natura, a book that primarily addresses the Epicurean cosmological worldview, it was this theme again that he singled out for special attention:

Thus like a sailor by the tempest hurled
 Ashore, the babe is shipwrecked on the world:
 Naked he lies, and ready to expire,
 Helpless of all that human wants require;
 Exposed upon unhospitable earth
 From the first moment of his hapless birth.
 Straight with foreboding cries he fills the room,
 Too true presages of his future doom.
 But flocks, and herds, and every savage beast
 By more indulgent Nature are increased.
 (*Poems*, II, bk V, 345; 1-10)

(Then further the child, like a sailor cast forth by the cruel waves, lies naked upon the ground, speechless, in need of every kind of vital support, as soon as nature has spilt him forth with throes from his mother's womb into the regions of light, and he fills all around with doleful wailings – as is but just, seeing that so much trouble awaits him in life to pass through. But the diverse flocks and herds grow, and wild creatures; they need no rattles, none of them wants to hear the coaxing and broken baby-talk of the foster-nurse, they seek no change of raiment according to the temperature of the season, lastly they need no weapons, no lofty walls to protect their own, since for them all the earth herself brings forth all they want in abundance, and nature the cunning fashioner of things). (pp. 395-97)³³⁸

Isolated from a discussion of the evolution of human society, which is its original context this passage speaks for itself.

³³⁸ (Tum porro puer, ut saevis proiectus ab undis
 navita, nudus humi iacet, infans, indigus omni
 vitali auxilio, cum primum in luminis oras
 nixibus ex alvo matris natura profudit
 vagituque locum lugubri complet, ut aequumst
 cui tantum in vita restet transpire malorum.
 at variae crescent pecudes armenta feraeque,
 nec crepitacillis opus est, nec cuiquam adhibendast
 almae nutricis blanda atque infracta loquella,
 nec varias quaerunt vestes pro tempore caeli,
 denique non armis opus est, non moenibus altis,
 qui sua tutentur, quando omnibus omnia large
 tellus ipsa parit naturaque daedala rerum.)
 (*De Rerum Natura*, bk V, 394-96; 222-34)

Inevitably though, in reading Dryden's translations of Books II and IV of *De Rerum Natura* alongside libertine poetry, and more specifically, alongside libertine appropriations of Lucretian thought, we discover that the sceptical tendencies of them both are working against each other; indeed, the differences of the two approaches are fundamental – the one relying on premises that the other vehemently denies. This deadlock could not be broken; yet, arguably, neither was the situation forced. If Dryden did truly intend his selections to serve as a critique of libertine poets and philosophers (even if, in a very general sense, this was a critique of individuals whom he identified with the social climate he shunned), it might be supposed that he was tempted to underwrite the spirit of Lucretius's secularism with Christian certainty, that is, to continue, where philosophy stops, with the convictions of faith. Particular moments in the translations are predisposed to such readings. The interpolation 'And to women's will enslave their life' in line 94 of Book II above, for example, is more in keeping with the Book of Proverbs than the generally gender-neutral Epicurean claims: 'Give not thy strength unto women, nor thy ways to that which destroyeth kings' (31:3). Also suggestive is Dryden's translation of *mensque* or mind, into soul in line 23 of Book II, a change which, as some important commentators have proposed, suggests a 'Christianizing of Lucretius'.³³⁹ Though of themselves not expressions of faith, these instances show how elements of Lucretian thought, if probed, can be made to dovetail with Christian beliefs. And as Dryden's friend, Charleton, had demonstrated (albeit unconsciously) in his dialogue between Lucretius and Athanasius in *Immortality of the Human Soul*, they could prove a powerful theological weapon against the atheism of many seventeenth-century materialists.

³³⁹ Notably, the Californian editors of Dryden's works; Hammond challenges the reading, see 'The Integrity of Lucretius', *MLR*, 78 (1983), 1-23 (p.8).

However, Dryden – ever conscious of the spirit of the original author – had chosen to be more faithful to the aesthetics of *De Rerum Natura*. In the preface to *Sylvae* he had complained that Lucretius ‘was so much an atheist, that he forgot sometimes to be a poet’, and in order to do his ‘character’ justice, ‘I laid by my natural diffidence and scepticism for a while, to take up that dogmatical way of his’ (*Poems* II, p. 247). In contrast to Edward Ward, for whom Lucretius was all dogma, representing a materialism so absolute that it was beyond Christian scrutiny, and in contrast to Charleton’s for whom he was all metaphysics, representing an ancient view which, though it may be admired for its own sake, was not in the end intended to endure Christian scrutiny, Dryden turned Lucretian Epicureanism over in his own mind and found other dimensions. Recognising that these were worth expressing, he lets Lucretius reason according to his Roman premises. The rewards are most evident in the translations of the metaphysical arguments of the latter part of Book III, ‘Against the Fear of Death’. In the opening lines of these passages, a number of references to the soul are made, yet here they throw both Libertine responses and strictly Christian re-readings of *De Rerum Natura* into distinctively sharp relief:

What has this bugbear death to frighten man,
 If souls can die, as well as bodies can?
 For, as before our birth we felt no pain
 When Punic arms infested Land and main,
 When heaven and earth were in confusion hurled
 For the debated empire of the world,
 Which awed with dreadful expectation lay,
 Sure to be slaves, uncertain who should sway:
 So, when our mortal frame shall be disjoined,
 The lifeless lump uncoupled from the mind,
 From sense of grief and pain we shall be free;
 We shall not feel, because we shall not *be*.
 Though earth in seas, and seas in heaven were lost,
 We should not move, we only should be tossed.
 Nay, ev'n suppose when we have suffered fate,
 The soul could feel in her divided state,
 What's that to us? for we are only we
 While souls and bodies in one frame agree.

(*Poems*, II, bk III, 317; 1-18)

(Therefore death is nothing to us, it matters not one jot, since the nature of the mind is understood to be mortal; and as in time past we felt no distress, while from all quarters the Carthaginians were coming to the conflict, when the whole world, shaken by the terrifying tumult of war, shivered and quaked under the lofty and breezy heaven, and was in doubt under which domination all men were destined to fall by land or sea; so, when we shall no longer be, when the parting shall have come about between body and spirit from which we are compacted into one whole, then sure enough nothing at all will be able to happen to us, who will be commingled with sea and sea with sky). (p. 253)³⁴⁰

Anyone in the seventeenth century familiar with *De Rerum Natura* would not be shocked by the heresy implicit in *animi mortalis* in the first couplet; more accurately translated as ‘mortal spirit’ (from which mortal soul is readily inferred), such terms play directly into the hands of Creech and other believers who meant to discredit the philosopher on the grounds of his paganism. What does come as a surprise is the occasion Dryden gives these words: exploiting the force of a rhetorical question, he not only confirms but emphasises a determined *froidueur* of limited hope. And yet, despite the confidence of Dryden’s phrasing, the question posed remains open, allowing for the opposite reading. Had the conjunction of the second line begun with ‘when’ or ‘since’ instead of the conditional ‘if’, then the final effect would have seemed much more like a statement of fact, that is the *a priori* argument that the original intended to be, as in the Longman footnote to this line: ‘*since* the nature of the mind [or ‘soul’] *is* understood to be mortal’.³⁴¹ That Dryden adds to the original a distinction between the body and soul and uses the verb ‘can’ (the

³⁴⁰ (Nil igitur mors est ad nos neque pertinent hilum,
quandoquidem natura animi mortalis habetur;
et, velut anteacto nil tempore sensimus aegri,
ad confligendum venientibus undique Poenis,
omnia cum belli trepido concussa tumultu
horridas contremuere sub altis aetheris auris,
in dubioque fuere utrorum ad regna cadendum
omnibus humanis esset terraque marique,
sic, ubi non erimus, cum corporis atque animai
discidum fuerit, quibus e sumus uniter apti,
scilicet haud nobis quicquam, qui non erimus tum,
accidere omino poterit sensumque movere.)
(*De Rerum Natura*, bk III, 253; 830-41)

³⁴¹ *Poems* II, p. 317fn. My italics.

second time to qualify ‘man’ as well as ‘body’), instead of the decidedly affirmative alternative ‘do’, only adds to the uncertainty. Of course, reading on, we discover that Dryden cannot entirely resist the spirit of the Lucretian voice; we recognise the Roman by his references to classical history, by the uncompromising declaration of non-being in line 12 and by the second rhetorical question, which, although translated in a way that is not closed to the possibility of the soul’s existence as some other ‘we’ outside of the mortal frame, does not imply the same paradox as the opening couplet.

However, the double perspective that is established at the beginning of these translations is the first of a pattern. As in Books II and IV and his preface to *Aureng-Zebe*, Dryden singles out the lifestyle of many of his contemporaries for particular criticism, bringing Lucretius’s references to history up to date in lines 95-107. Yet where in those books he makes a specifically topical complaint, here the contemporary focus serves the metaphysical ends of *De Rerum Natura* in a much more meaningful way. Extrapolating from Lucretius’s largely abstract admonishments, Dryden opines:

The worst that can befall thee, measured right,
 Is a sound slumber, and a long good night.
 Yet thus the fools, that would be thought the wits,
 Disturb their mirth with melancholy fits,
 When healths go round, and kindly brimmers flow,
 Till the fresh garlands on their foreheads glow,
 They whine, and cry, ‘Let us make haste to live,
 Short are the joys that human life can give’.
 Eternal preachers, that corrupt the draught,
 And pall the god that never thinks, with thought;
 Idiots with all that thought, to whom the worst
 Of death is want of drink, and endless thirst,
 Or any fond desire as vain as these.
 For ev’n in sleep, the body wrapt in ease,
 Supinely lies, as in the peaceful grave,
 And wanting nothing, nothing can it crave.

Were that sound sleep eternal it were death,
 Yet the first atoms then, the seeds of breath
 Are moving near to sense, we do but shake
 And rouse that sense, and straight we are awake.
 (*Poems*, II, bk III, 321-22; 95-114)

This also is the way among men, when they have laid themselves down at table and hold goblets in their hands and shade their brows with garlands, that they often say from their hearts: ‘Short enjoyment is given to poor mankind; soon it will be gone, and none will be able to recall it.’ As if after death their chief trouble will be to be miserably consumed and parched by a burning thirst, or a craving possess them for some other thing! In fact, no one feels the want of himself and his life when both mind and body alike are quiet in sleep; for all we care that sleep might be everlasting, and no craving for ourselves touches us at all. (p. 259-60)³⁴²

Again, Dryden’s language seems to generate a tension in the text. The translation of ‘worst that can befall thee, measured right’ softens the general Epicurean claim in Book III that ‘a sound slumber and a long good night’ is the only outcome of death. The suggestive term ‘measured right’ exposes the reasoning at the heart of *De Rerum Natura* to explicit doubt (contrast with ‘Measure my *Pleasures* by my *Appetites*’ from Ward’s poem above). Similarly, the superlative ‘worst’ presupposes comparison; this cannot be regarded as a merely figurative inflection, for reading a philosophy that deals with absolutes, we should expect to see here ‘best’, the opposite extreme. At this moment in the meditation, the argument seems as much concerned with uncertainties about as it is with the fear of mortality, thus offering a degree of latitude in interpretation not strictly countenanced by the equivalent lines in the original.

