Abraham Cowley, the Transitional Poet

Stella F. Sheehy
Loyola University Chicago

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ABRAHAM COWLEY
THE TRANSITIONAL POET

By

Stella F. Sheehy

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Of The Requirements For The Degree Of
Master Of Arts

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"Some poets outlive their reputation, and have the melancholy perception of the fading wreath of their fame to sadden their declining years, while some have no reputation to outlive. Some, on the other hand, win great renown both in their own day and during several successive generations after their death, and then suddenly cease to be read or regarded. They survive only in the memory of students of literature, who look upon them either with a critical eye, to ascertain their rank in the history of poetry, or are moved with surprise at the taste of their predecessors. Of this class is Abraham Cowley, who was all but worshipped in his own day, and perhaps for two generations after his death, but whose comparatively difficult poems are seldom read now, and more seldom understood. In short, to most of the cultured he is merely a name, and he may have been said to have outlived the honor in which he was formerly held, and to live only in the reputation of a reputation, which once was his.\(^1\)

Why is Cowley, who was once the most popular poet of his age, now forgotten? The works of Cowley present the student of English Literature with a two-fold riddle: Why did

\(^1\) Arthur W. Fox, \textit{A Book Of Bachelors.} P. 203.
they at one time attract extravagant praise, and at another time deep contempt? Through what chain of vicissitudes did they pass before reaching their present humble station?

"Every thoughtful reader who goes even a little way into Cowley will become increasingly aware of two dominant impressions forming in his own mind. He will feel a massiveness and intensity of poetry, latent almost everywhere, but not often realized by Cowley in actual words and image and design. Though Cowley rarely wrote poetry as great as the Ode on Hervey, there is an equally high spirit latent in much of his poetry, as Milton felt, and as Wordsworth was to feel. The reader will perceive in the second place, as many critics since Goese have pointed out, how far he is moving into the world of Dryden and Pope. What I have to say, taking its start from these two points of massiveness and rhetoric, should perhaps be called a footnote to previous work of Cowley. In the light of them, I want to stress a new emphasis in the interpretation of his work and to point out certain aspects of his influence which deserve special attention. For Cowley is not only a poet but even more a man of letters. Studied from this side he illustrates both the type and its function to a remarkable degree."²

² Ruth Wallerstein, Cowley As A Man Of Letters, p. 127.
"Every student of English poetry will admit that two great opposite influences have alternately ruled the writers of verse. Before the age of Elizabeth, it was not quite so easy to mark the difference between the fresh and natural spirit of Chaucer and some of his followers; but from the Mirror For Magistrates, when poetry once more burst into sudden blossom, it is easy enough to trace down to Herrick the unbroken chain of objective and naturalistic poets, born to teach through singing, and not through rhetoric.

With Cowley a wholly new influence came in. From Cowley to Darwin all the poets made oratorical effect take the place of the observation and inspired interpretation of nature. With Collins, through Cowper, and first fully in Wordsworth, came that return to primal forms and primal feeling which still breathes in our latest poetry."

"Cowley gave the reading public a new experience. Tired of the style of the religious and philosophical lyrists, tired of the romantic epic which had slipped from Shakespeare and Marlowe down into such hands as Chamberlayne's, tired of Cavalier song-writers, the public of that day rejoiced in Cowley as Paris a generation before had welcomed Malherbe.

In France, Corneille was making the stage resound with the harmonious cadence of his heroic couplets; why should not England also aspire to such sublime eloquence? Feeling, passion, romance, color all had been poured out so lavishly that the public palate was cloyed with sweetness. The severity of Cowley's writings, their intellectual quality, their cold elevation and dry intelligence, were as charming as they were novel. But the charm was not to last; for Dryden, with assimilative genius of the most marvellous kind, was to tarnish the glory of Cowley by sheer superiority of imitation. No form of verse that Cowley cultivated, with the single exception of the elegy, but was carried to far greater perfection in the same line by Dryden. Even the occasional use of the Alexandrine in heroic verse, Dryden was to eliminate the discoveries of Cowley, rather than to strike out in new paths for himself." 4

"Three writers of less influence than Cowley gave their adherence to the new school, and strengthened the determination of Dryden. These were Davenant, in his stilted dramas; Denham, in his correct but cold and measured descriptive poem Cooper's Hill; and Waller, in his smooth emasculated lyrics. To Cowley alone belongs the honor of inaugurating the reign of didactic and rhetorical poetry in England." 5

4 Ibid., p. 63.
5 Ibid., p. 67.
It may be asked, Why restore a memory so justly dishonored? Why recall to our attention a writer whose verses were but galvanized at the outset, and now are long past all hope of revival?

Mr. Edmund Goese answers these questions thus:

If the judgment of a whole generation has unanimously set an unambitious man on a pedestal of supreme reputation, I am more ready to doubt my own perception than to stigmatize so many cultivated persons with folly. No poet universally admired in his own age can be wholly without lasting merit. Cowley whether judged as a man, or as a litterateur, or even as a poet, has qualities of positive and intrinsic merit.

The opinions of later ages concerning the works of literary men who in their own times have achieved considerable popularity are always an interesting field of study, for they form a valuable index to the growth of taste and critical theory.

The reason of his comparative neglect at the present time is not far to seek. It is not because he is obscure. Goethe, in the second part of Faust, and Robert Browning, from the lightening-like rapidity of his thought, are by no means transparent in their simplicity; yet each has his widening circle of patient students and faithful admirers, and both the father of German Literature and the author of The Ring And The Book merit careful study and enthusiastic admiration.  

6 Edmund Goße, From Shakespeare To Pope, p. 153.
But Cowley's obscurity does not lie so much in the depth of his thought, as is the case with his great successors; he is difficult to read from the unusually labored style in which he wrote, and from his tendency to far-fetched plays of wit. No one realized more than he the necessity of being at the same time brief and telling; but for the most part, when he toiled after brevity, he attained obscurity.

Himself the most severe critic of his muse, he yet believed that some of his work would live forever. Singing the praises of his mistress, who may have been merely a creation of his fancy, he says of his poems:

And when in future times they shall be read,  
As sure I think they will not die. 7

"There must be something in the works of a poet who commanded such successive admiration in the minds of many competent critics; and an examination of the reasons of his contemporary fame and of its fading, will not be time unprofitably thrown away. Such an investigation will lead over dangerous ground, and through not a few bypaths, in which individual taste must of necessity be the only guide. But to recall the past glories of the dead poet, and if possible to reawaken some of the enthusiasm with which he was honored in his own lifetime, is surely a charitable office. Besides, good poets are not so common today." 8

7 Abraham Cowley, Works (Ed. VI., 1680) p. 65.  
8 Arthur W. Fox, A Book Of Bachelors, p. 207.
"The period of English poetry which lies between the
decline of Ben Jonson and the rise of Dryden was ruled with
undisputed sway by the man whose works are now as little read
as those of any fifth-rate Elizabethan dramatist. During the
whole lifetime of Milton, the fame of that glorious poet was
obscured and dwarfed by the exaggerated reputation of Cowley,
and so general and so unshaken was the belief in the lyricist of
the day, that a royalist gentleman of Cambridge or an exiled
courtier at Paris in the year 1650 would have laughed in your
face had you suggested that time would ever wither the death­
less laurels of Cowley, or untune the harmonies of his majestic
numbers. Yet in a very short space the work of destruction
was most thoroughly done. The generation of Dryden admired
his genius passionately, but not without criticism. The
generation of Pope praised him coldly, but without reading
him, and within fifty years of his own decease this nonpareil
of the Restoration fell into total disfavor and oblivion.
With the revival of naturalistic poetry, the lyricists and
dramatists of the reign of Charles I came into favor once more.
Crashaw, Quarles, Lovelace, martyrs, pietists, and rakes, all
the true children of the Muses, whatever their mode or matter,
were restored and reprinted; but Cowley, the one representative
genius of the age, as his contemporaries supposed, almost
lacks an editor who would collect his works and give him the
chance of a new lease of life. His prose essays have held
their ground, but as a poet he is a dead man, or living only
in depreciation and ridicule. We shall try to show that how-
ever great his faults, his depreciation is unjust and his
ridicule absurd, and in doing this it will be necessary to
solve two questions -- why Cowley ever attained so immense a
poetic reputation, and why having once gained it, he has so
completely lost it." 9

Who now reads Cowley? If he pleases yet,
His moral pleases, not his pointed wit;
Forget his Epic, nay Pindaric art;
But still I love the language of his heart. 10

Thus wrote Pope, more than two hundred years ago, of
the once famous Cowley; and thus wrote Cowper:

There, too, enamored of the life I loved,
I studied, prized, and wished that I had known
Ingenious Cowley. 11

The man of whom Pope and Cowper could thus agree to write must
have been highly distinguished both intellectually and morally.