³⁴² (Hoc etiam faciunt ubi discubere tenentque
 pocula saepe homines et inumbrant ora coronis,
 ex animo ut dicant: “brevis hic est fructus homullis;
 iam fuerit neque post umquam revocare licebit.”
 Tamquam in morte mali cum primis hoc sit corum,
 quod sitis exurat miseros atque arida torrat,
 aut aliae cuius desiderium insideat rei.
 nec sibi enim quisquam tum se vitamque requirit.
 Cum pariter mens et corpus sopita quiescent;
 Nam licet aeternum per nos sic esse soporem.)
 (*De Rerum Natura*, bk III, 258-60; 912-15)

But it is the addition of the wits and eternal preachers – those ‘idiots’ who believed that deep thought and consideration were beside the point of living well – that is most striking. Qualifying the general picture with new examples, Dryden refreshes the power of his source, enhancing the timelessness of the original argument by anchoring it in present history. Such examples, considered against a previous time (and the previous line) ‘When heaven and earth were in confusion hurled / For the debated empire of the world’, not only rescue Lucretius from libertine distortions of his philosophy; they rescue him from the charge of mere atheistic reckoning that might be imputed to him by Christian readers like Creech. Shortly afterwards the significance of this becomes fully apparent:

Consider former ages past and gone,
 Whose circles ended long ere thine begun,
 Then tell me fool, what part in them thou hast?
 Thus may'st thou judge the future by the past.
 (*Poems*, II, bk III, 324-25; 175-78)

Dryden transcends Lucretius and history altogether to find a position outside of the argument against death with the addition of line 176. Circumscribing history in this way ultimately destabilises the didacticism of the poem. *De Rerum Natura* relies on a belief in human progression which implies that history must be conceived as linear. If all, by contrast, is circular, how do we escape coming back on ourselves? Accentuating the sense of oblivion without some of that consolation found in Lucretius, Dryden’s rendering of these lines emphasises the correspondence between loss and gain. Read with this in mind, Dryden’s translation of what are probably Lucretius’s most memorable lines seem especially empowering; like the Pyrrhonic philosophy attributed to Dryden by Bredvold, their force of conviction consists in the concept of *ataraxia*, or serenity of thought, which is specifically associated with resignation:

'Tis pleasant safely to behold from shore
 The rolling ship, and hear the tempest roar:
 Not that another's pain is our delight,
 But pains unfelt produce the pleasing sight.
 'Tis pleasant also to behold from far
 The moving legions mingled in the war;
 But much more sweet thy labouring steps to guide
 To virtue's heights, with wisdom well supplied,
 And all the magazines of learning fortified[.]
 (*Poems*, II, bk II, 1-9)³⁴³

PLEASANT it is, when on the great sea the winds trouble the waters, to gaze from the shore upon another's great tribulation: not because any man's troubles are a delectable joy, but because to perceive what ills are free from yourself is pleasant. Pleasant is it also to behold great encounters of warfare arrayed over plains, with no part of yours in the peril. But nothing is more delightful than to possess lofty sanctuaries serene, well fortified by the teachings of the wise. (p. 95)

It is telling that Lucretius's detail of at least temporary security – that *templa serena* is more present in Dryden's version. It is also noteworthy that Creech's version omits much of the attainment of philosophical detachment for a rather smug self-congratulation: 'tis sweet to see / Those Cares and Fears, from which we our selves are free' and 'tis pleasantest to get / The top of high *Philosophy*' not for the self-awareness that might follow, but rather to regard 'poor mistaken *Mortals*' from a 'calm, peaceful, flourishing head' of perceptual superiority.³⁴⁴ With respect but no envy for those caught in the thick of social and political conflict, Dryden's version promotes the supremacy of wisdom; the tropes of war (moving legions, and magazines, or store, of human knowledge) all serve to illustrate this end, suggesting, as they do, that learning,

³⁴³ (SUAVE, mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis,
 e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem;
 non quia vexari quemquamst iucunda voluptas,
 sed quibus ipse malis careas quia cernere sauae est.
 suave etiam belli certamina magna tueri
 per campos instructa tua sine parte pericli.
 sed nil dulcius est bene quam munita tenere
 edita doctrina sapientum templa serena.)
 (*De Rerum Natura*, bk II, 94; 1-13)

³⁴⁴ *Lucretius His Six Books of Epicurean Philosophy and Manilius Translated into English Verse*, p. 35.

tactically deployed, is our only security for peace of mind. Viewed from the perspective of Dryden's political and philosophical reflections, though, the imagery used by Lucretius to demonstrate his point seems uncanny. In *Astraea Redux*, Dryden associated the unpredictability of the sea with the dangers of public life; in *Annus Mirabilis*, the sea was associated with nationhood, discovery and conquest. Using this familiar motif here once more, Dryden was making a largely new argument, namely that true happiness, true knowledge, is but intellectual resignation. Through the act of translating Lucretius he was enjoying equally the safety of a distant shore and the sanctuary of his ivory watchtower of classical learning.

Although seventeenth-century responses to *De Rerum Natura*, and Epicurean philosophy in general, primarily derive their effect from parallels between two similar cultural perspectives, the overall ethical impact upon their contemporary audience should for the most part be considered in its own terms. Any hypothesis, however vague or veiled, that predicts the victory of secular self-independence over a dominant Christian belief system has a number of serious moral and aesthetic implications – as libertine responses to Lucretius demonstrate. More importantly in an evaluation of philosophical and theological hegemonies, such an exploration of secular impulses raises doubts about the largely unquestioned assumptions of reason, as Rochester and to a lesser extent Behn reveal. Insofar as he entertained philosophical arguments as compelling as Epicureanism without being seduced by them, Dryden seemed to typify the Pyrrhonic habit of thought in the early 1680s. Indeed, the suppleness of intellect required to capture the vitality of Lucretius suggests ease, detachment, in short, a kind of informed indifference. The virtue of this position lies in its variety and guise of urbane awareness – an ability to take in worldly aspiration without being enslaved by it. With an emphasis that is at once aesthetic, metaphysical and

pragmatic, Lucretian Epicureanism gave him that flexibility. As Emrys Jones has speculated, Lucretius' identity 'may have seemed to him, a very fluid one', and through his time spent translating *De Rerum Natura* he may have attempted to resolve an intellectual ambivalence by becoming 'for a time someone whose sense of self was more stable than his own, more aggressively or obdurately fixed'.³⁴⁵ This was especially necessary given the immense difficulties Dryden perceived in tracing a consistency in any accepted political – and occasionally religious – practice. By speaking through a Lucretian mask, he may have hoped to hear something of his true self at a time when, in Winn's words, he was 'seeking a new direction'.³⁴⁶ Reflecting the political and religious climate changing around him, his interpretation of the Epicurean world of flux ultimately allowed him to formulate an alternative identity to that of public poet; as I shall show in the next chapter this new identity would be central to his survival as a poet.

³⁴⁵ Emrys Jones 'A Perpetual Torrent': Dryden's Lucretian Style', in *Augustan Studies Essays in Honor of Irvin Ehrenpreis* ed. by Douglas Lane Patey and Timothy Keegan (Newark and London: Delaware University Press, 1985), p. 51.

³⁴⁶ Winn, p. 405.

The Classical Consolation: Dryden's Translations of Juvenal and Persius

This chapter considers Dryden's translations of the 1690s, concentrating specifically on Juvenal's (c.60-c.140CE) third and tenth satires, and Persius's (34-62CE) first and second satires, all of which were published in *The Satires of Decimus Junius Juvenalis* (1693). These Roman works are among a number of classical poems that preoccupied Dryden in the final decade of his life; written in the early phase of the Roman Empire – a time of accelerated social and cultural change – they clearly offered interesting and relevant sites of comparison with Britain after the revolution of 1688. Equally, these texts reflect changes in Dryden's personal convictions, particularly in matters relating to the transfer of power from James II to William and Mary, and to the role of public poetry under the new regime. As I explained in an earlier chapter, Dryden's refusal to swear an oath of allegiance to the new monarchy resulted in the humiliating loss of his public posts – his laureateship and his position as Historiographer Royal. Besides procuring him an alternative source of income, translation literature gave the dispossessed poet a valuable new space – away from the contemporary political scene – in which to redirect his creative energies and intellectual impulses; it also gave him the disguise of other voices, allowing him to exorcise the discontents he had about post-revolutionary England, and it gave him the means of exploring ideas not bound by the parameters of conventional political and religious assumptions.

Building on the argument of my previous chapter, I shall show that translation literature was a crucial medium of sceptical self-expression for Dryden during the 1690s. Although many of Dryden's translations from this period contain evidence of scepticism, I single out his Juvenal and his Persius for specific analysis because the parallels he makes between the world of these

poets and that of his own both exemplify the sceptical intelligence of his earlier works and advance it in new directions. In taking up Juvenal and Persius, Dryden returns to satire, a genre where, as I argued in my third chapter, he generates some unlikely paradoxes; however, he does so at a time when the satiric mode was in crisis. Censorship laws aimed at protecting William and Mary's regime from supporters of James II and the senior Stuart line were put in place to suppress open political debate, making satirical criticism difficult, and Dryden's role as Tory satirist apparently untenable. Engaging with the theme of the exiled and displaced artist, and, at a more literal level, with the language of moral indignation that Juvenal and Persius use about their own society, Dryden dramatises his expulsion from public life, maintaining, in the process, an important connection with something of his old self. That his translations of Juvenal's third and Persius's first satires appear ironically to gesture at the dialogue form which he found effective as a method of argumentation in *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* and *The Hind and the Panther* is also significant to an assessment of the development of his scepticism.

Most critics in the last forty years have come to agree that Dryden had, at least in part, intended translation literature as a means of expressing that which could not be openly expressed in the public arena. Certainly, Walter Scott's view, that 'His powers of satire, at this period, were of no more use to Dryden than a sword to a man who cannot draw it', and, therefore, 'that he made no formal attack on the government, either in verse or prose' has been definitively rejected.³⁴⁷ Yet equally, while it is recognised that Dryden's turn to translation reflected the need to earn a living, Hume's 1970 claim that the pursuit of material relief implied 'neither burning interest nor a poetic falling-off' is no longer an acceptable summation of the poet's position in the 1690s.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁷ *The Works of John Dryden*, vol. 1 (London, 1808), p. 349 and p. 35.

³⁴⁸ *Dryden's Criticism*, p. 6.

Considered together, current criticism about Dryden's translations proposes two general premises: firstly, that Dryden remained faithful to the principle of paraphrase, or 'translation with latitude', as set down in his preface to *Ovid's Epistles* in 1680; and secondly, that he employed this principle in order to circumvent censorship restrictions (*Poems*, I, 384).³⁴⁹ With specific reference to the Juvenal and Persius texts, Myers's statement that translation allowed Dryden to 'make indirect allusion to the contemporary scene [where] a frontal attack on Orange of England was forbidden' is a characteristic judgement, but such readings have provided the basis for far more expansive hypotheses.³⁵⁰ In his rather tellingly entitled essay, 'Clandestine Protest against William III in Dryden's Translations of Juvenal and Persius', Kirk Combe posits 'a translator-collaborator' who 'with his interpolations, holds up himself as proof that an older, legal, and righteous political order [...] has been usurped by a hateful and illegitimate new one'.³⁵¹ 'By creating this sublevel of political meaning', he argues, 'Dryden not only provides himself with literary camouflage but he associates his protests with the traditionally perceived savage indignation of Juvenal as well'.³⁵² This view is elaborated upon by Steven Zwicker, who states that Dryden explored 'the interplay between Rome and England', creating historical parallels 'in which Rome at once conceals and expresses England'.³⁵³ Going further, Winn places Dryden's translations in the context of his other works from this period. He finds that, 'motivated by a shifting mixture of caution and defiance', Dryden 'had played a double game', where dedications thanking 'noblemen who supported the new regime [...] for overlooking the poet's faith and politics' were neutralised by 'Jacobite innuendoes' in the works

³⁴⁹ See my previous chapter

³⁵⁰ William Myers, *Dryden* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1973), p. 149.

³⁵¹ 'Clandestine Protest against William III in Dryden's Translations of Juvenal and Persius', *Modern Philology*, 87 (1989-90), 36-50 (p.46).

³⁵² 'Clandestine Protest against William III', p. 46.

³⁵³ *Politics and Language in Dryden's Poetry: The Arts of Disguise*, p. 177.

themselves.³⁵⁴ Winn also identifies ‘self-protection’ as a factor in the translations of Juvenal and Persius’s satires: ‘Dryden could skew his translation towards criticism of the regime while letting the blame fall on Juvenal or Persius’.³⁵⁵

Although Dryden’s translations from the 1690s have been the subject of ever-increasing critical attention, there have been few systematic attempts to explain the role of sceptical thought in these works, still less to locate Dryden’s translation literature in the debate about his philosophical scepticism. However, certain interpretations do indicate where the presence of scepticism might be found. Winn’s observation, above, describes the kind of incongruity that typifies what Love regards as ‘a fundamental confusion [...] arising from Dryden’s inability to reconcile the contradictions of his historical predicament’.³⁵⁶ In fact, for Love, Dryden’s translations (as opposed to highly modernised translations by his contemporaries John Oldham and Rochester) take ‘the form of an insistence that the reader is both of his own time and social world and of that of the ancient author’; as such, they demonstrate a ‘conscious plurality of vision’, which had been a defining quality of Dryden’s work since *Astraea Redux*.³⁵⁷ The concept of ‘paradox’ is also mentioned by Gareth Tissol in his reading of Dryden’s translations from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: ‘Dryden’s own tendency is towards paradox and antithesis, whether in translation or original composition’.³⁵⁸ For Tissol, Dryden takes paradox to its logical extreme, insofar as he attempts to produce ‘genuinely Ovidian English’ despite ‘antithesis’ and

³⁵⁴ “‘Complying with the Times’: Dryden’s Satires of Juvenal and Persius (1693)”, *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 12 (1988), 76-87 (p. 79)

³⁵⁵ Winn, “‘Complying with the Times’”, p. 80.

³⁵⁶ ‘Rationale of Paradox’, p. 302.

³⁵⁷ ‘Rationale of Paradox’, p. 310.

³⁵⁸ ‘Dryden’s Additions and Interpretive Reception of Ovid’, *Translation & Literature*, 13 (2004), 181-93 (p. 186).

‘paradoxical expression’ being ‘exactly the features of Ovid’s style that he disparages and mocks in his critical prefaces’.³⁵⁹

Moreover, reflecting upon the selection process of *Fables Ancient and Modern* (1700), Zwicker discerningly asks: ‘Could it be that Dryden celebrates in their assembly not a new order, but no order at all?’³⁶⁰ This is a question that is generally applicable to Dryden throughout the 1690s, prompting further important speculations. Indeed, from his contributions to *The Satires of Juvenal and Persius* to those of *Fables Ancient and Modern*, the collection that completed his canon, Dryden flitted between no fewer than seven poetic personae: on the one hand, the multiplicity of these subjects might reflect a compulsion to remain, as it were, always on the move, exploiting the energy and force of another’s voice in situations to which they are best suited at a local level (Juvenal and Persius for satirical parallels in politics, Chaucer for criticisms of the clergy), but tactically evading the need to justify the use of such voices. On the other hand, it might signify deliberate incoherence or arbitrariness representing a kind of freewheeling indifference in place of the determined articulation of values that the poet’s readers (as Dryden well knew) were hitherto accustomed to.

One critic who does address the matter of scepticism in Dryden’s translations directly is Paul Hammond. Working from the observation that the early-modern ‘mind was by training critical and by instinct sceptical’, Hammond’s essay, ‘John Dryden: The Classicist as Sceptic’ reasons that a ‘grounding in classical literature seems to have given Dryden a freedom to think for

³⁵⁹ ‘*Dryden’s Additions and Interpretive Reception of Ovid*’, pp. 185-87.

³⁶⁰ ‘Dryden and the Dissolution of Things: The Decay of Structures in Dryden’s Later Writings’, in *Tercentenary Essays*, p. 327. See also David Bywaters, *Dryden in Revolutionary England* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), p. 127.

himself at a tangent to some prevailing commonplaces’, and, in his capacity as translator, the poet utilises this freedom to ‘force open cracks in the structure of cultural assumptions’.³⁶¹ Significantly, Hammond suggests that Dryden is at his most sceptical when reflecting on ‘the political revolutions of his age, or on revolutions in religious belief, or on any of the new developments in the arts, in science and in commerce’; this has been my claim throughout this study.³⁶² Yet focussing on Dryden’s Ovid and the classical influences in *Annus Mirabilis* only, Hammond does not provide a full account of the external pressures on Dryden in his post-revolution translations. As a result, his argument offers little explanation of how Dryden accommodates himself to his Latin subjects, and, no less importantly, of the ways in which he makes them speak for him as, before 1688, he would have spoken for himself.

Hammond redresses this matter in his longer study, *Dryden and the Traces of Classical Rome*, where he creates a portrait of Dryden’s relationship with his Roman predecessors across the span of his career. During the reign of Charles II, he shows, Dryden wove tapestries of Roman references to give ‘form and substance to [his] contribution to the new Restoration culture’, whereas after the revolution, the turn to the satires of ‘Juvenal and Persius and in the *Georgics* contributed to a different mode of distancing the present through recourse to a classical past’.³⁶³ With reference to Dryden’s statement about his scepticism in the preface to *Sylvae*, Hammond suggests that what Dryden meant by the term had remained the same: ‘the ability to see both sides of a question and to keep different possibilities in play, rather than a distrust of epistemology’.³⁶⁴ However, the disjuncture produced by a distancing of the present imposes

³⁶¹ ‘John Dryden: The Classicist as Sceptic’, p. 179.

³⁶² ‘John Dryden: The Classicist as Sceptic’, p. 165.

³⁶³ *Dryden and the Traces of Classical Rome*, p. 218.

³⁶⁴ *Dryden and the Traces of Classical Rome*, p. 157.

upon the reader the task of drawing for themselves the sceptical implications of these texts; speaking specifically of Juvenal's tenth satire, Hammond contends that Dryden has created 'a mobile text [...]. If we apply the term 'Usurpers' [line 178 of the translation] to include William III, that becomes our judgement on him and not Dryden's responsibility'.³⁶⁵ The play of possibility has become, to adopt Hammond's earlier insight, the 'play of similarity and difference' in a chain of possible associations – usurper as William, usurper as Pompey (Juvenal's original meaning), William as Pompey.³⁶⁶

Rachel Miller also regards Dryden's translation literature as a kind of textual performance in which reader-participation is actively required. Her paper on Dryden's translations of Juvenal, Persius, and Boccaccio, identifies a 'spectrum of potential references [...] ranging from isolated historical allusion to extended political analogy' and 'from modernization to imitation', by which Dryden sought to disconnect himself from the meaning of the texts that he re-creates.³⁶⁷ Thus, according to Miller's argument on the Juvenal translations, Dryden 'adapts an ancient topic to a modern theme, omits distancing classical details, modernizes allusions, and occasionally mixes English terms with Roman ones' in order to encourage 'readers to search for analogies and make their own applications'.³⁶⁸ If readers 'see more than they were intended to see', this is because 'Dryden deliberately clouded the question of authorial intention'.³⁶⁹ With respect to the Persius translations, Miller continues, Dryden 'pursues a different approach'; however his objective remained the same: 'Here, Dryden "shadows" William III [...] following the example of Persius',

³⁶⁵ *Dryden and the Traces of Classical Rome*, p. 186.

³⁶⁶ *Dryden and the Traces of Classical Rome*, p. 183.

³⁶⁷ 'Physic for the Great: Dryden's Satiric Translations of Juvenal, Persius, and Boccaccio', *Philological Quarterly*, 68 (1989), 53-75 (p. 55)

³⁶⁸ 'Physic for the Great', p. 60.

³⁶⁹ 'Physic for the Great', p. 60.

and exploits the knowledge that ‘seventeenth-century readers were predisposed to find covert allusions to Nero in Persius’ satires’.³⁷⁰ Although Miller does not explicitly equate her theory about a spectrum of potential references with a sceptical strategy on Dryden’s part, her general ideas are comparable with those of Hammond. Like Hammond’s hypothesis about the play of possibility, Miller’s theory emphasises that the task of establishing the text’s meaning lies with the reader; as she says in reference to the modernisation of general terms in Juvenal’s tenth satire: ‘While the reader may hold Dryden responsible for establishing a topical context, Dryden may hold the reader responsible for extracting specific parallels’.³⁷¹

Other purely thematic and stylistic considerations also highlight important sceptical attributes of Dryden’s exercises in translation, particularly those relating to satire. For David Hopkins, Juvenal’s *Satires* furnished the poet with ‘the opportunity to explore the particular kinds of insights afforded into the delusions and absurdities of human affairs by the exercise of a hyperbolically extravagant wit’.³⁷² In every text which comes under his attention, Dryden embraces the task of re-presenting ‘figures [...] whose behaviour and fortunes illustrate the folly of all human aspirations’.³⁷³ At the same time, he adopts as his own Juvenal’s ‘reflections on the character of philosophical contentment and serenity’.³⁷⁴ Discussing the concluding lines of the tenth satire, Hopkins considers possible parallels with Horace’s *Odes III. 29*; both poems, he finds, exhibit a ‘defiantly daring assertion of the need to live in the present, neglecting the false attractions of worldly fame’, and both deplore ‘the self-torturing desires which normally prevent man from truly living’, advocating instead the acceptance of ‘the buffets of fortune’, and the

³⁷⁰ ‘Physic for the Great’, p. 61.

³⁷¹ ‘Physic for the Great’, p. 61.

³⁷² *John Dryden* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 149.

³⁷³ *John Dryden*, p. 149.

³⁷⁴ *John Dryden*, p. 153

possession of ‘the true goods of life, in full and confident recognition and relish of their present delight’.³⁷⁵ Dryden’s ‘Discourse concerning the Original and Progress of Satire’, which prefaces *The Satires of Decimus Junius Juvenalis* with an account of the history of satire identifies the modern understanding of the genre as applying ‘only to invective poems, where the very nature of satire is formidable to those persons who would appear to the world what they are not in themselves’ (*Poems*, III, p. 401); thus, for exposing the treasonous Shaftesbury as ‘like white witches, mischievously good’ (*Poems*, II 62), *The Medal* is Dryden’s own example of modern satire. However, it is clear that Dryden was drawn to the timeless and explicitly philosophical aspects of the classical satirists to whom he devotes his attention in this later period of his career: his emphases on mental tranquillity in Juvenal’s satires echo those in his translations from Lucretius; and emphasising, as he also does in ‘Original and Progress of Satire’, the stoic rejection of ‘Passion, interest, ambition, and all their bloody consequences of discord and of war’ (*Poems*, III, p. 401), his translations of the stoic Persius’s satires represent no deviation from this pattern.

Also significant in the Persius translations is Dryden’s treatment of the dialectic. As Emrys Jones observes, Persius often writes in ‘the form of a mixture of authorial discourse and dialogue’, which, far from being clearly distinguished from one another, has bestowed upon his modern editors the ‘insoluble problem’ of determining who is speaking, and to whom:

Reading through some of Persius’s satires is like overhearing snatches of several conversations going on at once – we jump from one to another with disconcerting abruptness and never stay long with any one of them.³⁷⁶

³⁷⁵ *John Dryden*, p. 140.

³⁷⁶ Emrys Jones, ‘Dryden’s Persius’, in *John Dryden (1631-1700): His Politics, his Plays, and his Poets*, ed. by Claude Rawson, Aaron Santesso and others (Newark: Delaware University Press), 123-38 (p. 125).

Jones points out that Persius's style in this respect is of 'a kind that derives from "diatribe"', a 'form of vehement popular preaching [that] Lucretius also drew on'.³⁷⁷ However, the significance of Dryden's own interest in dialogue must be brought to bear here. In *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, the dialogue form integrates a number of theoretical perspectives, considers their merits side by side, and clarifies correspondences between potentially opposing points of view; by virtue of its flexibility, it promotes a positivistic epistemology, as applied to dramatic theory. Dialogue in the satires of Persius, on the other hand, creates confusion. Whether intended or not, the elision, or running together, of voices allows no foundation for interpretation. Just as Dryden's resort to the satires of his classical predecessors may reflect the limitations placed on his own satiric accents, so his interest in Persius may reflect his belief about the effectiveness of the dialogue form in the intellectually repressive climate of Williamite rule.

Having been forced into new literary directions by a political regime that was hostile to freedom of thought and religious tolerance, Dryden repeatedly sounded notes of disillusionment in the 1690s, expressing his frustrations and apprehensions about the society around him. And yet, many of the classical texts that preoccupied him during this period also advocated ideas which would ultimately prove empowering for the poet. Taken together, Dryden's treatment of these ideas may be regarded as an attempt to formulate a new philosophically sceptical perspective, one which affirms the sceptical intelligence that he displays throughout his previous works, but which reveals that his instinct for sceptical inquiry has been turned in on himself in order to redefine his role in the world of affairs (even as he proclaims his detachment from it). In a statement which contrasts with Zwicker's claims, Felicity Rosslyn argues that 'Dryden's translations do amount to a world-view, if properly understood', since they 'can be decoded as a

³⁷⁷ 'Dryden's Persius', p. 125.

profound response to seventeenth-century questions in themselves'.³⁷⁸ Dryden – who had always written out of contemporary concerns – seems at his best in his Juvenal and Persius translations when he is promoting an attitude of sceptical indifference towards worldly matters, or when he is maintaining indifference towards matters beyond human control; in this way demonstrating his commitment to the qualities of thought that we find associated with classical consolation philosophy like Epicureanism, Stoicism, and even Pyrrhonism, Dryden might be said to exemplify the paradox of the public writer: like Montaigne who ostensibly wrote of and for himself, he intends to present his newfound sense of self-awareness for public consumption. As I shall show, the search for mental tranquillity, a theme which was often prominent in the original texts, is accentuated by Dryden throughout, and, in particular, the concept of *ataraxia*, and its stoic equivalent, *apatheia*, may be imputed to the poet on the basis of his response to key passages in Juvenal's tenth and Persius's first satires, two works which depend for their meaning on the textual presence of at least one sympathetic addressee.³⁷⁹

There is, of course, a danger of confusing Dryden's purpose and priorities with those of Juvenal and Persius. Even Dryden's additions to the poems may be explained in terms of an attempt to meet the requirements of the original texts' strategic aims; after all, Dryden had posited that to translate 'with latitude', the approach, which, as I have discussed, he apparently favoured, the 'author' should be always 'kept in view by the translator' and his 'sense' be 'strictly followed' even if his 'words' are not (*Poems*, I, p. 384). Any significant differences, therefore, may have been included on the understanding that they represent the spirit of the original. However,

³⁷⁸ 'Dryden: Poet or Translator?', in *Translation and Literature: John Dryden, Classicist and Translator*, ed. by Stuart Gillespie, 10 (2001), 21-32 (p. 28).

³⁷⁹ For my discussion of *ataraxia* in Pyrrhonic philosophy and its relevance to Dryden's work see the first chapter of this study.

insights into the degree of Dryden's intervention may be gleaned from the prefatory matter of his translations. In these para-texts, including the 'arguments' (expositional material) that introduce individual poems, Dryden outlines some important analogies between him and his subjects, illustrating the ways in which Juvenal and Persius and other satirists appealed to his literary sensibilities. Equally importantly, his prefatory material allows him to place his translations in a broader context, inviting readers to make conceptual leaps between matters that are apparently related. The 'Discourse Concerning Original and Progress of Satire' is predictably the most useful frame of reference for Dryden's intellectual temper in 1693, but some consideration must be given to the dedicatory epistle to *Examen Poeticum*, which was published in the same year. A short discussion of both should establish the relevance of these prose works to the translations.