"The former popularity of Cowley is a cause of much
perplexity to the modern critic. He can hardly understand how
it came to pass that a writer, now almost unread, should have
ranked with the greatest poets of antiquity. Cowley was the
fashionable poet of his age. No writer received praises like
those which were showered upon him. Some classed his works

10 Pope, Epistle To Augustus, p. 75.
with those of Spenser and Shakespeare; others placed him above all the preceding poets of his native land. This was not the judgment of inferior men, but the decision of the highest judges in literature. Sir John Denham declared that posterity would rank Cowley with Virgil, and that he united in himself the natural genius of Shakespeare and Fletcher, with the artistic power of Spenser and Jonson. Dryden refers to him as "the darling of my youth, the famous Cowley"; while Bishop Sprat, not only described the works of Cowley as immortal monuments, but calls him the English Ovid, Anacreon, Pindar, and Virgil. In his admiration the Bishop exclaims: "What angel sat upon thy pen when thou didst write?" In another verse he calls Cowley the eagle and Pindar the wren. Even the sublime Milton classed the Poet of Chertsey with the brightest names in English Literature." 12 Durham thinks Cowley finer than Ovid. 13

Nearer to our own times, we hear Cowper, whose taste was pure and natural, expressing his love for Cowley, whom he well characterizes as the "ingenious Cowley", but justly adds:

I cannot but lament thy splendid wit,
Entangled in the cobweb of the schools. 14

"The praise of this neglected author is as graceful and

12 Downing, Poets And Statesmen, p. 38.
13 Durham, Critical Essays Of The Eighteenth Century, p. 35.
14 Cowper, The Task, Bk. IV, The Winter Evening, 1, 725.
natural as his poetry is ingenious, and bears witness to the largeness of his reading and the extent of his knowledge. His verses have few strains of poetic enthusiasm, and are never pathetic. These are not qualities of poetry which in his day were in fashion. He gave what the age demanded; sometimes just and often fanciful resemblances and oppositions of images and thoughts. He had his reward in being ranked as a poet by his contemporaries above all others in his time."

"That he is no longer read is not surprising. Of all the old authors in our language few are now read, save by persons of peculiar tastes and habits of study, and even the proportion of these to the rest of the population is, I fear, gradually becoming less. Poets of greater genius than Cowley are neglected by the mass of readers. Books have multiplied of late to such extent that whoever reads all the new ones which possess a certain degree of merit has hardly time for anything else. In this way ignorance of the older literature of our language is becoming more common from year to year. Many persons of considerable reading appear as if they had scarcely ever heard of any author who wrote before the year 1800. The prospect is not encouraging for contemporary men of genius, who aspire to live in the memory and admiration of succeeding ages. Will it happen that they, too, shall be for-

gotten? Will the years to come, like waves rolling upon a sandy beach, efface their footprints in sweeping over them? Must the volumes which contain their writings be left, just like Cowley's are, to gather dust on the shelves of old libraries, scarce ever opened and never reprinted, while newer books of far less merit engage the universal attention?" 16

"Cowley was more alive than any other writer of his time. It was necessary that he should be so, for he lived in an age of transition. That may seem a futile statement to make for no one ever lived in any other kind of an age. But Cowley lived in an age when the transition was rapid, so rapid that scarcely anyone could keep up with it. It is the distinction of Cowley that he, more than any other man, was the active agent through whom that transition in literature was effected. It is significant that the symbolic figure of Moses looking toward a Promised Land so often furnished him with fine metaphors. He started with Ben Jonson and Donne; he ended with Dryden; and Swift was born the year of his death. He traversed the whole space between the English Renaissance and the English so-called Augustan Age, seeming an equal to the men of one world and a king to the men of the other." 17

"The praise of his admirers must be examined and care-

16 Ibid., p. 98.
fully weighed, since their standards of true poetry differ much from ours, and their opinions in most cases deserve respectful attention. The majority of Cowley's eulogists have succeeded in praising him with greater fulness than discretion. It is poor commendation to admire every line which a poet has written. Indiscriminate praise is as unjust to their memory as undiscriminating censure. Cowley has had his full share of both, and his real title to poetic fame has suffered quite as much from fulsome flattery as from unwise severity.  

Joseph Addison, who may be regarded as a sound judge of a certain kind of poetry, has given no clearer proof of his critical capacity than in his judgment of this poet. In his Account Of The Greatest English Poets, written in 1694, to Sacheverelle, he sings:

Great Cowley, then a mighty genius, wrote,  
O'errun with wit, and lavish of his thought;  
His turns too closely on the reader press;  
He more had pleased us, had he pleased us less.

The young critic, however, ashamed at his own rudness, corrected it by these lines:

Pardon, great poet, that I dare to name  
The unnumbered beauties of thy verse with blame;  
Thy fault is only wit in its excess,  
But wit like thine in any shape will please.

In order to understand what is meant by his wit, it

20 Ibid.
will be necessary to see what Cowley himself designed by his wit; and fortunately he has left a comparatively complete definition, the pitch of which is fairly represented in the following stanza:

In a true piece of wit all things must be,
    Yet all things there agree.
As in the Ark, joined without force or strife,
    All creatures dwelt; all creatures that had life.
Or as the primitive forms of all,
    If we compare great things with small,
Which without discord or confusion lie
    In the strange mirror of the Diety. 21

With this extensive definition as a guide, it is possible to estimate Cowley's position as a poet and as a wit.

"Entirely without mysticism, capable of affection but not of passion, a sincere friend and a tepid lover, his mind dominated his heart and his imagination. It was less pure reason which ruled his faculties than wit, the active and voluntary play of his combined intellect and fancy. His poetry, which never glows and is often imitative and cold, is full of learned reminiscences and scintillates with witticisms." 22

Wit is, more than all else, the mark of Cowley. It is not surprising that one of his small masterpieces is the ode Of Wit. He defines wit in the classical manner, and, prodigal as he is of it himself, he would have it used moderately. He condemns wit which is not controlled by reason or which is dis-

21 Cowley, Of Wit, St. 8.
22 Robert Coffin, Seventeenth Century Prose, p. 494.
played too lavishly, and he adds:

Rather than all things Wit, let none appear. 23

He will have neither puns nor forced similes nor bombast.

True wit is harmonious. This very witty disquisition against wit, with its abundant imagery, ingenius to the point of subtlety, is curious,

"Cowley's remarkable poem Against Hope has the same character. It consists, from one end to the other, of subtle definitions of hope, so witty and so just in their strangeness that it is impossible not to admire the poet's virtuosity. He is on the tight-rope and we expect, at any moment, to see him lapse into bad taste. But, more sure-footed than Donne, he keeps his balance. Crashaw answered this attack on hope by a defense. The retort is very beautiful and more poetical than the condemnation; the comparison of the two poems shows that Cowley lacked the qualities which are properly lyrical, but his brilliant ingenuity remains dazzling." 24

"The qualities which caused Cowley to be worshiped have proved a bar to his posthumous fame. He had attributes which must otherwise have secured him permanent favor. He whom Milton, notwithstanding party hostilities, ranked with Spenser and Shakespeare, in the first rank of English poets; whom Rochester, chief of wits and courtiers, made the pure gold

23 Cowley, Of Wit, St. 5.
24 John Wm, Hebel, Poetry Of The English Renaissance, p. 829.
standard to try base poetry by; whom the jealousy of Pope allowed to be a poet with all his faults, a seventeenth century writer whose works ran through ten editions in twenty years, must have had solid claims to admiration." 25

The influence of Cowley's poetry on contemporary taste was powerful; but taste does not become criticism until it has received reasoned expression. His keenest intellectual powers express themselves in his verse. In his prose he aimed rather at charm and clarity after the fashions of the new standards of France; here, his critical opinions are casual and fragmentary, and, unlike Milton's they explain the externals rather than the essence of his own poetical practice. His chief critical utterances are contained in the 1656 edition of his poems. 26

Abraham Cowley was the precursor of the classicists. Of all the poets of the middle seventeenth century, a few are a link between the past and the present, between the Renaissance and modern times. Their merits should be considered relatively rather than absolutely. Their interest has come to be mainly historical, to lie in the evidence they afford regarding new intellectual and literary tendencies, especially such of these as affect literary form. In their first

rank is Cowley, who was the most famous of them in his lifetime, enjoying a greater reputation not only than Herrick, who was almost unknown, but even than Milton. His position as a major English poet was considered to be as secure as Shakespeare. Milton himself considered that Cowley was one of the three greatest English poets. His renown long outlived him, lessened with the passage of years.

When Johnson wrote his *Lives Of The English Poets* in 1778, he began with Cowley. Cowley existed for him, for all that he complacently gives the list of his faults. Cowley headed the moderns; his predecessors were out of date. Everything about Cowley assigns him to a transitional position; he was the last of the metaphysical poets and in many respects he fore-shadowed the English Classicists.

As a good Angelican and a faithful Royalist, he might be reviewed among the Cavaliers or the religious poets of the middle of the century. Equally, he deserves to be numbered among the disciples of Donne. His knowledge of the ancients, whom he imitates, entitled him to be considered a humanist. But with these characteristics certain others are mingled which are new and which modify them. With all his piety, his fantasy, his pointedness, and his Pindarism, Cowley is, first of all, an intellectual. He was the friend of Hobbes, and an admirer of
Bacon, a founder of the Royal Society and a devotee of science who was made an M.D. of Oxford.

Cowley was always simple and natural. He never talked of himself so that a stranger would know him to be a great poet. Notwithstanding his love of solitude, he had a genius for friendship, and among his nearest friends were men we now count the best of that time from Crashaw to Evelyn.

It has been the general custom to regard Cowley as a Metaphysical Poet; instead, we should think of him as a poet, playwright, Royalist and spy, physican, educational theorist, and an early member of the Royal Society.

With an art moulded by his special temperament and the circumstances of his life, Cowley set forth on his pioneering voyage, even such a voyage, this time on the sea of art, as he described in the Ode addressed to his friend Hobbes:

The great Columbus of the golden lands of new philosophies.

He was not heavily freighted, like Donne, with passion and imagination. "His strength always appears in his agility", remarks Johnson, who here unwittingly placed his heavy finger on a significant equality of Cowley, his bounding and flexible mind; his airy frolicks, his incomparable dance of words. If he had possessed the struggling weightiness of Donne, Cowley

27 Ibid.
28 Cowley, Ode To Hobbes, St. 4.
would have been no more of a pioneer than Donne. Sensitive intelligence was needed for Cowley's task, more even than good taste; for his critics have pointed out with a smile that Cowley's taste was far from impeccable, without being able to see that fine taste involves a regard for convention and tradition which must necessarily sterilize a pioneer. For his own tasks Cowley was none the less specially equipped, and he was content to know, in his own words, that:

Life did never to one man allow
Time to discover worlds and conquer too. 29

His task was in the first place technical. Here Cowley was indefatigable in inventiveness. He remoulded the heroic couplet, he attempted the occasional introductions of Alexandrines, he made advance towards vers libres; he was always trying new metrical effects; his Pindarics and his Anacreontics, his Elegies and his Odes, which sometimes seem so shallow and sometimes so vivacious or so delightful, are always the work of an artist who is feeling his way into the paths of the future, and making mistakes which are as instructive as his successes. It was not only new forms that were wanted, but new material to put into them. Here Cowley was following Donne, with less daring but with an immensely wider range.

"His varied experiences of life, all the new knowledge then coming into the world, his own marvellously receptive

29 Cowley, Ode To The Royal Society, St. 5.
mind, furnished him with a vast and variegated imagery—which he drew upon almost at random. He was, for instance, familiar with war. So it seems obvious to him to compare his heart with a grenade likely to tear and blow up all within should it come in contact with his mistress's stubborn heart. Generations of critics have wearied us in futile condemnation of these conceits. But there is only one thing that matters; Cowley was engaged in the hardest but necessary task of testing and proving the new material for art, and his work made in the end for the enlargement and enrichment of literature.

There was not only new material to be considered; there was the important question of new subjects. For Cowley the world was full of new subjects. He could write a *Hymn To Light* and an ode, *Sitting And Drinking In The Chair Made Out Of The Relics Of Sir Francis Drake's Ship*—both equally novel. He has an Ode to Mr. Harvey, in which he introduces not only the mechanics of the heart but also the liver, and a better *Ode To Mr. Hobbes*. Still finer is the lofty, reflective eloquence of the *Ode To The Royal Society*, where Cowley was making straight the path for Coleridge and for Wordsworth.  

What, briefly, are Cowley's claims on the attention of every one who pretends to an appreciation of and a regard for English Literature?

"In his youth, with boyish enthusiasm and confidence, he set out to scale the Alps of poetry -- to be the Muse's Hannibal. The uncertainty and the lack of firmness in his own character, combined with the political conditions of his time, prevented him from achieving this ambition. But during his career of forty years of writings, he had made more marks in English Literature than most men dared to hope for. He was perhaps the most precocious of English poets, anticipating even Pope in early maturing of his genius. He composed, or at least commenced the first religious epic in English, anticipating Milton by several years. He was the popularizer, almost the inventor, of the Pindaric or irregular ode. He was, therefore, a liberal influence on versification. He wrote and helped to develop the couplet. As a part of his innovations with Pindar, he developed his theory of translation. Similarly, he was an incipient critic, next to Davenant, perhaps, the most important one between Jonson and Dryden. His scientific views of the influence of climate of social and political environment on the writer, lead directly to the creed of Taine. He was an influential factor in the formation of the Royal Society. He was the first in English to write essays in which self-revelation and the establishment of an intimate bond between reader and author was a prime aim. He wrote a familiar, colloquial prose
which was among the best styles in his century." 31

The passion and imagination of the English Renaissance, in the decline of which Cowley was born, deepened as he grew to manhood. The gorgeous and cloudy splendor of Doone and Crashaw were the last gleams of a dying day. They could lead to nothing but night. There was Milton, a wonderful afterglow of the Renaissance in the English sky, a matured Marlow turned Puritan. But Milton could not point the way. His heart was still in Italy, and it was the ferment of France that was now leaving England. It needed a man of altogether different mould, a man with a new vision, one who had known the old day but was content to let its dying glory go, eager to pass on to the new day; it needed a man of prose mind even to quicken poetry. So it came to pass that it was Cowley's part to bear the sacred ark through the wilderness that separated the world of the Renaissance from the modern world. Today, when possibly we are passing through such another wilderness between two worlds, we may feel fresh interest in Cowley.

Mr. Nethercot, in his newest book on Cowley 32 offers some new material on the tantalizing mystery of Cowley's return to England from his French exile two full years before the date usually given; and presents a new picture of the struggle be-

31 Nethercot, Cowley The Muse's Hannibal, p. 289.
32 Ibid.
tween the two phases of Cowley's nature, culminating in a partly forced victory on the side of simplicity and true philosophic imagination against that of a fantastic elaborateness and metaphysical display.

During this struggle he succeeded in composing the first religious epic in English; in virtually inventing the Pindaric or irregular ode and the Anacreontic; in devising a new and more liberal theory of translation; in becoming one of the three or four important English critics before Dryden; and in writing the first real familiar essays in the language.

Arnold wrote that Cowley's verse is, in this century, unread and unreadable; yet had he lived, he was accounted by general consent the greatest poet of his time and some went so far as to say of all time. Arnold, if he had cared to, might have discriminated between several kinds of verse which Cowley wrote, not all of which are metaphysical to an unreadable degree. John Donne, to whom Cowley is often assimilated, has of late undergone a considerable revival. A limited renaissance of Cowley may yet follow. Mr. Nethercot's volume, The Muse's Hannibal, provides an admirable foundation for renewed interest in Cowley's remarkable life and works.
CHAPTER 1

Of infinitely great importance was the evolution effected in poetry in 1579 by the publication of the Shepherds' Calendar by Edmund Spenser. With this book we begin an new era; we stand on the threshold, not of a fashion or a period, but of the whole system of modern English poetry.

"Spenser was the only poet among his immediate contemporaries whose achievement has won permanent place, not only in English literature, but in the literature of the world. The Poets' Poet he has been called so long that we are apt to forget how he was once only another poet among the rest who were making the new literature of English. Not to speak of his other work, The Faerie Queene is beyond doubt a master piece. It is by The Faerie Queene that Spenser holds his sovereign place among the foremost English poets. English had never before approached such mastery of language, turning into deathless beauty the words and phrases which had seemed fit only for humdrum use. The mastery has never been surpassed; indeed, one can hardly imagine that it ever will be.