Addressed to the Earl of Dorset, a member of government who was sympathetic to Dryden after the loss of his laureateship, the 'Original and Progress of Satire' recalls the intellectual climate of *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* as a time when 'I was sailing in a vast ocean, without other help, than the pole-star of the ancients, and the rules of the French stage amongst the moderns' (*Poems*, III, 313-14). Looking back on these years, Dryden presents himself as 'first discoverer [...] without name or reputation in the world, having rather the ambition of a writer than the skill' (*Poems*, III, p. 313). Such highly romanticised reminiscences – which superficially seek to persuade Dorset of the authenticity of their professional friendship by reminding the patron of its origin in a happier period – throw the intellectual restrictions of the present times into sharp relief. In the freer days of the 1660s, intellectual endeavour had a seemingly heroic purpose; Dryden sees himself as a kind of literary explorer who has cut his way through the world of artistic promise, shining a light into its darker recesses. Significantly, this is a passage which directly recalls 'To

Dr Charleton' in which Dryden envisages a poet who is possessed of the sceptical wherewithal to break free from the influence of Aristotelian philosophy and transcend the tyranny of platitudinous verse:

Had we still paid that homage to a name
Which only God and nature justly claim,
The western seas had been our utmost bound,
Where poets might still dream the sun was drowned.
(*Poems*, I, 71-72; 15-18).³⁸⁰

However, the playful imagery of the preface's quasi-philosophical addresses (at one point Dryden describes the integrity of Dorset's character as a 'truth so generally acknowledged, that it needs not the reformation which Descartes used', *Poems*, III, p.312) quickly gives way to the solemnity of regret, as Dryden meditates on his unfulfilled ambition of writing an epic poem. Although he acknowledges the missed opportunities of his epic desire as largely his own fault (and attributes to his dotage his present inability to act), he also seeks to clear up the received and apparently popular misconception among writers of the day that Christian culture is incompatible with the thematic and stylistic demands of the epic. In answer to Boileau, whom he identifies as the source of the misconception, Dryden resorts to the kind of sceptical idealisation of the blueprint he might have followed had he found the necessary resolve; as the following passage shows, the man of action has become the dreamer again:

But, what if I venture to advance an invention of my own, to supply the manifest defect of our new writers? I am sufficiently sensible of my weakness, and 'tis not very probable that I should succeed in such a project whereof I have not had the least hint from any of my predecessors, the poets, or any of their seconds, and coadjutors, the critics. Yet we see the art of war is improved in sieges, and new instruments of death are invented daily; something new in philosophy and the mechanics is discovered almost every year; and the science of former ages is improved by the succeeding. I will not detain you with a long preamble to that which better judges will, perhaps, conclude to be little worth. 'Tis this, in short: that Christian poets have not hitherto been acquainted with their own strength. If they had searched the Old Testament as they ought, they might there have found the machines which are proper for their work; and those more certain in their effect than it

³⁸⁰ See the second chapter of this study

may be the New Testament is in the rules sufficient for salvation. The perusing of one chapter in the prophecy of Daniel, and accommodating what there they find with the principles of Platonic philosophy, as it is now Christianized, would have made the ministry of angels as strong an engine, for the working up heroic poetry, in our religion, as that of the Ancients has been to raise theirs by all the fables of their gods, which were only received for truths by the most ignorant and weakest of the people [...] 'tis an undoubted truth, that for ends best known to the Almighty Majesty of heaven, his providential designs for the benefit of his creatures, for the debasing and punishing of some nations, and the exaltation and temporal reward of others, were not wholly known to these his ministers; else why those factious quarrels, controversies, and battles amongst themselves, when they were all united in the same design, the service and honour of their common master? (*Poems*, III, pp. 342-45)

It is worth mentioning again that such prose texts are of themselves sceptical in nature. To quote Parker, Dryden's 'engagingly first-person critical prefaces [...] deal with a kind of truth too subtle or too evasive to be accessible to direct rational inquiry or impersonal philosophical discourse'.³⁸¹ This is a view of which Dryden is apparently aware. He draws his lordship's attention to the evasiveness of his missive when he insists that he will not be detaining 'you with a long preamble', and then, at a later point in the preface when he suggests that 'I doubt not but that you wonder why I have run off from my bias so long together, and made so tedious a digression from satire to heroic poetry' (*Poems* III, p. 338).

However, this embodiment of the sceptical impulse in prose form must be considered alongside other manifestations in 'Original and Progress of Satire'. Accounting his digressiveness a 'crime' – one that he perceives as symptomatic of 'the tattling quality of age' (*Poems* III, p. 338) – Dryden is clearly self-consciously purging his emotions, and expressing doubts about his own uncertain identity as a poet in the 1690s. He feels neither involved in the activity of new developments nor energised by it; rather he surveys all scientific and philosophical advances with nonchalance and from the safety of a distant vantage point: 'Something new in philosophy

³⁸¹ Parker, p. 46.

and the mechanics is discovered almost every year: and the science of former ages is improved by the succeeding' (*Poems*, IV); with the reference to the art of war in mind, there is clearly a trace of that famous Lucretian exemplification of wisdom about this, as Dryden's translation of the relevant passage of *De Rerum Natura* attests: 'Tis pleasant also to behold from far / The moving legions mingled in the war' (*Poems*, II, bk II, 5-6). Similarly, the synopsis of his imagined epic, whilst delivered with conviction, is nevertheless poignant for the present perfect tense and the predominantly passive mood in which it is written. His tone is one of resignation.

And yet, resignation is also indicative of Dryden's greater commitment to a different kind of scepticism. The revolution of 1688 forced to him to prioritise his faith over his career; now from that platform he considers what might have been. What he envisages is a biblical theme, a cosmic game in which the dramas of the Judeo-Christian world are played out according to the classical formula of the 'Fables of their Gods'. It is the power of dramatic irony, he anticipates, that will sustain the narrative of such a noble work, and through the re-enactment of God's providential design he would lay bare the futility of human action and the limitations of human knowledge; as Dryden's subsequent comment makes clear:

But being instructed only in the general, and zealous of the main design, and as finite beings not admitted into the secrets of government, the last resorts of providence, or capable of discovering the final purposes of God (who can work good out of evil as he pleases, and irresistibly sways all manner of events on earth, directing them finally for the best to his creation in general, and to the ultimate end of his own glory in particular) they must of necessity be sometimes ignorant of the means conducing to those ends, in which alone they can jar, and oppose each other. (*Poems*, III, pp. 345-46)

When Dryden does turn his attention to satire, it becomes apparent how these deliberations fit in the overall scheme of 'Original and Progress of Satire'. 'Satire' he argues is 'a kind of poetry [...] invented for the purging of our minds; in which humane vices, ignorance, and errors, and all

things besides [...] are severely reprehended' (*Poems*, IV p. 431). In the dedicatory epistle to *Examen Poeticum* (1693), Dryden makes this clearer:

For what other reason have I spent my life in so unprofitable a study? Why am I grown old in seeking so barren a reward as fame? The same parts and application which have made me a poet, might have raised me to any honours of the gown, which are often given to men of as little learning and less honesty than my self. No government has ever been, or ever can be, wherein timeservers and blockheads will not be uppermost. The persons are only changed, but the same jugglings in state, the same hypocrisy in religion, the same self-interest, and mismanagement will remain forever. Blood and money will be lavished in all ages, only for the preferment of new faces with old consciences [...]. These considerations have given me a kind of contempt for those who have risen by unworthy ways. I am not ashamed to be little, when I see them so infamously great [...]. The notions of morality are known to all men; none can pretend ignorance of those ideas which are inborn in mankind; and if I see one thing and practise the contrary, I must be disingenuous not to acknowledge a clear truth, and base to act against the light of my own conscience. (*Poems*, III, pp. 207-208)

Unable to deny his pursuit for recognition, Dryden again departs from both the philosophical confidence of the 1660s, and, to a lesser extent, his faith in the ability of literature to clarify and instruct; in the process of doing so, he assumes the guise of an aging sceptical commentator. Reading between this text and 'Original and Progress of Satire', the high ideal of an epic poem seems especially implicated, for who is more honoured than the author of epic literature? Dryden's contempt for political dishonesty and the unworthy ways of those who seek worldly greatness completely contradicts the natural morality of those satisfied with their lot, those who, as he was incapable of doing for so long, recognise the folly of wasting their creative energies, indeed the better part of their lives, in fruitless ambition. His tone here carries unmistakable Lucretian inflections; though such seemingly casual expressions as 'hypocrisies in religion', 'self-interest, and mismanagement', together with such images as juggling in the state, also recall the political immediacy of such poems as *Religio Laici*, *Absalom and Achitophel*, as well as such an essay as 'The Parallel of the History of the League', Dryden now completely identified political vice with the unchanging nature of human passions; as he definitively stated, 'blood and

money will be lavished in all ages'. Naturally, from such Epicurean conclusions follow Epicurean recommendations – philosophical detachment and the expediency of retreating from public affairs – which he underscores, with the now characteristically Drydenian flourish of conscience.

It is important to remember that this somewhat negative picture of late seventeenth-century society forms the backdrop to Dryden's translation of the Juvenal and Persius satires. The first five lines of Juvenal's third satire, for instance, relate the story of Umbricius (Juvenal's friend) quitting Rome for a life that is nobler and more moral in the calm of provincial Cumae; told from Juvenal's perspective, it is a story of self-imposed exile and solitude in which an ancient complaint is revived and given modern resonance:

Grieved though I am an ancient friend to lose,
I like the solitary seat he chose,
In quiet *Cumae* fixing his repose;
Where, far from noisy *Rome*, secure he lives,
And one more citizen to *Sybil* gives.
(*Poems*, IV, 20; 1-5)

(Although I'm distressed at the departure of my old friend, all the same I approve of his decision to establish his home at empty Cumae and to donate a single fellow-citizen to the Sibyl. It's the gateway to Baiae, a lovely coast, delightfully secluded.) (p. 167)³⁸²

Dryden might at first glance appear to do less in the same number of lines, but the effect is nonetheless a more succinct, sharper opening. The quest for peace, is here focussed on residence in Cumae, or, as Dryden refers to in the argument, in 'an obscure place' (*Poems*, IV, p. 19). The sense of Rome in ebb is emphasised by the perception that the only way to be a Roman is to

³⁸² (Quamvis digressu veteris confusus amici
laudo tamen, vacuis quod sedem figere Cumis
destinet atque unum civem donare Sibyllae.
ianua Baiarum est et gratum litus amoeni'.
secessus.)
(*Satire III*, p. 166)

This and all Latin quotations from Juvenal and Persius are from the Loeb editions of their works.

leave Rome. However, the crucial word in these lines is ‘ancient’, which has not quite the inflection carried by *veteris* which is nearer just to a sense of ‘well known’ or ‘of long-standing’. Not unlike the remarks about the authority of political heritage above, the notion of antiquity embodied a sense of pre-eminence, also indicated by the repeated reference in line 20 to one of the foremost founders of Roman law, second king of Rome, Numa – an honorific reference not in the original. Significantly, this reference occurs in the context of declining spirituality, and a decline in the sacred arts:

Now while my friend, just ready to depart,
 Was packing all his goods in one poor cart,
 He stopped a little at the conduit gate,
 Where Numa modelled once the Roman state,
 In mighty counsels with his nymphs retired;
 Though now the sacred shades and founts are hired
 By banished Jews, who their whole wealth can lay
 In a small basket, on a wisp of hay.
 Yet such our avarice is, that every tree
 Pays for his head; not sleep itself is free.
 Nor place, nor persons now are sacred held,
 From their own groves the Muses are expelled.
 (*Poems*, IV, 20-21; 17-28)

(But while his entire house was being loaded onto a single wagon, he halted under the ancient arch of dripping Capena. We walked down into the vale of Egeria with its artificial grottoes. How much more real the spirit of the spring would be were the waters enclosed by a green grass and if marble didn’t profane the native tufa stone. Here, where Numa used to date his nighttime girlfriend, the grove and shrine of the sacred spring are rented out to Jews with their equipment, a hay-lined chest. Why? Every tree has been told to pay its rent to the people, the Camenae have been thrown out, and the grove has now taken up begging.) (pp. 167-68)³⁸³

³⁸³ (sed dum tota domus raeda componitur una,
 substitit ad veteres arcus madidamque Capenam.
 in vallen Egeriae descendimus et speluncas
 dissimiles veris. quanto praesentius esset
 numen aquis, viridi si margine cluderet undas
 herba nec ingenuum violarent marmora tofum.
 hic, ubi nocturnae Numa constituebat amicae,
 nunc sacri fontis nemus et delubra locantur
 Iudaeis, quorum cophinus fenumque supellex;
 omnis enim populo mercedem pendere iussa est
 arbor et eiectis mendicat silva Camenis.)