When Spenser first sent forth The Faerie Queene, not one of his contemporary poets had begun to publish. When he died in 1599, there were other names, lesser than his but still
distinct. We have Daniel, Drayton, Southwell, Davies, Hall, Marston and Chapman. Each new poet was beginning to grow more individual, more distinctly separate from the rest."33

"Spenser was called the Poets' Poet because he appealed wholly to the artistic sense and to the love of beauty. He was so called by Charles Lamb, who had a knack of saying memorable things. Spenser has been called the Poets' Poet because his poems have stimulated the brain and fired the imagination of Milton, Cowley, Dryden, Keats and many others. It would seem to be true that only poets can rightly appreciate the author of The Faerie Queene, and that many poets have been aroused and awakened by such appreciation. Milton esteemed him; so did Dryden and Cowley; Prior and James Thomson frankly imitated him. To Wordsworth he was an inspiration; and to Keats his fine phrase "sea-shouldering whales" flung upon magic casement of poetic imagination".34

"Spenser is the central figure in the English poetry of the sixteenth century. With Spenser we are at the full center of the English Renaissance. For all his Chaucerianism, he is, as Chaucer in his time has been, a modern of moderns. The Faerie Queene reflects more fully than any other English work that many-sided literary influences of the Renaissance.

33 Edmund Gosse, History Of English Literature, p. 82.
From the beginning Spenser was destined to be an influence; an influence rather formal than substantial, for the reason that while his form was excellent, his grasp of substance never had the firmness of simplicity. His followers imitated his peculiarities rather than his poetry. This will go far to explain some careless comments on him by the most influential poet of immediately succeeding years - Ben Jonson.

As a man of letters, Jonson was naturally a decided critic of his contemporaries. He touched on a great many English poets of his time, but on none other so often as on John Donne. He estimated Donne as the first poet in the world in some things and memorized many of Donne's verses.

The pastoral and romantic poetry of Spenser is different in many ways from the poetry of Donne. It is diffuse, sensuous, and melodious. It is idealistic, and represents the medieval and chivalric attitude toward woman. The poetry of Donne, on the other hand, is intricate, obscure and rough. It appeals not mainly to the senses but to the intellect.

Donne began his bold and original poetic career by the composition of his Satyres, of which the first four were written between 1593 and 1599. The second Satyre is especially noteworthy in view of the ridicule of the poetry of the age.
The most striking thing about these poems is the author's indifference to, and apparent contempt for, accepted stylistic canons.

Not only does Donne reject the ideals, conventions and poetic materials of the old school, but he also revolts against their objectivity, prolixity, and even flow of versification. The sonnets and lyrics of the Elizabethan era usually conform to the general type, and it is therefore very hard to distinguish the work of one poet from another. Donne repudiates all this. A distinctly individual note is infused into all his work. In opposition to the Spenserian smoothness and melody, Donne deliberately becomes rugged of line, and careless in rhyme. Donne's thoroughgoing of position to the Spenserian school is perhaps best summed up by Carew:

"The Muses Garden, with pedantic weeds
O'erspread, with purged by thee; the lazy weeds
Of servile imitation thrown away
And fresh invention planted". 35

That Carew is referring to the old school of poetry such as Drayton, Deniel, and Chapman, is probable. 36

Donne became to his contemporaries a real literary force, a power that dominated subsequent poetry for many years.

35 Carew, Elegy Upon The Death Of Dr. Donne.
36 Jenkins, Drayton And The School Of Donne, p. 565
Just as Spenser and Jonson, Pope and Dryden, and other leaders in literary movements have had their coterie of followers, so Donne too became a literary dictator to his fellow-poets, who imitated his methods and praised the quality of his mind.

"Although according to modern standards, Donne's work seems at time very greatly lacking in true poetic quality, yet it must not be judged apart from the character of the period to which it belongs. One has only to note the praise bestowed upon it, by his enemies as well as his friends, to understand that Donne was welcomed by his own generation as a significant force." 37

Ben Jonson's criticism of Donne's roughness of verse, in which he makes the statement that Donne deserved hanging for not keeping of accent 38 is quoted by every one who discusses his work; yet Jonson praised him by saying:

"Donne, the delight of Phoebus, and each Muse, Who to thy one, all other brains refuse, Whose every work, of thy most early wit, Come forth example, and remains so yet." 39

Carew, a follower of Jonson, closes his poem with these words:

"Here lies a king that ruled, as he thought fit, The universal monarchy of wit." 40

Such commendation is the more remarkable in view of the fact

37 Ethel Sloane, Influence Of Donne Upon Seventeenth Century Poets.
38 Drummond, Conversations.
39 Commendatory Poems In The 1650 Edition Of Donne
40 Carew, Elegy Upon The Death Of Dr. Donne.
that Donne's ideas of poetry were so diametrically opposed to those which held sway for a good many years. Mr. Gosse pointed out Donne's utter disregard where he says:

"One is left with the impression that Donne would not have turned to see Edmund Spenser go by, nor have passed not the Mermaid to listen to the talk of Shakespeare." 41

The only poet of the old school for whom we know that Donne has the slightest regard was Ben Jonson. Donne mentions no others in his poems and letters. His kinship with Jonson seems to have been due to the fact that both were innovators to a greater or less degree. Donne was on a level with Spenser and Jonson as a master of Jacobean poetry. The influence of Donne was more potent than that of Jonson, though it is extremely difficult to understand the precise manner in which it was exercised.

During the Jacobean period we have Spenser's influence, with Donne's and Jonson's, at work shaping and preparing the forces, accumulating the matter, which was to result on the one side in the massive structure of Milton, and, on the other, in the exquisite filagree of the Caroline lyrists.

"Spenser has been called the poet's poet and with good reason; for most of his successors have owed more to him than they might have been ready to acknowledge, and there can be little doubt that the great Elizabethan's poetical fancy and

unique creative power laid hold of a kindred spirit in the soul of his young disciple, Shakespeare. Cowley's reading of Spenser has influenced his style; but the quaint conceits of Venus and Adonis, to say nothing of the meter and rhythm, have affected him still more deeply." 42

"Cowley was first attracted to poetry by reading Spenser's Faerie Queene. Poetry being first kindled in the imagination, to which Spenser writes, it will not seem strange that Cowley first caught his flame by reading Spenser; that the great Milton owned him for his original; that Dryden studies him, and has bestowed more frequent commendation on him than any other English poet." 43

"Spenser frankly set forth in English poetry the influence of classical Italian. Jonson expounded and practised the permanent poetic principles of the enduring classics of antiquity. Donne wrote with utter disregard for both these influences. The influence of Spenser could never quite lose the amenity of his Italianate grace; that of Jonson could never quite lose the civility of his classical poise; that of Donne was bound to fall into the affectations of a mannerism which grew lifeless the moment the master who vitalized it fell asleep.

43 Willard H. Durham, Critical Essays Of The Eighteenth Century, p. 87.
It would be foolish, perhaps, to say that Spenser, Jonson, and Donne caused the disintegration of Elizabethan poetry; but there can be no doubt that the three distinct influences embodied in the work of these three divergent masters portend, with precision, the courses which that poetical disintegration was to take. 44

Spenser's successors, rather than Spenser himself, appear to have been Cowley's model. The two songs in Constantia And Philetus, and the epitaph at the end of Pyramus And Thisbe, show that his ear was naturally sensitive to prosody. The opening verses of The Vote, with their keen and even humorous observation of typical characters, are evident that, if he sat at the feet of Spenser and the Latin poets, he also had caught the tricks of Donne; and the two or three sharp curses which he flings, in A Poetical Revenge, at the semigentleman of the Innes of Court who struck him in Westminster Hall are a direct reminiscence of Donne in his satiric moods.

According to the classifiers of literature, Cowley was a Metaphysical Poet. In the opinion of Dr. Johnson, who fastened the name upon him, he was "almost the last of the race and undoubtedly the best." 45

If Cowley had been addressed as a Metaphysical Poet in his lifetime, he would have looked mystified and then, in his

44 Barrett Wendell, Temper Of Seventeenth Century, p. 142.
45 Johnson, Lives, 1., 35.
polite manner, have asked for elucidation. In one of his essays he had remarked:

As for metaphysics, I do not know if it be anything or no. 46

If the phrase has been explained as meaning belonging to the School of Donne, he might have nodded hesitantly and very doubtfully, for in his autobiography he had classed himself as a Spenserian. If Clarendon is to be believed, he had better accredited his success to the example of Ben Jonson. 47 It would have been much less surprising to Cowley to be put with the disciples of Spenser or with the Sons of Ben than with the School of Donne. Groups of avowed followers of Spenser and Jonson had existed, but there never was a School of Donne until later critics and historians manufactured it for ease of classification. Almost none of the poets who have been associated as Metaphysical claimed Donne as their master.

"Samuel Johnson could see no ground for what Clarendon said of his influence of Ben Jonson on Cowley. Yet the objective definition of his condition and feeling in the ode on Hervy is in the spirit of Ben Jonson's amplest verse, just as his grasp of the traditional imagery is in the spirit of Jonson's epitaphs, and of Jonson's general "judgment" and "eloquence" and "masculine expression", to use Clarendon's

46 Cowley, Of Agriculture.
47 Cowley, Of Myself.
48 Clarendon, Life Of Cowley, i. 34.
phrases. Though Cowley has no note of sublimity and though in detail he has a grotesque literalness which pushes into an arabesque of style, he has a deep sense for noble and comprehensive thought, for the details of the visible world as material and as instrument of thought, and for the glow of emotion that spring from such thought. A splendor of this sort hovers in the Pindarics, in much of the Davideis, in the bold conception and rapid imagery of the Hymn Of Light. It was these things that Milton must have felt when he ranked Cowley as a favorite. The final poetic fusion of this material wanting in the actual words of Cowley, Milton could himself make, and must have made even as he read. The range of life and reflection, the sweep of human experience, he appreciated. And these, tempered by Cowley's personality, give everywhere the sense of a great implicit poetry so much larger than the actual accomplishments." 49

"Dryden was, more or less, responsible for the whole situation for he was the first literary critic to apply the name to Donne and his imitates. In his Original And Progress Of Satire he had spoken of Donne as "(one who affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verse; and Mr. Cowley has copied him to a fault)". Dryden, therefore, associated Donne and Cowley on only one ground —

49 Ruth Wallerstein, Cowley As A Man Of Letters, p. 132.
their use of metaphysics in their love poetry. His remark was promptly taken up and repeated by writers like Sir Thomas P. Blount, John Oldmixon, Elijah Fenton, Alexander Pope, and others throughout the eighteenth century, most of them being satisfied not to elaborate on it to any extent—all except Pope, who increased the school by enrolling Davenant and Sprat. But in all these cases the word metaphysical had a close relationship to metaphysics as a branch of philosophy.  

Dr. Johnson, was familiar with both uses, but unfortunately for succeeding critics and readers, confused the two. He knew that Donne and Cowley were full of fantastic conceits; and also that they were fond of raising philosophical speculations. He, therefore, worked through his list of the poets of the seventeenth century who indulged their ingenuity and wit in the first of these two fashions; found Marino, Donne, Cowley, Cleveland, Suckling, Waller, Dunham, and Welton, rejected the last four so far as the majority of their works are concerned, and called the resulting group the Metaphysical Poets. Moreover, he applied the term to their work, and not simply to the few in which Dryden had discerned the metaphysical taint. Consequently, from Johnson's time down, metaphysical poetry has meant poetry compounded of ridiculous con-

ceits and ostentatious learning. The utmost efforts of a few clear-sighted critics have been unable to free the general reader from the conviction that all the poets whom Johnson, or others misled by him, have branded with this term are forever cast into outer darkness. It would be absurd to treat Cowley merely, or even primarily, as a representative Metaphysical Poet. Addison and Johnson were forced to admit the presence of many other admirable traits in their poet. Cowley is more interesting as an individual, as a personality, than as a representative Metaphysical writer. Addison has selected Cowley as the chief English example of "Mixt Wit", and states that

the poet possesses as much "True Wit" as any genius who ever wrote. 51

"Investigation will reveal that for virtually all readers and critics of the time except Dryden, and for him only dimly, a metaphysical school of poets did not exist, either by that name or any other. Dryden was, unconsciously, responsible for originating the term, although Johnson must assume the doubtful honor of popularizing it.

The chief members were Donne, Cowley, Cleveland, Carew, Herbert, Crashaw, Vaughan, Quarles. Cowley was unquestionably the most popular of the metaphysical poets. The general re-

51 Joseph Addison, Spectator, No. 62
ferences to his works were overwhelmingly appreciative during the Restoration. The Latin poetry and Anacreontics were always praised, as well, with few exceptions, the Pindarics. The Mistress and some of the other lyrics, because of their overabundant wit, were the first works to be attacked with much vigor, but even they found defenders. The epic Davideis was enjoyed and admired by most readers. The plays were not widely read, but were always mentioned favorably, and were acted at different times. The essays and prose received little attention at first. By the end of the century some general criticism had set in, centering, as in the case of Donne, upon wit and versification."

The two most famous and characteristic of the school of poets whom Johnson dubbed metaphysical are Donne and Cowley. Donne was one of the earliest of the metaphysical writers, and he had many followers. Cowley had many bad, and a few good passages, of the metaphysical kind. Here are some of his lines on Hope:

Hope, whose weak being ruined is,
Alike it if succeed, or if it miss.
If things then from their end we happy call,
'Its Hope is the most hopeless thing of all.'

54 Cowley, Hope.
It was to pieces such as these that Cowper refers when he says:

I cannot but lament thy splendid wit,
Entangled in the cobwebs of the schools.55

"Donne is anterior by nearly a whole generation to those who are usually classed with him; he was some forty years older than Cowley, and it is probable that he wrote next to none of his characteristic work after Cowley was born. The lumping of the two together, such as that which Wordsworth makes in representing Donne's style as a decadence and reaction from that of men who were actually younger than himself. Cowley, though undoubtedly one of the chiefs of the school that Johnson meant to portray, is, as has been seen, but half a metaphysical, and has a common-sense face as well as a fantastic one." 56

That these things did not seem ludicrous to contemporary readers is once more witness to the power of fashion. Poetry has its fashions, like everything else, and Cowley was the leader of the fashion which held the field during the Stuart period. Dr. Johnson called the exponents of this school the metaphysical poets, but fantastic has been suggested as a more suitable epithet.

The father of the Metaphysical School was Morini, an Italian poet, who, Sismondi tells us, used the most whimsical comparisons, pompous and over wrought descriptions, with a species of poetical punning.57

55 Cowper, The Task, Book IV, I, 725.
56 Edmund Goose, From Shakespeare To Pope, p. 411.
Donne naturalized these errors in England, and Cowley followed Donne's lead. Johnson remarks that even Milton did not escape the contagion, though showing its effect only in his line on Hobson, the Carrier. Johnson did not observe that Milton's fine address to Shakespeare is disfigured by a far-fetched conceit. It is quite in this manner of the Fantastics:

"For whilst to the shame of slow-endeavoring art
Thy easy numbers flow, and that each heart
Dost make us marble with too much conceiving
And so speculcherd in such pompt must lie
That kings for such a tomb would wish to die." 58

"The enormous influence of Johnson on English criticism is nowhere better seen than in the general acceptance by later critics on the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century. The Life Of Cowley, in which these views are expounded at length, he held to be the best of his Lives Of The Poets. It certainly has been the most enduring and powerful in its effect on opinion. What he said of the fashion which reigned in English poetry from Donne to Dryden has been incorporated in all histories and his successors have been content to follow his lead. Metaphysical poetry, so named by Johnson, has become a by-word for violent and unnatural fictions, enormous and disgusting hyperboles, perverse originality, affection, absurdity and conceit. Critic has vied with critic in the selection of

58 Milton, Sonnet On Shakespeare, 1. 10-16.
the most ridiculous examples to illustrate the excesses of the metaphysical school." 59

The metaphysical poets have had many friends and admirers of a later date. Lamb and Coleridge praise them; Wordsworth alludes to them; Sir Leslie Stephen treats them as a survival of Middle Ages. The literary history of today has failed to do justice to their heroic attempts because, for the most part, it was written by men of letters, or a more appropriate name which they invented for themselves, by bookmen. Milton and Dryden, Donne, Cowley and Cleveland, were not men of letters: in this narrow sense. The realm of knowledge was in their day as yet unpartitioned; the poets of the age were students of divinity and science, of politics, history, and geography. Living as they did in the century which gave birth to modern science, their minds, as Johnson says of Cowley, were set more on things than on words. The metaphysical poets were preoccupied by the new discoveries and speculations of science. They were the realists of the rationalists of their own age; and the sincerity of their attempt is witnessed by the pure and genuine mother-English, as Coleridge calls it, wherein they set forth ideas that are now no more than antique curiosities.

This aspect of metaphysical poetry is well illustrated

in the work of Cowley, who was first of all a man of science. He was a Doctor of Physic, a botanist of repute, and an ardent friend to scientific research. His scheme for the establishment of a college devoted wholly to scientific discovery is one of the best planned of those many similar schemes partly fulfilled when a charter was granted to the Royal Society. His scientific interests were not kept apart from his poetical, but were the feeders of his verse. Johnson says that botany in the mind of Cowley turned into poetry. Any one who looks through the pages of The Mistress will find a new application of scientific lore on every page. Inconstancy is defended by a consideration of the seasons and of the physiological changes in the human body. His haughty and cold mistress is compared to a burning glass of ice, which flames other objects while remaining frozen itself. The excuse for the wanderings of love Cowley bases on the behavior of the magnetic needle:

The Needle trembles so, and turns about,
Till it the Northern Point find out;
But constant then and fixt does prove,
Fixt, that his dearest Pole as soon may move. 60

Johnson's criticism is, in the main, responsible for

60 Cowley, The Mistress.
the treatment of metaphysical poetry as a museum of atrocities, and for the comparative neglect of those subtle movements of the intellect, and those strange raptures of the adventurous imagination, which give an irresistible charm to the work of Donne and his disciples.