Dryden stresses the irony of place where Numa's modelling of the state stands in stark contrast to its present commercial exploitation. Juvenal stays, yet his sympathies lie with his departing companion. This is most evident in the account of Umbricius's exile where, following what goes on to become an especially evocative description of an Arcadian lost Rome (lines 31-37) – a Rome in which 'crystal streams through living turf had run' (*Poems*, IV, 21; 35) – Dryden's and Juvenal's grievances coincide more and more, until at last we discern Dryden's own voice, here in Umbricius's accents:

Since noble arts in *Rome* have no support,
And ragged virtue not a friend at court,
No profit rises from th' ungrateful stage,
My poverty increasing with my age;
'Tis time to give my just disdain a vent,
And, cursing, leave so base a government.
(*Poems*, IV, 22; 39-44)

(There's no room in Rome for respectable skills and no reward for hard work. Today my means are less than yesterday, and tomorrow will wear away a bit more from the little that's left.) (p. 169)³⁸⁴

Much of the phrasing in these short lines has, in Winn's words, no 'basis in the Latin, but an obvious basis in Dryden's life since the Revolution'.³⁸⁵ Dryden's version, more so than Juvenal's original, notes the specific absence of government support and these comments on the government are in stark contrast to Juvenal's preoccupation merely with personal ethical choice. To 'leave so base a government' suggests Dryden's own thoughts about his rejection. Indeed, the juxtaposition, even synthesis, of aesthetic purpose and political comment was intended to work both ways in this satire. Just as its major theme was exile, so Dryden poeticised his own

(*Satire III*, 166-68; 10-20)

³⁸⁴ [...] "quando artibus" inquit "honesties nullus in Vrbe locus, nulla emolumenta laborum, res hodie minor est here quam fuit atque eadem cras.)

(*Satire III*, 168; 21-23)

³⁸⁵ Winn, p. 458.

professional displacement, standing apart from the ‘Knaves who [...] have the knack / Of turning truth to lies, and white to black’ (*Poems*, IV, 23; 54-55) and the poets ‘Who [...] are like a looking-glass, / Still ready to reflect their patron's face’ (*Poems*, IV, 29; 181-82).

As Dryden progresses in the poem, he becomes bolder. Above, Umbricius jettisons a government he held accountable for his poverty, but in a later couplet, Dryden turns this sentiment on its head, again giving us a perspective much more in keeping with his own discontents: ‘Like a dead member from the body rent, / Maimed and unuseful to the government’ (*Poems*, IV, 24-25; 87-88) – once more, a detail found only in Dryden. Towards the end of the poem, this somewhat veiled criticism becomes a frank and full denunciation, with the first person insistently present:

Disgraced and banished from the family:
 In vain forgotten services I boast,
 My long dependence in an hour is lost.
 Look round the world, what country will appear
 Where friends are left with greater ease than here?
 (*Poems*, IV, 30; 210-14)

(You see, once he’s dripped a drop of the poison which comes naturally to him and his race into that receptive ear, I am hustled away from the threshold and my long years of slavery have been wasted. Nowhere is the ditching of a friend more casual.) (p. 177)³⁸⁶

The feeling of having done all for nothing – of loyalty, which in an hour was vainly lost – conveys a very definite impression of world-weariness that should be identified with scepticism, in the philosophical understanding of the term.

³⁸⁶ (nam cum facile stillavit in aurem
 exiguum de naturae patriaeque veneno,
 limine summoveor, perierunt tempora longi
 servitii; nusquam minor est iactura clientis.)
 (*Satire* III, 176; 122-25)

Juvenal's role as confidant is a telling if easily overlooked detail of this satire, implying a certain degree of intimacy in which the two friends stand together at the gates of Rome, on the margins of the city's society. However, the discourse they share contrasts with the use of dialogue in Dryden's previous poems; Umbricius and Juvenal are by no means one and the same voice, yet nor do they represent different ways of thinking as the interlocutors of *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* or *The Hind and the Panther* do. In those works, debate facilitates understanding – where there is contradiction there is clarity as one argument is built on another, even in refutation. This type of writing reflects intellectual openness both in the form and themes of the text and in the cultural climate in which the texts were produced. Dryden's treatment of Juvenal's third satire seems nuanced to show that this culture of openness has broken down. The two characters of the poem share complaints rather than ideas. Again, it is of no small consequence that *The Satires of Decimus Junius Juvenalis* is dedicated to the Earl of Dorset. Censorship laws have precluded the kind of debate enjoyed by Neander and Eugenius (Dorset in *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*). The irony would not have been lost on Dryden's patron.

The breakdown of the dialectic in an age of repression is a matter to which Dryden returns in Persius's first satire; as his Argument to the poem explains, this work consists of a 'dialogue betwixt the author and his friend or monitor, who dissuades him from this dangerous attempt of exposing great men' (*Poems*, IV, p. 140). Dryden's interest in Persius has been the source of some critical speculation. Noting that Dryden thought 'poorly of Persius in strictly poetic and literary terms', Jones attributes the poet's decision to translate the work of the Roman to similarities in historical circumstances: 'Dryden felt attracted to Persius because he saw him as a fellow sufferer, someone who had to endure life under the tyrant Nero just as he had to put up

with things under William and Mary'.³⁸⁷ While this is certainly the case, Persius seemed to offer Dryden more than the opportunity to make apt historical allusions. In 'Original and Progress of Satire', he celebrates Persius's stoicism as something that 'might be taught from pulpits, with more profit to the audience than all the nice speculations of divinity' (*Poems*, III, p. 401); he celebrates the fact that Persius's poems propose nothing 'but the quiet tranquillity of mind' (*Poems*, III, p. 401), as well as the 'spirit of sincerity in all he says' (*Poems*, III, p. 401). Clearly, any historical allusions Dryden makes in his translations of Persius are underlined by an appreciation of the principles of Stoicism, and insofar as he identifies tranquillity of mind as philosophical virtue, with Hellenistic philosophy in general. This appears to be the case with the first satire. Indeed, Persius intended the poem to be read as a kind of private resistance to the decline in social, political and artistic standards, with the speakers ultimately aware of their own powerlessness to halt the situation: prefacing the satire with a verse prologue that insists upon his poetic shortcomings, he clearly did not feel exalted by his cause, despite its integrity: 'Statues with winding ivy crowned belong / To nobler poets, for a nobler song' (*Poems*, IV, 139; 7-8). As a result, the text of the main poem seems divided between self-criticism and a criticism of the times, a detail which Dryden was keen to exploit:

Persius. How anxious are our cares, and yet how vain

The bent of our desires!

Friend. Thy spleen contain,

For none will read thy satires.

Persius. This to me?

Friend. None; or what's next to none, but two or three

'Tis hard, I grant.

Persius. 'Tis nothing; I can bear

That paltry scribblers have the public ear;

That this vast universal fool, the town,

Should cry up *Labeo's* stuff, and cry me down.

They damn themselves, nor will my Muse descend

To clap with such who fools and knaves commend:

³⁸⁷ 'Dryden's Persius', p. 128.

Their smiles and censures are to me the same;
 I care not what they praise, or what they blame.
 (*Poems*, IV, 141-42; 1-12)

P How troubled is humanity! How very empty is life!
 I *Who'll read that?*
 P Are you talking to me? No one, for God's sake
 I No one?
 P Perhaps one or two.
 I That's disgraceful and pathetic.
 P Why's that? Because Polydamas and the Trojan dames might prefer Labeo to me?
 Rubbish! If muddled Rome disparages something, don't step in to correct the faulty
 balance in those scales and don't search outside yourself.) (p. 49)³⁸⁸

Here, the 'public ear' is misguided and is Dryden's addition, the parallel to a confused state. Juvenal's satire, too, had condemned the universal fool of a town for its aesthetic deficiencies (in fact, as will be shown shortly, this is another major feature of the poem). One particularly revealing line to this end suggests the superiority of tradition over novelty: 'The same rude song returns upon the crowd, / And by tradition is for wit allowed' (*Poems*, IV, 33; 287-88). For Persius, though, tradition had dwindled, and what was left in its place was little more than nostalgic despondency. Neither believing in himself nor hoping for more than the Labeos of the world, he (even more suggestively than Juvenal) saw on the horizon no moral crusader with the heroic qualities needed to redeem Rome.

Dryden's translations of Juvenal's third and Persius's first satires seem indicative, even expressive, of the translator's general ambivalence. Where the former advocated retreat, the

³⁸⁸ (O curas hominum! o quantum est in rebus inane!
 "quis leget haec? min tu istud ais? nemo hercule.
 "nemo?"
 (vel duo vel nemo. "turpe et miserabile." quare?
 ne mihi Polydamas et Troiades Labeonem
 praetulerint? nugae. non, si quid turbida Roma
 eleuet, accedes examenve inprobum in illa
 castigas trutina nec te quaesiveras extra.)
 (*Satire I*, 48; 1-7)

latter urged an attitude of stoic indifference, caring not for smiles, censures, praise or blame. However, though neither option can be entirely reconciled to the other, Dryden did not appear to dismiss the idea that both looking inwards to one's own judgements and outwards to an (albeit barely recognisable) ideal is most conducive to peace of mind. To this end, a further parallel can be surmised from Juvenal's remarks about the Greeks and the Greek influence in Rome, as Dryden's translated text reveals: 'To see the scum of *Greece* transplanted here, / Received like Gods, is what I cannot bear' (108-109), and 'The *Greeks* get all by fulsome flatteries, / A most peculiar stroke they have at lies' (151-52). Dryden may not have meant to identify Greek with Protestant, or more specifically, with the House of Orange, but the idea of one culture supplanting another certainly played into his hands.

But Dryden's parallels suggest a problem at the heart of civilisation, and the present English variety of it. Indeed, bemoaning the loss of a better, more honourable society (which, at the very least, attested to the existence of such a society beyond hopeless idealisation), he was ultimately passing comment on the nature of human society. Juvenal's solution to the venality of the times was the same Epicurean life of careless ease that Dryden had worked out at least eleven years earlier in his translations of *De Rerum Natura*. Reminiscent of the second book of *De Rerum Natura*, where Dryden spoke of the 'cool stream' (*Poems*, II. 35) and 'warm spring', the closing lines of the satire, for example, emphasise the 'cool shades' (*Poems*, II. 502) and 'sweet country air', which is to say, of course, that it emphasises the search for an intellectual relief and spiritual freedom synonymous with the apparently incomparable pleasures of innocent, sweet country life, a world away from Rome.

Of course, there are crucial differences between the two texts, as there were between their original authors. Unlike *De Rerum Natura*, the third satire did not present opting out as an absolute philosophical solution. The Epicurean solution did seem to have become Dryden's favoured recourse from the social and political evils of civilised life. In 'To My Honoured Kinsman, John Driden of Chesterton in the County of Huntingdon, Esquire' (1700), a poem written to his cousin and published in the *Fables*, he finally claimed Juvenal's insights as his own, envying ease from 'anxious cares' (*Poems*, V, 190; 2) that attend the 'country life' (*Poems*, V, 190; 1), and the student of 'peace' who shuns 'civil rage' (*Poems*, V, 190; 3). This late poem also provides a further, fascinating insight into Dryden's scepticism throughout the 1690s. Chief among the illuminations is, as my second chapter discussed, the view that the aim of human science is the discovery of 'forbidden truths' (76), including the 'doom of death' (79), or immortality, which suggests that the pronouncements of God 'were vain' (78). That Dryden is specifically directing criticism at modern medicine need only be taken at face value here. The views he articulates are, after all, applied in other contexts, notably *Religio Laici* and *The Hind and the Panther*. As in those poems, his scepticism is rooted in the Fall, which left us hopelessly 'wandering in the dark' (100).

However, although the translation of Persius's first satire did not seem to contain as much of Dryden's voice as that of Juvenal's third, his poetic presence can be felt. Moreover, it is in the possible crumbling of Persius's Stoic reserve that most of Dryden's additions take root. There is a sense in which the personal alienation and disgust at vain forgotten services, described in the third satire, is more pointedly and more vociferously expressed here. In lines 39-51, for instance, Persius gives a very damning account of the practice of performing poetry in contemporary

Rome, which, explicit though it is, does not contain anything that might be judged to have been outside Dryden's understanding of his own experience. Here in Persius's accents is an anatomy of the public poet:

They mount, a God's name to be seen and heard
 From their high scaffold, with a trumpet cheek,
 And ogling all their audience ere they speak.
 The nauseous nobles, ev'n the chief of Rome,
 With gaping mouths to these rehearsals come,
 And pant with pleasure when some lusty line
 The marrow pierces, and invades the chine.
 At open fulsome bawdry they rejoice,
 And slimy jests applaud with broken voice.
 Base prostitute, thus dost thou gain thy bread?
 Thus dost thou feed their ears, and thus art fed?
 At his own filthy stuff he grins and brays,
 And gives the sign where he expects their praise.
 (*Poems*, IV, 143; 39-51)

(We shut ourselves away and write some grand stuff, one in verse, another in prose, stuff which only a generous lung of breath can gasp out. And of course that's what you will finally read to the public from your seat on the platform, neatly combed and in your fresh toga, all dressed in white and wearing your birthday ring of sardonyx. After you have rinsed your supple throat with a liquid warble, in a state of enervation with your orgasmic eye. Then, as the poetry enters their backsides and as their inmost parts are tickled by verse vibrations, you can see huge Tituses quivering, both their respectable manner and their calm voice gone. What, you old reprobate, do you compose morsels for other people's ears, morsels which would make even you, with your joints and skin decayed, say, 'Enough!') (pp. 49-51)³⁸⁹

The lasciviousness represented in this passage is extreme, even in the original context. It also dramatises the public role of poetry and its recurrent fate – instant and ignorant dismissal. From

³⁸⁹ (Scribimus inclusi, numeros ille, hic pede liber,
 Grande aliquid quod pulmo animae praelargus anhelet.
 scilicet haec populo pexusque togaque recenti
 et natalicia tandem cum sardonyche albus
 sede leges celsa, liquid cum plasmate ocello.
 tunc neque more probo videas nec voce serena
 ingentis trepidare Titos, cum carmina lumbum
 intrant et tremulo scalpuntur ubi intima versu.
 tun, vetule, auriculus alienis colligis escas,
 articulis quibus et dicas cute perditus "ohe?")
 (*Satire* I, 48-50; 13-23)

unabashed profanity to whorish ribaldry to gleeful animalistic carnality, it appears to portray moral degeneration in parts, highlighting successive phases between humanity's conceptions of a God and its total surrender to the passions. And with that in mind, it reads like a summary of Dryden's private and public discontents; in this account of idolatry and base prostitution are all the complaints of *Absalom and Achitophel*, *The Medal*, *The Hind and the Panther*, and many of his prologues and prose essays.