The most instructive comment on metaphysical poetry is to be found in Sir Thomas Browne's treaties on Vulgar Errors, or better still in the list of problems which the Infant Royal Society propounded for the consideration of its members. These reflect the intellectual movement of the age; it was these and such-like notions which the metaphysical poets attempted to make use of as a new light thrown on the eternal theme of poetry - man and his relations to the world.

"Johnson says that Cowley thought for himself upon every subject. Such was his copiousness of knowledge that something at once remote and applicable rushed into his mind. He is rich in political and geographical as in scientific metaphors. The conquest of the Spaniard in the Indies, the rebellion of the Low Countries against the Spanish yoke, the Salic Law of France, the great wall of China, the perpetual
night of Greenland -- these and one hundred other things are made to lend themselves to the interpretation of the lover's mind. He is like Donne in this respect. Donne did this too. He took all knowledge for his material, and melted it into the crucible over which he mutters his incantations. The pupil, though he is adapt, cannot pretend to the power of the master."

Cowley makes no use of the fables which, before his time and since, have been consecrated to the use of poets. In his poems there are no gods, devils, nymphs, witches or giants. The business of poetry, as he conceived it, was to give a true account of the mind and experience of man. The rationalism of the metaphysical poets, which was preached and practiced by Greville, Donne, Davenport, and Cowley, prepared the way for the less exalted rationalism of the Augustans. In still another way have these pioneers made straight the way of their successors. They cultivated a simple and familiar diction, and expressed their thoughts in natural, homely, idomatic English. Cowley's writing is beautifully simple; some time the result is perfection, as in the lament on the death of his friend, Wm. Hervey:

Ye fields of Cambridge, our dear Cambridge, say,
Have ye not seen us walking every day?
Was there a Tree about that did not know
The Love betwix us two? 62

so, again:

I saw a Rose-bud ope this morn; I'll swear
The blushing morning open'd not more fair.
How could it be so fair, and you away? 63

The ease and power of passages like these are greater than the
Augustans could often attain to.

The principle that "an individual who has both strong
friends and violent enemies must himself be a strong character
and marked personality", has ample justification in the person
of Dr. John Donne.

It must be acknowledged that Donne's verses, on super-
Ficial reading seem like riddles made to conceal the thought in-
stead of expressing it; but it is none the less true that a more
careful study will always show wit, fancy, tenderness, and deep
feeling. Although his lines will not allow themselves to be
read in the liquid way which modern criticism insists upon for
model verse, they have, in compensation, a deep and subtile
music which adds true feeling to the thought, and a dignity and
movement which, like that of Milton's verse, does much to re-
place the wanting smoothness.

Coleridge alone excepted, it is possible that no one, in

62 Cowley, Ode On The Death Of Wm. Hervey.
63 Cowley, The Spring.
his writings, ever referred to Donne oftener than Dr. Samuel Johnson. His *Life Of Cowley* has the appearance of a picture painted with Donne as a background.

The modern appreciation of Donne seems to begin with Robert Browning, who met with the poems when he was still a boy, and was greatly influenced by them. He quoted and praised the Dean so constantly in later years that Miss Barrett noticed it early in their acquaintance; "your Donne", she says on several occasions. 64

Certainly Spenser and Donne are the typical exponents of their respective groups; the personal influence of either would be hard to overestimate; certainly the poetry of melody began earlier than the poetry of imagination; ....still to the last they appear side by side, often directly in this mode and in that the harmonies of the same pen. But Courthope says that Donne cannot be reckoned among the poets, who by their sense of harmony and proportion, have helped to carry forward the refinement of the English language from one social stage to another. 65

Donne's superficial influence on Cowley is obvious in the subject of such verses as the stanzas *Written In Juice of Lemon*, or in *The Prophet*. From Donne comes the trick of be-

64 Melton, The Rhetoric Of John Donne's Verse, p. 49.
65 Edmund K. Chambers, English Pastorals, p. 32.
Beginning a poem impatiently and abruptly, as though in exasperation, and an extravagant outburst like

"Love thou' st a Devil; if I may call Thee One, For sure in me thy name is legion." 67

Equally characteristic of Donne is Cowley's free use of far-fetched and unexpected simile; but he does not give any sign of the capacity for phrases and thoughts of astonishing brilliance which underlie Donne's extravagance. His aim is always to astonish his readers with some new invention of a learned and elaborate fancy. True discipleship does not consist of an imitation of mannerisms, and in the new poems of The Mistress, in which Cowley chose to be natural, his manner was far more nearly allied to the level suavity of Waller than to the rugged and cloudy magnificance of Donne; as for example in the stanzas of The Spring and the beautiful lines in The Change.

Love expresses an unbounded tyranny over him, and he calls in other passions to drive this one out; so do the Indians seek to free themselves from the Spaniard by calling in the state of Holland. 68 His love is so violent that, though his life may be short, he may become "the great Methusalem of Love". 69 On parting from his mistress, he recalled the sorrow with which men in Greenland see the sun sink for half a

67 Cowley, The Inconstant, St. I.
68 Cowley, Love And Life, St. I.
69 Cowley, The Passions, St. 4
Milton's Hymn On The Morning Of Christ's Nativity is an ode, stately and pictorial, but here and there its language is strained and affected, indicating the influence of Donne. George Herbert was a friend of Donne's, and his poems were influenced by the dean's literary peculiarities. Browning admired Donne and certainly imitated his "verses gnarled and knotted." Cowley first drew fire because of The Mistress, his most direct echo of Donne.

Carpenter has reached his conclusion:

"Donne's influence is widely diffused, but he does not form a school. Indeed, some of those who show the attraction of his genius most are themselves in partial reactions against what is bizarre and extravagant in the rhythms and in the art of Donne." 71

Collins undertakes to show in what manner Donne's influence may be detected: "The style of Donne is marked by certain distinctive peculiarities which no intelligent critic would be likely to mistake; and his influence on contemporary poetry was unquestionably considerable." 72 Collins suggests several poems of Herbert as resembling those of Donne, but none came nearer than The Idea:

"All Beauties vulgar eyes on earth do see, 
At best but some imperfect copies be 
Of Those The Heavens did first decree." 73

70 Cowley, The Parting, St. I
71 Carpenter, English Lyric Poetry, lviii.
Donne's influence was no doubt great. Something new in English Literature begins in Donne, something which proceeded under his potent influence, to color poetry for nearly one hundred years. Gosse, says:

"The exact mode in which that influence was immediately distributed is unknown to us, or even dimly perceived. To know more about it is one of the great desiderata of literary history."

According to De Quincey the first very eminent rhetorican in English literature is Donne. Dr. Johnson inconsiderately classes him in company with Cowley under the title of Metaphysical Poets; but Rhetorical would be a more accurate designation.

That the critics have not been able to understand Donne's peculiarity is evidenced by the fact that Johnson describes him as Metaphysical; De Quincey, as Rhetorical; Masson, as Metrical. Mason expresses himself as follows:

"Collectively the Metaphysical Poets might be described as the Poets of Metrical Exposition and Metrical Intellection. It was mainly for poets practicing this process of metrical intellection that Johnson invented or adopted from Dryden the designation Metaphysical Poets."

In Dr. Johnson's "Lives Of The Poets," Cowley stands first. He is there classed with the poets whom the critic is pleased to call Metaphysical, and much space is taken up with

74 Edmund Gosse, Jacobean Poets, p. 47.
76 David Masson, Life Of Milton, p. 484.
examples to show in why he so-called them, and with examples from Cowley to prove that he also belongs to that group. Johnson gives Donne as the founder of this style in England.

Dryden in his dedication to Juvenal in 1693 says Donne affects the Metaphysical not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses where nature only should reign. Southey says of this designation:

"It is not fortunate, but so much respect is due to Johnson that it would be unbecoming to substitute, even if it were easy to propose, one which might be unexceptionable."

In regard to Dryden's criticism of Donne, Melton makes this remark:

"Would not Donne's Satires, which abound with so much wit, appear more charming if he had taken care of his words and his numbers? But he followed Horace so closely, that of necessity he must fall with him; and I may safely say it of this present age, that, if we are not so great wits as Donne, yet, certainly, we are better poets."

If Dryden was also speaking for himself, may it not be asked, if he was a better poet than Donne, why did he need in his Eleanora, to copy Donne to such an extent as to make an acknowledgment, in the preface, imperative? He said: "I have followed Donne's footsteps in the design of this panegyric, (An Anatomy)."