There are, interestingly, other satires in the Juvenal and Persius collection that are equally, if not better, disposed to a consideration of philosophical scepticism. In particular, the second Juvenalian satire, translated in this 1693 collection by Nahum Tate, took as its subject the hypocrisies of philosophers and Rome's prevailing spirit of irreligion. Like the Jewish Scriptures, Juvenal posited that the beginning of wisdom was the fear of God; in the current climate, he observed, neither the 'Stygian Lakes' nor Charon's 'leaky Boat' is able to awe humanity into due reverence of the gods, for they are even 'by children scarce believ'd'.³⁹⁰ In this discussion of atheism can be found many connotations relevant to the late seventeenth century, and it is to Tate's credit that his translation is rendered with all the clarity and concision that Dryden and his fellow collaborators had been aiming for from the outset. However, with their emphasis upon the need for self-examination and moral individualism, upon the destruction of the noble and poetic arts, and upon the exiled artist, the third Juvenal and first Persius satires are much more illustrative of Dryden's personal experiences and professional position in 1693; through them he continued to confirm his unshakeable political conscientiousness and tireless aesthetic judgement.

³⁹⁰ *The Satires of Decimus Junius Juvenalis [...] together with the Satires of Aulus Persius Flaccus* (London, 1693), p. 27.

It should, then, come as no surprise that these satires anticipated many of the themes of Juvenal's tenth satire, and its supposed antecedent, Persius's second.³⁹¹ In fact, all the Epicurean and Stoic tribulations of the two previous poems are now given much greater precedence, and though they dwell on political matters but briefly, and in a manner more detached from the contemporary scene, Dryden's translation of the Divine Satires, so-called, clearly carried with them a topical subtext. Moreover, and maybe more importantly, Dryden perceived in Juvenal a kind of fideism, and in Persius an example of piety, analogous to his own; as he intimated in the Argument to the tenth: 'He concludes therefore that since we generally choose so ill for ourselves, we should do better to leave it to the gods to make the choice for us' (*Poems*, IV, p. 97), and in Persius's second, 'He shows [...] the true doctrine of all addresses made to heaven, and how they may be made acceptable to the powers above, in excellent precepts, and more worthy of a Christian than a heathen' (*Poems*, IV, p. 153). Keeping in mind Dryden's own fideism, both satires might be regarded as a characteristic example of Dryden's sceptical predispositions. The tenth satire begins with a typically Epicurean question:

Look round the habitable world, how few
 Know their own good, or knowing it, pursue.
 How void of reason are our hopes and fears!
 What in the conduct of our life appears
 So well designed, so luckily begun,
 But, when we have our wish, we wish undone?
 (*Poems*, IV, 97-98; 1-6)

(In all lands extending from Cadiz as far as Ganges and the Dawn, there are few people who can remove the fog of confusion and distinguish real benefits from their opposite. After all, what is rational about our fears and desires? When you begin a project, how often is your progress so good that you don't regret the effort or the accomplishment of your wish?) (p. 367)³⁹²

³⁹² (Omnibus in terris, quae sunt a Gadibus usque
 Auroram et Gangen, pauci dinoscere possunt

This passage emerges as typically Epicurean, but not in the least Hobbesian, which would presuppose that reason arises from our fears and in this way can be the source of our hopes. What these lines emphasise is the paradox of human nature: when we seek to consummate our desires, we become instead consumed by them. Throughout this satire, they provide the context to more particular observations and objections – to the rhetoricians whom ‘the depths of eloquence have found’, and ‘In that unnavigable stream were drowned’ (*Poems*, IV, 98; 12-13), to the ‘foppish gravity of show / Which cunning magistrates on crowds bestow’ (*Poems*, IV, 101; 51-2), and, conversely, to the poor man who ‘dreads no poison in his homely bowl’ (*Poems*, IV, 100; 38). Generally speaking, such individual illustrations of human immorality and individual imperviousness demand to be read as an all-encompassing analysis of a universal problem but one intensified at this moment. The metaphors used, and the tripping, succinct and self-contained aphoristic expression of the couplets, clearly reinforces Juvenal’s, and in turn Dryden’s, claims to speak for divine perception.

With Persius’s second satire, however, Dryden brings us back down to earth. Like the first satire, it succeeds in being a powerful running critique on the political corruptions and irreligion of the late seventeenth century. As such, its divine themes seem less abstracted than in Juvenal’s tenth satire, yet the nature of divinity is undoubtedly its defining focus. Indeed, dedicated to Persius’s friend, Plotinus Macrinus, whose purity of prayer, according to the Roman, the ‘test of heaven

vera bona atque illis multum diversa, remota
 erroris nebula. quid enim ratione timemus
 aut cupimus? quid tam dextro pede concipis ut te
 conatus non paeniteat votique peracti?)
 (*Satire X*, 366; 1-6)

will bear' (*Poems*, IV, 154; 7), the satire begins in earnest with a diatribe against the sin of superstition:

Indulge thy genius, and o'erflow thy soul,
 Till thy wit sparkle like the cheerful bowl.
 Pray, for thy prayers the test of heaven will bear,
 Nor need'st thou take the gods aside to hear:
 While others, ev'n the mighty men of Rome,
 Big swelled with mischief, to the temples come,
 And in low murmurs, and with costly smoke,
 Heaven's help, to prosper their black vows invoke.
 So boldly to the gods mankind reveal
 What from each other they for shame conceal.
 (*Poems*, IV, 154; 9-14)

(Pour undiluted wine to your Guardian Spirit. You at least do not make requests with a haggling prayer that can only be entrusted to the gods in confidence, whereas a good number of our lords will make their libations from a secretive censer. It does not come easy to take one's muttering and low whispers away from the temples and to make life's vows open.) (p. 65)³⁹³

The distinction, here accentuated by Dryden, between public conformity and private conviction, involves the essential probity of *aperto vivere voto* (l. 7), a public and open disclosure before one's God. The clichés of typical prayer emerge from indistinctive behaviour, often motivated by greed or malice. This is a common ingredient in the later imitations or translations. In his 'The Character of a Good Parson, Imitated from Chaucer and Enlarged', published in the *Fables*, Dryden eulogised the religious man who 'needs no foil, but shines by his own proper light' (*Poems*, V, 566; 140), and the priest who exemplifies 'patience in want, and poverty of mind' (*Poems*, IV, 563; 91). For Zwicker, that poem was a 'harsh condemnation of the revolutionary settlement', its 'tolerance' carried to a vice, and its basically secular 'settlements' of conscience,

³⁹³ (funde merum genio. non tu prece poscis emaci
 quae nisi seductis nequeas committere divis;
 at bona pars procerum tacita libabit acerra.
 haut cuivis promptum est murmurque humilisque
 susurros
 tollere de templis et aperto vivere voto.)
 (*Satire* II, 64; 3-7)

and an attempt to ‘immortalize a particular kind of spirituality’ where ‘the edge of particularity heightens the idealization’.³⁹⁴ On both counts, the same can be said of this passage from Persius. The new mighty men of Britain, elevated for the most part by their own endeavours to the highest political offices, were a victory for the religious cause that Dryden had forsaken and a political settlement from which he had been exiled.

Elsewhere in Persius, Dryden consolidated his connections between divine knowledge, scepticism and the political scene still further by giving a thoroughly revised theory of providence. The crucial point here is the tyranny of intervention in lineal succession. Again the key lines point to William and the transgression of British freedom:

Great father of the gods, when for our crimes
Thou send'st some heavy judgement on the times,
Some tyrant king, the terror of his age,
The type and true viceregent of thy rage.
(*Poems*, IV, 163; 65-68)

Although Juvenal eschewed a discussion of the politics of his day, he could not escape the fact that the logical conclusion of his philosophical speculations upon human desire was the nature of political ambition. Politics, and in particular, political rulers, always imply notions of worldly greatness, and the greatest of political rulers in antiquity was the military mastermind, Alexander, originally of Macedon. A paragon of political organisation and heroic achievement, Alexander brought the city-states of the Greek and Mediterranean world under his sole jurisdiction, an accomplishment that had fired the Roman imperial imagination.³⁹⁵ For Juvenal, however, Alexander was the supreme example of human fallibility, and the lessons to be learned from him concerned the vanity of conquest and control. Indeed, to judge by the following

³⁹⁴ *Politics and Language in Dryden's Poetry: The Art of Disguise* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 173.

³⁹⁵ A similar example is made of the Carthaginian General, Hannibal, in lines 234-272 of Persius's second satire.

extract, Dryden seems to be tentatively exploring a political analogy that he would develop far more purposefully in such poems as *Alexander's Feast* (1697) and 'To John Dryden of Chesterton' (1700):

One world sufficed not *Alexander's* mind;
 Cooped up, he seemed in earth and seas confined,
 And, struggling, stretched his restless limbs about
 The narrow globe to find a passage out;
 Yet, entered in the brick-built town, he tried
 The tomb, and found the strait dimensions wide.
 Death only this mysterious truth unfolds:
 The mighty soul how small a body holds.
 (*Poems*, IV, 115-16; 273-80)

(One world is not enough for the young man from Pella. In discontent he seethes at the narrow limits of the universe as if confined on the rocks of Gyara or tiny Seriphus. But once he entered the city that's fortified by potters, his coffin will be enough. It's only death that reveals the miniscule size of human bodies.) (p. 381)³⁹⁶

Alexander's materialism was his tragic flaw and Dryden expands the sense of dislocation between heroic aspiration and one's inexorable fate. As his horizons expanded, so his anxiety increased. Interestingly, Dryden also casts Alexander's ambition in terms of its effects upon his physiology. His struggling, restless limbs, spurred to action by a limitless mind, were ultimately defeated by the limits of the one insufficient world.³⁹⁷ And yet, he that would be larger than life could not escape his inevitable finitude, nor hope to glimpse the secret operations of the universe he sought to master – which was, of course, entirely indifferent to his impulses. The wider ramifications of striving for 'things beyond their native worth' (*Poems*, IV, 111; 207), of the

³⁹⁶ (Vnus Pellaeo iuveni non sufficit orbis,
 aestuat infelix angusto limite mundi
 ut Gyarae clausus scopulis parvaque Seripho;
 cum tamen a figulis munitam intraverit urbem,
 sarcophago contentus erit. mors sola fatetur
 quantula sint hominum corpuscular.)
 (*Satire X*, 380; 168-73)

³⁹⁷ Cited in *Poems*, IV, p. 115fn.

‘mad chase of fame, by few pursued’ (Dryden’s addition, *Poems*, IV, 112; 224) was for Dryden very clear – ‘destruction on the multitude’ (*Poems*, IV, 112; 225).

Though Juvenal’s solution was simple, it was, it seems, at the same time unattainable, as his rhetorical question of lines 222-23 implies: ‘For who would Virtue for herself regard, / Or wed without the portion of reward?’ Dryden’s translation of *Satire X* affords an additional insight. Indeed, virtue, or *arête*, may have been the traditional preserve of philosophy, but the reference to the strait dimension evokes Jesus’s Sermon of the Mount: ‘Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide *is* the gate, and broad *is* the way, that leadeth to destruction [...] narrow *is* the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it’.³⁹⁸ The significance of this metaphor is enhanced by its context. Coming directly after Christ’s speech on God’s provision for the humble believer, and directly before Christ’s counsel against false prophets, Dryden used this allusion to emphasise the compatibility between the Christian worldview and philosophical ethics, for his seventeenth-century readers. A better example of this interplay occurs earlier in the poem, in lines 212-19, where Dryden recalls Satan’s temptation of Christ with ‘all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them’ at ‘the pinnacle of the temple’:

A chap-fall’n beaver loosely hanging by
The cloven helm; an arch of victory.
On whose high convex sits a captive foe,
And sighing casts a mournful look below:
Of every nation each illustrious name
Such toys as these have cheated into fame,
Exchanging solid quiet to obtain
The windy satisfaction of the brain.
(*Poems*, IV, 111-12; 212-19)

Clearly, all such criticisms of Alexander might well have applied to William. Despite exhortations to peace, the new king fought an expensive, and to some degree needless, war on

³⁹⁸ See Matthew: 7:13-14 and Matthew 4:5-11, respectively

the Continent in an attempt to secure Britain against an invasion from Catholic France, and, of course, to quash all chances of a Jacobite counterrevolution. Conflict with France was the unwelcome legacy of the Dutch monarchy, which, to a disgruntled band of the Tory faithful, was turning Britain into a military state.

Lest there are doubts that he intended the association, Dryden left us clues. The reference to a ‘mob, commissioned by the government’ in line 27 is his own addition, an addition that Hammond and Hopkins contend ‘possibly alludes to the accusations of state-orchestrated violence levelled during the exclusion crisis’; it may also have alluded to William’s standing army, which did nothing to assuage popular fears in post-revolutionary England, and, arguably, reflected William’s own anxieties.³⁹⁹ However, it is in his interpolations in lines 112-23 that Dryden gives us his most comprehensible political insights. Anticipating the lines on Alexander, Dryden identified the restless ambitions of the self-interested ruler with the endlessly competing interests of the ruled, or the mob. Likewise covetous of worldly prestige, it too was likely to bring destruction on the multitude.⁴⁰⁰ Alexander may have referred to William, but as an example of ambition and apprehension he was universally relevant:

How goes the mob (for that’s a mighty thing)?
 When the king’s trump, the mob are for the king;
 They follow Fortune, and the common cry
 Is still against the rogue condemned to die.
 But the same very mob, that rascal crowd,
 Had cried ‘Sejanus’ with a shout as loud,
 Had his designs, by Fortune’s favour blessed,
 Succeeded, and the prince’s age oppressed.
 But long, long since, the times have changed their face,
 The people grown degenerate and base;
 Not suffered now the freedom of their choice

³⁹⁹ *Poems*, IV, p. 99fn. 7

⁴⁰⁰ For further details on the political influence of the mob in Dryden’s post-revolution translations, see David Bywaters, *Dryden in Revolutionary England*, pp. 126-7.

To make the magistrates, and sell their voice.
 Our wise forefathers, great by sea and land,
 Had once the power and absolute command;
 All offices of trust themselves disposed,
 Raised whom they pleased, and whom they pleased deposed;
 But we who give our native rights away,
 And our enslaved posterity betray,
 Are now reduced to beg an alms, and go
 On holidays to see a puppet-show.
 (*Poems*, IV, 105-106; 112-31)

(But what of Remus' mob? They are followers of Fortune, as always, and hate those who are condemned. This same crowd, if Nortia had supported her Etruscan, if the aged emperor had been smothered off his guard, would be hailed Sejanus as Augustus within minutes. It's way back that they discarded their responsibilities – since the time we stopped selling our votes. The proof? The people that once used to bestow military commands, high office, legions, everything, now limits itself. It has an obsessive desire for two things only – bread and circuses.) (p. 373)⁴⁰¹

Lapped up with foolish alacrity by the masses, the career of Lucius Aelius Sejanus was a spectacle that exposed the dangerous ebb and flow of public opinion. For Dryden, the inevitable outcome was a degeneration of the people and a disintegration of traditional and cherished values into superficiality, as indicated by the pun on puppet-show which modifies *panem et circenses* (bread and circuses) from the original Latin.

In some respects, Persius entertained a far more practical policy of retreat than Juvenal had done.

To Juvenal's emphasis upon convalescence or regeneration in the third satire, for example, he

⁴⁰¹ (sed quid
 turba Remi? sequitur fortunam, ut semper, et odit
 damnatos. idem populus, si Nortia Tusco
 favisset, si oppressa foret secunda senectus
 principis, hac ipsa Seianum diceret hora
 Augustum. iam pridem, ex quo suffragia nulli
 Vendimus, effudit curas; nam qui dabat olim
 Imperium, fasces, legiones, omnia, nunc se
 continet atque duas tantum res anxius optat,
 panem et circenses.)
 (*Satire X*, 372; 72-81)

advocated intellectual abandonment, giving ground, as he did, to the infallible guide of a kind of inner sight. Where it appeared, Dryden's translation of this concept was 'conscience', a christianisation of Perisus's stoicism. However, Persius's stoical sentiments regarding individuality remain intact, encoded in the religious language of the day, as the translation to the first satire succinctly puts it: 'The conscience is the test of every mind: / Seek not thyself without thyself to find' (15-16). With its emphasis upon conscience as test of mind, this seemingly casual line appears to refer to the debate about the test act, taken up in *The Hind and the Panther*.⁴⁰²

Two moments from the first Persius and tenth Juvenal reveal the extent to which their convictions overlap, and the extent to which their poetic insights to this end coincide. I quote them respectively:

[Here as the friend]
 Why have I learned, say'st thou, if thus confined
 I choke the noble vigour of my mind?
 Know, my wild fig-tree, which in rocks is bred,
 Will split the quarry, and shoot out the head.
 Fine fruits of learning! Old ambitious fool,
 Dar'st thou apply that adage of the school,
 As if 'tis nothing worth that lies concealed,
 And 'Science is not science till revealed'?
 (*Poems*, IV, 143-42; 52-59)

(What's the point of studying, if this yeast, this wild fig tree, once it's taken root inside can't rupture the liver and burst out?) (p. 51)⁴⁰³

and

This avarice of praise in times to come,
 Those long inscriptions crowded on the tomb,
 Should some wild fig-tree take her native bent
 And heave below the gaudy monument,
 Would crack the marble titles, and disperse

⁴⁰² See my fourth chapter.

⁴⁰³ ("quo didicisse, nisi hoc fermentum et quae semel intus innata est rupto iecore exiret caprificus?")

The characters of all the lying verse:
 For sepulchres themselves must crumbling fall
 In time's abyss, the common grave of all.
 (*Poems*, IV, 112; 226-33)

(Yet there have been times when a country has been sunk by the ambition of a few, by their lust for renown and for an inscription to cling to the stones that guard their ashes, stones that can be split open by the evil strength of the barren fig tree, seeing that even graves have been allotted their own lifespan.)
 (p. 379)⁴⁰⁴

Evidently sceptical in its attitude to science, or knowledge, the Persius passage denounces learning for its own sake as vain acquisitiveness, entirely at odds with the noble vigour of an unperturbed mind, or *ataraxia*, which the Pyrrhonist covets. Dryden made a similar statement but with much more explicit political overtones in his translation of Boccaccio's 'Sigismonda and Guiscardo' published in *Fables Ancient and Modern*:

Ev'n mighty monarchs oft are meanly born,
 And kings by birth to lowest rank return;
 All subject to the power of giddy Chance,
 For Fortune can depress, or can advance:
 But true nobility is of the mind,
 Not given by Chance, and not to Chance resigned.
 (*Poems*, V, 242; 557-62)

Replete with allusions to the nature and natural legitimacy of monarchy, this translation can be read as an extension, even fulfilment, of Dryden's late seventeenth-century political pronouncements explored more tentatively in the Juvenal and Persius translations. Equally, the tenth satire condemns the vanity of worldly esteem, emphasising how historical records preserved in marble as an enduring monument to civilisation deceive successive generations over the true value of life. What they both attempt to illustrate is the inevitability of decay, as

⁴⁰⁴ (patriam tamen obruit olim
 gloria paucorum et laudis titulique cupido
 haesuri saxi cinerum custodibus, ad quae
 discutienda valent sterilis mala robora fici,
 quandoquidem data sunt ipsis quoque fata sepulcris.)
 (Satire X, 378; 142-46)

represented by the unruly fig tree, a weed that always seeks to take over in spite of any effort on our part to defy or snuff out its growth. Echoes of Lucretius can be plainly seen here, but the theme of *Tempus edax rerum* – or Time the devourer of all things – was to preoccupy Dryden until the end of his life.

Without doubt, it is no accident that Dryden turned to translation late in his career – as a culmination, one might say, of a philosophical preoccupation that can be traced in his early career. In his ‘Preface to the *Examem Poeticum*’ (1693), where he turns to his own theatrical context, it is clear that, far from a surrender to simple tradition or government control, writers have to forge a modern reputation. He, especially, excoriates those who would ‘throw dirt on the writers of this age [...] By a seeming veneration to our fathers, they would thrust out us, their lawful issue, and govern us themselves, under a specious pretence of reformation’. (*Poems*, IV, p. 212). But this use of past precedent actually suffers by ‘mechanic rules’ (*Poems*, IV, p. 216). Imitation, ever preferable to metaphrase, succeeds where simple translation cannot. To say that the office of a translator was inevitable, not only informal work of that name, but true of all literary efforts at the turn of the century, has a sobering effect. It is, as Bywaters notes, a primary literary task to rival and even surpass past precedent:

The poet, Dryden suggests, sees through the particular habits and customs to the unchanging truth that lies beneath; from his perspective, distinctions between Catholic and Protestant, Whig and Tory, simply do not matter. Further, the poet who sees the eternal beneath the ephemeral is himself eternal: Chaucer has lived to Dryden's time despite changes in language and customs, and Dryden expects the same for himself.⁴⁰⁵

It is only by clearly dramatising this struggle – in translation or imitation – that the necessary precision of this state of affairs could be expressed. In Juvenal, for instance, he found a satirical

⁴⁰⁵ *Dryden in Revolutionary England*, p. 117.

voice that contrasted with, and ultimately complemented, his own. Like Lucretius, Juvenal was greatly influenced by Epicurean philosophy, but his politicisation of largely Epicurean concepts transformed his poetry into a powerful commentary against government corruption; the decline in moral and aesthetic standards he associated with this was a major focus in Dryden's translation. Similarly, the Stoic Persius served as a model of tireless persistence and resilient individualism, qualities required to overcome the adversities of contemporary life.

As I have shown, all the themes of legitimacy are explored and made relevant to the seventeenth century, so much so that even the most politically indifferent seventeenth-century readers of the two satirists would not have failed to recognise in the ancient world the political permutations of their own era – not just the revolution of 1688, but also the civil wars and the Restoration. Being in this way encouraged to compare the two historical periods, they would have quickly understood that one of the conclusions offered them was that humanity is fundamentally incapable of learning from its mistakes. And encouraging us to apprehend the cyclical nature of history, Dryden ultimately demonstrated that Juvenal and Persius shared the same fundamental belief that escape or retreat was a viable philosophical consolation, despite their apparently different philosophical dispositions.

Conclusion

According to Louis Bredvold, scepticism in the early-modern period should be regarded as a ‘historical force [...] protean in nature, as much a group of tendencies as a system’.⁴⁰⁶ As I have shown, this would appear to be very much the case; far from offering anything in the way of a formal paradigm of conceptual thought, early-modern scepticism was largely a loose assortment of different, often conflicting (and sometimes competing), ideas. Various philosophical, religious, political and cultural in their emphases, these ideas can, of course, be understood dialectically. Indeed, originating as a defence of ecclesiastical convention, which would in a general way extend to all established authority, they quickly crystallised into an argument against all possibility of knowledge. Thereafter, they became central to a new epistemological sensibility that aimed at the reconstruction of knowledge in the academies and research institutions of the day.

Equally, from the revival of Academic and Pyrrhonic philosophy in the mid-sixteenth century, to the scientific formulations of the late seventeenth century, no single form of scepticism fully supplanted another. Descartes’s attempt to foil the endgame of Pyrrhonism, for example, did result in a new ‘science of appearances’, but the sceptical impulse he had been seeking to challenge was merely re-consigned to those areas of inquiry that would founder upon a difficult or impossible epistemological impasse – which is to say, upon those (often metaphysical) questions where no answers can be found because the evidence needed to make a cognitive judgement is inaccessible to sense perception and the reasoning intellect. Similarly, the predominantly reactionary insights of Academic sceptics like Erasmus and Sebastian Castellio

⁴⁰⁶ Bredvold, p. 16.

became the defining premise of progressive political thinkers like Hugo Grotius and Hobbes. All were seeking to fly from a religious and political fanaticism which they thought was eroding or had eroded traditional religious and political authority, and all posited the practical necessity of dogma to this end.