Cowley was undoubtedly influenced by Donne as well as the then prevailing taste to adopt this style. Gosse says of Donne:

"That extraordinary writer cast his shadow over the vault of the century from its beginning to its close, like one of the Carthaginian statues, the hands and feet of which supported opposite extremities of the arch they occupied."

The first clear sign of the influence of Donne seems to have grown from a visit which Cowley paid to the Law Courts at Westminster Hall. When a barrister tried to push him out with the words, "Boy, get you gone. This is no school". Cowley turned and answered smartly:

"Oh, no!
For if it were, all you gowned men would be
Up for false Latin."

At a safe distance, Cowley poured out such a stream of scathing remarks on law students and lawyers that one must look at Donne's first and fourth satires for the inspiration of *A Poetical Revenge*, the poem which Cowley immediately wrote in impish exultation over his victory.

Donne's poems set a fashionable style before Cowley, which he practised upon at intervals, but which he did not display to any extent until *The Mistress* burst upon the applauding world. Only two or three times did he refer to Donne by name, 

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Gosse, Preface To Seventeenth Century Studies, 1885, p. 9.
but these allusions are sufficient to show an intimate knowledge. In 1656, for instance, he quoted from Donne in his own preface; and in his early play he made Dogrel say to Aurelia:

.....thou'dst be a rare wife for me. I should begot on thee Donne's and Jonson's; but thou are too witty.

To Cowley, Donne and Jonson seems to have been the two wittiest English poets. Little of Jonson's rocky strength is discernable in Cowley, as is little of Donne's white-heat of feeling. But he read them both and profited as well as he could, especially in his experiments in metrics. Lord Clarendon, at that time simply Edward Hyde, is authority for Cowley's imitation on Jonson, for he says: "If Mr. Cowley had not made a flight beyond all men, with that modesty yet, to ascribe much of this to the example and learning of Ben Jonson." At any rate, Cowley practically forgets Spenser from this time on. Grosart thinks Spenser is, in Cowley, scarce traceable from first to last. The best suggestion of Donne occurs in Callidora's speech in the first act, beginning:

"For as the soul is nobler than the body,  
So its corruption asks a better medicine."

Swift began by writing frigid Pindaric odes, after the fashion of Cowley, and from his letters we know that he set

81 Donne, The Will.  
82 Cowley, The Guardian.  
83 Clarendon, Life Of Cowley, 1, 34.  
84 Alexander Grosart, Life Of Spenser.  
considerable value on them. In his latter odes, Drayton sometimes touches the metaphysical poetry of Donne and Cowley, a kind which he does not often affect. It is in the complimentary verses and the funeral elegies of the early and middle century, as well as in some of the religious poetry and in the frigid love poems of Cowley, that one sees the worst effects of Donne's endeavour to wed passion and imagination to erudition and reasoning.

Johnson makes the following comment concerning the influence of Donne on Cowley:

"To emulate Donne appears to have been his purpose; and from Donne he may have been learnt that familiarity with religious images; and that light allusion to sacred things, by which readers far short of sanctity are frequently offended; and which would not be born in the present age; when devotion, perhaps not more fervent, is more delicate." 87

Cowley's intelligence is an interesting one. Curiosity, a vigorous intellectual grasp of the external world as fact, and the free play of interest in this fact and in theories of all sorts are basic in it. To compare it with Donne's will define it and will show how really different Cowley is from Donne, and how the pupil changed what he took. Donne's is the far greater and more intense intellect. Raymond Alden noted in the love lyrics of Donne a profound intellectual serious-

86 Cambridge History Of English Literature, Vol. IV, p. 223.
ness not found in Cowley's. All the drive of Donne's character and imagination are behind his intellect. All parts of Donne's life and perception bear on each part. Shear restless intelligence and curiosity are strong in him; but what gives his thought its special quality is that there is nothing he observes or studies but he strives to make it at once a part of his philosophy and thence a part of his actual belief and will and feeling. Donne's is that "concentration of reason in feeling" which can lead to mysticism. Cowley's intellect, on the other hand, is not philosophical. It has not the Baconian sheer dry weight and depth, nor has it the imaginative drive of Donne's. Yet Cowley has a keen interest in scientific ideas, and he is a leader in giving them currency in the cultivated world as the Proposition For The Advancement Of Learning, To The Royal Society, and the influence of his poems show.

A brief glance at the method of reading of Cowley and Donne reiterates the same truth. Mediaeval thought and logic had a deep influence in shaping Donne's imagination, as Courthope has shown. But it found its opportunity in the character of Donne's mind and his way of reading. One can imagine him plunging into every book he reads as a matter of life and

death. He reads as a scholar and critic. One remembers in all this that Cowley is forty-five years younger than Donne, and that Hobbes and other reading of Cowley's maturer years dealt with ideas less imperatively applicable to the individual consciousness than was Donne's reading. But even where Cowley handles the mediaeval reading, in the notes to Davideis, he handles it as he handles Hobbes, with shrewed critical insight rather than passion. His temper of a man of letters, if it deny him certain other gifts, is fortunately suited to the material of the time and to making it current in the literary traffic of the day. Johnson's word on Cowley's mind is final: "A mind capacious by nature and replenished by study... always either ingenious or learned, either acute or profound."[90]

"With these differences in the two minds, Donne's perception finds its characteristic and inevitable expression first in the love lyrics and the religious lyrics, poems in which the whole content of thought is absorbed in the flash of feelings; and then in the gusto and irony and passionate anger of question which characterizes the Satires and Epistles. Cowley's genius is not suited to the love lyric. True, The Mistress is specifically in the school of Donne, and Cowley, sensitive as he is, has caught the vision of Donne, wondering at the complex of personality impinging on the outer world, [90] Samuel Johnson, Lives Of English Poets, p. 55.
just as he caught the sweep of Pindar. But that imaginative intensity is not the chief note of even The Mistress.

The shaping quality of Cowley's reasoning temper is equally manifest in the more obvious pervasive element of his style, in its wit and so-called "metaphysical" quality. "Metaphysical" style is a very different thing in Donne and Cowley. The stuff, the manner, the imaginative effect of the imagery is very different, although they have in common the intellectual form of statement and the logical extension of image. Donne's images most often represent the truth of the world of inner experience, their outer curiousness being simple truth in that world, their logic the logic of philosophical imagination seeking to pierce through objects in their casual temporal juxtaposition, to spiritual and emotional reality; and in the satires, his figures make appeal from worldly values to human.

Cowley's imagery, if we define it by this comparison, represents not inner life, but sentiment, wit, fancy. Whereas Donne has imagination in the Coleridgean sense, handling and shifting objects to get at what lies behind them, Cowley's is fancy musing upon objects and playing with them, indeed, to see all their faces, but still focusing upon them as fixed objects.

To analyse several of Donne's characteristic images and approach Cowley's figures through them will better explain the

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91 Ruth Wallerstein, Cowley As A Man Of Letters, p. 132.
meaning. In Donne's song "Sweetest love, I do not go", the whole theme, as in many others, is the significance, to a lover, of personal experience as against the outer mechanical fact of life. The images recreate this personal reality, following boldly and directly the psychological flow of the emotion. The great figure in one of the sonnets on death:

"At the round earth's imagined corners below
Your trumpets, Angels" 92

is not literally reasonable on the face of it. But reason may deal with it profoundly if its full thought is looked at, if the enthymeme be expanded. It does not matter, says Donne, if the traditional pictures with which we figure the universe be scientifically false; they are but symbols, and the reality is not circumscribed by them, either in itself or for us. This truth he gives us in one flash. The compass figure in the Valediction, again, takes us step by step deeper into the perception of the ideal thought on which the emotion rests, and the emotion intensifies and expands as the concept clarifies.

What does this teach us of Cowley?

Cowley's imagery develops in a quite different spirit. Like his thought, it is many things in many types of poem. The Anacreontics have little essentially in common with the Pindarics. But certainly the trick of image elaborated in

92 Donne, Poems, Ed. by Chambers, p. 61.
detail becomes a habit on the surface of his whole style. And he is set going by the extension of figures in earlier poets, particularly Donne's figures. It is this "witty" or "metaphysical" imagery that we now want especially to look at. Some of the poems of The Mistress are little allegories of love play, written in the manner of the Elizabethan or Herrick's songs for music, but with the figure of wit and fact caught from Donne taking the place of a myth. Written In Juice Of Lemon illustrates this. Again, The Change begins with courtly Petrarchean play:

"Love in her Sunny Eyes does basking play; 
Love walks the pleasant Maze of her Hair; 
Love does on both her Lips forever stray:" 93

But this shifts to analysis:

With me alas, quite contrary it fares;
Darkness and Death lies in my weeping eyes,
Despair and Paleness in my face appears,
And Grief, and Fear, Love's greatest Enemies;
But like the Persian-Tyrant, Love within
Keeps his proud Court, and ne're is seen. 94

The analysis itself, however, becomes not the analysis of emotion or ideal situation, but rather the analysis of the figure itself and hence draws out to its logical conclusion, the epigram:

On take my Heart, and by that means you'll prove
Within, too stor'd enough of Love:

93 Cowley, The Change.
94 Ibid., St. 3.
Give me but Yours, I'll by that change so thrive,
That Love in all my parts shall live.
So powerful is this change, it render can.
My outside Woman, and your inside Man.