Significantly, there is evidence to suggest that by the end of the seventeenth century, the paradoxical nature of early-modern sceptical thought could be accommodated in a single worldview. Perhaps the best example of this was Pomfret's *The Sceptical Muse*. As a member of the Anglican clergy in the closing years of the seventeenth century, Pomfret may well have displayed all the confidence of a free-thinking Latitudinarian; yet any sympathies he had for this new stream of religious ideas was balanced by a general sceptical reserve. I quote the concluding lines of the poem:

If there's a God, it then must be believ'd
 He's no Deceiver, nor can be deceiv'd;
 And if he spake, as may be plainly prov'd;
 Then truth prevails, and every doubt's remov'd.
 Here then at last my weary'd Soul shall rest:
 With Heav'nly light, and sacred knowledge blest.
 And now methinks bright Angels round me stand,
 And bid me welcome to a peaceful Land.
 Methinks I'm lifted to an higher Sphere
 Where all is mild, and all the Prospect clear:
 From hence I can behold contending Schools,
 Disputing Sects, Philosophers, and Fools;
 Now I can each Hypothesis despise,
 Laugh at Opinions, and be boldly wise:
 No more, Ye *Dogmatists*, your Wit shall harm
 My liss'ning Soul, no more my Reason charm;
 No more you shall my Faculties controul:
 Suspicion guards, and Doubt defends my Soul.⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰⁷ *The Sceptical Muse*, p. 10.

Having opened with a description of humanity in a prelapsarian state, Pomfret, like many sceptics before him, accounted God's grace and truth as 'without doubt the same' (p. 2); also like his antecedents, he argued that the sense of certainty afforded to Adam before the Fall was lost, as God has withdrawn his light (p. 4), and that the 'little knowledge now which Man obtains' was but gleaned from 'outward Objects, and from Sense' (p. 5). Then, with a long explanation of human psychological processes, including, crucially, the need to find some semblance of truth in an essentially unknowable world, Pomfret begins to turn to the tradition of sceptical thought more and more. Certainly, his statement 'Our prepossessions and Affections bind / The Soul in Chains and lord it o'er the Mind' (p. 7), along with references to 'vain Ambition' (p. 4) and 'Passions [...] Uncivil, rude' (p. 6) that 'cause strange Conceptions and pervert the Will' (p. 6), directly recall Erasmus and Hobbes; other general criticisms of philosophy seem straight out of Montaigne: 'Thus are we Debtors to the famous Dead / For all those Errors which their Phancies bred' (p. 8).

However, as the above passage shows, Pomfret's scepticism was by no means entirely anti-epistemological. Reasoning that God was no deceiver, he appeared to be echoing the first principles of Cartesian ontology, which, as the jointly scientific and religious theories of Joseph Glanvill attest, would turn his more conventional claims on their head; compare, for instance, the positive affirmation quoted at the end of the previous paragraph with the following statement from the poem: 'Life now does scarce one glimpse of light display; / We mourn in darkness, and Despair of day' (p. 4). More to the point, though, Pomfret's final lines employ the suspension of judgement first advocated by Pyrrhonism and passionately promoted by Montaigne, and so, like

them, ultimately denounce the dogmatists, the very believers and thinkers for whom a conviction of the natural eminence of established authority and custom was best served by Pyrrhonism.

An excellent summary of the sceptical developments that came to define the early-modern period, *The Sceptical Muse* does not read like an inconsistent outline of sceptical ideas; on the contrary, it seems to smooth out the contradictions in scepticism's nascent history. Undoubtedly, the poem generated much of its effect by reinforcing the dominant ideological perspective of late seventeenth-century Britain; at the very least, maintaining two apparently contradictory opinions at one and the same time, Pomfret was enjoying a political climate that allowed for a certain freedom of religious thought. However, if it had been Pomfret's intention to express the intellectual temper of his own age, then his writing clearly reflected a changed view of scepticism. Indeed, Erasmus, Montaigne, Hobbes, even the new scientists, had all written specifically to refute any political, religious and philosophical claims upon what they regarded as truth, or upon the orthodoxies on which they and their contemporaries had traditionally come to depend. Ambivalence and anxiety was everywhere present, if not always immediately obvious, in their writings, and, as was specifically the case with Hobbes, Bacon and Glanvill, the survival of national identity relied upon the need for progress, even a heroic struggle for imperial greatness. Pomfret, for his part, had written with apparent ease, giving no thought to the political concerns of tomorrow; as Dillon's concluding remarks in his recent study, *The Last Revolution* (2007), shows, the nation was taking care of itself:

The country should have descended into anarchy. That was what traditionalists had always predicted for such a state. England should have slid into civil war, given the distances that separated its extremes. It should have succumbed to God's wrath. But it did not [...] For some reason it proved durable, this place where power was forever divided and fought over, this hybrid state created by the Revolution – not just durable, but

successful. Its remarkable achievement was to preserve competing power-bases intact and somehow hold them in a state of perpetual, stable reaction.⁴⁰⁸

Never knowing such a state of felicity, it was, ultimately, anxiety and ambivalence – that sense of living from one moment to the next – which defined Dryden’s own sceptical muse. Having witnessed the horrors of the civil wars and the initial optimism of the Restoration, and having lived through the instability of the Exclusion Crisis and the Orange accession, Dryden understood that scepticism could be affirmative and redemptive, intrinsically valuable as both a judicious commentary on, and conclusive counter-claim to, the best and worst intellectual impulses of the time. As my second chapter argues, Dryden shared in the Restoration image of optimism during the 1660s and early 1670s, but he was cautious about glorifying Britain’s political destiny unreservedly. Despite embracing a new era of peace and prosperity, his Restoration panegyric, *Astraea Redux*, betrays a general scepticism about the likelihood of the Golden Age that it otherwise seeks to usher in; this is especially apparent when compared with the earlier elegy to Cromwell where strong pragmatic political authority is lauded as the more plausible agent of national good fortune. In *Annus Mirabilis* and *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* – texts which display the influence of Royal Society scientific sceptical methodology – this general scepticism becomes intrusive, to the point that Dryden’s characterisation of Britain as a political and imperial superpower seems like an escape from the bleak reality of war with the Dutch, rather than the expected outcome of it.

Moreover, as my third chapter shows, the working relationship between king and parliament, and, specifically, the ability of certain individuals within the ruling hierarchy to curb private interests in matters of religion and state, was also a source of concern for the sceptical Dryden.

⁴⁰⁸ Patrick Dillon, *The Last Revolution* (London: Pimlico, 2007), p. 370.

Set in the courts of Peru, Mexico and Spain and India, plays like *The Indian Queen*, *The Conquest of Granada* and *Aureng-Zebe* explore topical questions about political legitimacy outside of a British context; frequently they echo Hobbesian sentiments about the power of pragmatic politics. By the time of the Exclusion Crisis, when, in his view, the ambitions of the emerging Whig party had intruded upon the king's prerogative, Dryden became a vociferous advocate of established authority and, accordingly, of an older strain of sceptical thought: though the satirical tone of *Absalom and Achitophel* and *The Medal* is not strictly in keeping with the writings of Erasmus, Castellio and Montaigne, the declamations against 'wild ambition' that punctuate such poems throughout certainly are.

Dryden's religious writings, which were the subject of my fourth chapter, also reveal how the poet writes to the moment. Often interpreted as a conventional work of the Anglican faith, *Religio Laici* combines a number of sceptical arguments to produce a peculiarly unconventional commentary on the nature of religion in the 1680s. The ease with which Dryden brings together these arguments suggests, ahead of *The Sceptical Muse*, a kind of liberation from any prevailing religious position. However, in parallel with the accession of the Catholic James II, Dryden converted to Catholicism in the late 1680s, and his *The Hind and the Panther* sees him adopt the intellectual outlook of Montaigne and the sixteenth-century Catholic fideists, making historical analogies which put him out of step with the times and which signal a more private phase in the public poet's career.

This can be seen in the translation literature of his later years, where Dryden actively redefines his poetic persona. In Lucretius, Juvenal and Persius he achieved the Epicurean and Stoical

equivalent of *ataraxia*, or peace of mind, taking his leave from the public arena, away from the cacophony of competing political and cultural voices which had inevitably prevented his abiding desire for intellectual repose. Underpinning this is a growing appreciation of his own incidental place in the natural order of things, and crucially, the futility of our efforts to understand God's grand design.

For Bredvold, the defining outlook of seventeenth-century sceptical thought was Pyrrhonism, arguing, despite little evidence to suggest that Dryden and his contemporaries had consciously espoused Pyrrhonic ideas, that neither 'Dryden nor his age can be fully understood apart from [...] Pyrrhonism, diffused in every department of thought [...] appearing [...] in the most unexpected places'.⁴⁰⁹ For Harth, seventeenth-century scepticism was, to quote him again, predominantly a 'confident affirmation of the powers of human reason', nothing at all to do with intellectual doubt.⁴¹⁰ At the very least, the last lines of 'The Sceptical Muse' were confirmation that a habit of thought we might identify as Pyrrhonic was still germane, and, more generally, the confidence expressed by that poem is not insignificant. Yet Pyrrhonism was at best only an aspect of scepticism in the seventeenth century, whilst confidence in rational thought was largely the preserve of a more purely theoretical sceptical view, which, its contemporary practical applications notwithstanding, came into its own in the eighteenth century.⁴¹¹ For Dryden, however, scepticism was largely the means by which he could both displace his fears about any given historical moment in which he was writing, and form his own judgement to this end. Dryden was 'not by nature an ideologue', insists Winn; instead, 'his capacity to argue both sides of many questions [...] must have convinced him that no mere opinion was worth dying for', nor

⁴⁰⁹ Bredvold, p. 15.

⁴¹⁰ Bredvold, p. 31, p. 24.

⁴¹¹ Parker, p. 53.

even ‘worth maintaining at the cost of one’s career’.⁴¹² The following speech from *The Indian Queen* (1665) seems emblematic of Dryden’s sceptical convictions:

God. Seek not to know what must not be reveal’d;
Joys only flow where Fate is most conceal’d:
Too-buisie Man wou’d find his sorrows more,
If future Fortunes he shou’d know before;
For by that knowledge of his Destiny
He wou’d not live at all, but always die.
(*Works*, VIII, III. 2. 95-100)

To this might be added a few lines from the third part of *The Hind and the Panther*: ‘But least of all philosophy presumes / Of truth in dreams, from melancholy fumes’ (*Poems*, III, pt III. 511-12) and

[...] int’reast is the most prevailing cheat,
The sly seducer both of age and youth;
When int’reast fortifies an argument,
They study that, and think they study truth.
Weak reason serves to gain the will’s assent
(*Poems*, III, pt III. 394-99).

Dryden’s last work, ‘The Secular Masque’, is often used by contemporary critics as a final illustration of his expansive intellectual sensibilities, an illustration which for them is ultimately indicative of their own theoretical insights about Dryden’s work. I, for my part, pretend to be no exception to that general rule. Like Zwicker, I hold that ‘The Secular Masque’ ‘ends in return and renewal’ and that this could be symptomatic of ‘a reconciliation to which Dryden had come in his last years’.⁴¹³ Yet I also hold that the masque was expressive of Dryden’s sceptical conclusions. Momus’s characteristically sceptical belief that ‘The world was a fool e’er since it begun’ (*Poems*, V, 602; 16) and that the preceding century was ‘A very merry, dancing, drinking, / Laughing, quaffing and unthinking time’ (*Poems*, V, 603; 39-40), together with the chorus’s bitter observation that ‘Thy wars brought nothing about’ (*Poems*, V, 605; 88) is not

⁴¹² Winn, p. 68.

⁴¹³ Zwicker, *Dryden’s Political Poetry: The Typology of King and Nation*, p. 176.

nullified by the seeming hope of the text's melancholy refrain: 'Tis well an old age is out, / And time to begin a new' (*Poems*, V, 605; 90-91 and 95-96); instead, what Dryden was proclaiming is an honest and open unknowingness, suggesting that the swirls and eddies of history could convey us anywhere.

The subtitle of this thesis, 'Towards a Definition of Dryden's Scepticism', both reflects the variety of the author's cultural and aesthetic aspirations and formulates the difficulties of arriving at a consistent and accurate definition of Dryden's variety. Any global statement about Dryden's politics or religion is likely to come up against some very rapid changes in circumstance throughout the years of his maturity as a poet, from the optimism of the early Restoration to the resigned pragmatism of the post-revolution Settlement. Throughout, however, there are at least two constants that Dryden recognised, even if strictly topical or local emphases were liable to change and modifications: the need for the poet to address a public and not a coterie or sectional interest, and the need to escape from fundamentalist concepts of the self and one's beliefs. Frequently, Dryden had recourse to his own version of the reality principle to temper individual inspiration, even in matters of deep faith. The result is a curiously modern aesthetic to be confused with neither postmodernist indecisiveness nor the need for biographical consistency.

Furthermore, this perspective drew on impulses that were by no means fideistic. The mere fact that Dryden proclaimed himself a Catholic in later years does not point to a deep alteration in aesthetic or philosophical direction. The poet, acutely sensitive to dialectical alternatives, wrestled with ideas that confronted his faith and challenged it with, at times, unpalatable alternatives. As a progression beyond both Bredvold and Harth, and as an extension to the

commentaries of Hammond and Hopkins, this study illustrates the significance and use of sceptical thought in Dryden's work – its restless energy and unfathomable terms of reference, and latterly, its provision of *ataraxia*, a vantage point from which to regard dogma and misguided ambition. Accompanying this is a set of re-definitions of a public poet role, a display of deep self-awareness and social responsibility.

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