Poems which suggest specific comparison with Donne
define Cowley very clearly. The lyric My Heart Discovered, in
its search of heart and soul through body, evokes a close com­
parison with Donne, and in particular the whole conception of
the opening lines,

Her body is so gently bright,
Clear and transparent to the sight,

That through her flesh, me thinks, is seen
The brighter soul that dwells within;

carries us back to Donne's description of Elizabeth Drury,

Her pure and innocent blood
Spoke in her cheeks and so distinctly wrought,
That one might almost say her body thought.

"In this poem, one of Cowley's most delightful, the turn of wit
answers deeply to the theme of the poem. The theme is not as
in Donne the yearning of personal feeling, or imagination try­
ing to transcend fact. Another lyric, Silence, which suggests
comparison with The Triple Fool, is, in theme, the Donnian pas­
sionate analysis of passion, but in expression, the logic moves
like the Hervey ode, with the slow definition of prose, and ends
not in the deeper focus of emotion into which Donne takes us,
but in the sententious phrase. The given Heart, which is

95 Ibid., St. 4.
96 Cowley, My Heart Discovered.
97 Donne, Second Anniversary.
frankly and wholly the extended epigram, is on the other hand, rapid, gay, integrated. We see, then, that this prose quality of Cowley's mind, this literal development, characteristically steps in. Where the figure has started to be emotional, it often becomes merely ludicrous. Where the figure is a figure of idea, it can, like Dryden's figures in Absalom, be made to carry forward an argument very prettily. In The Welcome this style of figure gives an enchanting gaiety; in To Wit it heightens and makes rapid the definition. These two are akin in objectivity and lucid definition to Ben Jonson. In My Dyet the subject matter once more comes from Donnian logic, but the objectivity of the new manner gives it its character and charm. The spirit of the conceit in Cowley has become intellectual and reasoning, and grows sometimes to reflect and sometimes to social comedy."

The conceit pushed too far, and Pope and Dryden wisely reprobated its excess of elaboration. In even great contexts, the image pushed to the limit not only loses its emotion but forgets its idea, and carries on in mere literal play of word. Starting in the passion to be complete in every detail of feeling and ratiocination, it is abstracted from its theme; it becomes an empty cleverness; it just trembles into periphrasis. The approach to periphrasis is widespread in his work, though

not sharply focused. My Muse and To Mr. Hobbes, in the lesser detail, well illustrate this:

The Baltique, Euxin, and the Caspian,  
And slender limb'd Mediterranean,  
Seem narrow Creeks to Thee, and only fit  
For the poor wretched Fisher-boats of Wit.  
The nobler Vessel the vast Ocean tires,  
And nothing sees but Seas and Skies,  
Till unknown Regions it describes,  
Thou great Columbus of the Golden Lands of  
new Philosophies. 99

Cowley approaches here a distinct "poetic diction". His abstract intellection and the fact that ratiocination usurped the ground of his thought were tendencies pushing him, perhaps inevitably, towards such a diction. Because of these qualities in his creation he tends to generalize his adjectives; and his images, because one element of life is abstracted from the rest, lose their sensousness and become abstract symbols of ideas of objects. Finally, he tends as a result of these two developments, and perhaps seeking an elegance congruous with this rhetoric, to a theory and practice of poetic words. The notes to Davideis, Book II, for example, explain the use of wife instead of spouse on the ground of poetic suitability of word. 100

Here too Pope absorbed before he criticised. The abstract play of reason caught him. There were other great influences at work in forming the poetic diction of Pope. 101 But

99 Cowley, Ode To Hobbes.
101 See, for example, the discussion of the influence of Milton in Sir Walter Raleigh's Milton, Chapter V, pp. 218-255.
it is clear that the Popean periphrasis received a significant
impluse from Cowley. It will be remembered that Pope himself
called his early work "fancy's maze" in contradistinction to
the "truth" and "moralized song" of his later work. 102

"Thus if Cowley did not find himself as a poet, he did
find himself as a man of letters. To bring to the fore this
intellectual and logical temper, even though it was to prune
away so much of his own time that was dear to him, was one of
his tasks as a man of letters, sensitive to the current of
ideas, just as to keep alive the breadth and range of per­
ceptions and the objective imagery of the Pindarics, ready for
greater hands to kindle to flames, was another. Cowley is an
important factor in understanding how English letters passed
so rapidly from the multifarious splendor of the Renaissance
to the more limited but the assured accomplishment of Dryden."

In one important respect Cowley's mind was like Donne's;
it was susceptible to learning, and particularly to the in­
fluence of the new science and philosophy. His learning ap­
ppears everywhere in his poetry and is everywhere apparent in
his amatory verse, where it is used in typical fashion of
Donne. Even a casual reading of The Mistress will disclose
the titles, themes, and images of Donne, as well as the wit,
antitheses and startling introductions. Dr. Johnson has re­

102 Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot. Poems, Ed. H.W. Boynton, p.181
103 Ruth Wallerstein, Cowley As A Man Of Letters, p. 140.
marked that one of the stanzas of Maidenhead would probably never have been written, had Cowley not remembered Donne's thought in Loves Alchemie.

Besides the actual borrowing, it is interesting to note the things which Donne taught Cowley. First, there is the skill in analysis. Certainly, Cowley's poem Against Hope would not be the triumph if analysis that critics since Johnson have felt it to be, if Donne had not practiced this analytic art. Cowley's poem Of Wit falls back upon definition by negatives, which Donne has examplified in Negative Love.

"Besides this art of analysis in Cowley, there is the rational evolution, the lyric argument, which comes from Donne. Moreover, Cowley uses the homely and learned word and figure of Donne, for Cowley also practices the conceit. He was even more fond than Donne of the expanded conceit. A comparison of the conceit in Cowley with the conceit in Donne reveals the different talents of the two poets quite clearly; the plangency and dark emotion of Donne's conceit contrasts sharply with the dry point and gay malice of Cowley's. Cowley's wit never reflects the passionate, intellectual, and mystical conception of life and love and death which Donne held. But the cool dry intelligence of Cowley appealed to the new sensibility and prepared the way for the greater genius of Dryden. Cowley was the last of the direct heirs of Donne." 104

During the political agitation of the Commonwealth, literature had practically come to an end in English. There were still men of talent, but they were weak and discouraged. Some were trying to keep alive the Jacobean method of writing; others were looking ahead to inaugurate a new school of reason and correctness. When 1660 brought back the Court, with its Latin sympathizers, the first of these two classes faded like ghosts. Herrick, Shirley and Vaughn long survived the Restoration, but no notice of them or their writings is to be found in any of the criticisms of the age. On the other hand, the second class came forth at once into prominence, and the four poets, Waller, Denham, Davenant, and Cowley were hailed at once as the masters of a new school.

"The first important step taken in intellectual life after the Restoration was the foundation in England of a body which at its initiation seemed more or less closely to resemble the French Academy. In 1661 Cowley had issued his Proposition For The Advancement Of Learning; the direct result of which was the institution of the Royal Society in 1662. Cowley's tract was merely the match which set fire to the scheme which had long been preparing for the encouragement of experimental knowledge. The Royal Society soon turned its attention exclusively to the exacter sciences, but most of the leading English poets and prose-writers were among its earlier
members, and it does not seem to have been observed by the historians of English literature that the original scope of the assembly included the renovation of English prose."

It was in the time of King James that Ben Jonson was at his best and most potent; at the same time too, the poems of Donne were growing more and more familiar. The influence of each steadily increased.

"The best remembered among Jonson's disciples are the three courtiers of King Charles - Carew, Suckling and Lovelace; and the solitary Robert Herrick. One of the three courtier poets, Carew, was, on the whole, the best. He could write after Donne when he chose; witness the opening of the elegy he made to Donne's memory:

Can we not force from widow'd Poetry,
Now thou art dead, great Donne, one Elegy
To crown thy Hearse? 106

But he mostly followed Jonson, as did Suckling and Lovelace; something of Jonson's influence and of Spenser's too, shows itself in the work of the group of poets sometimes called metaphysical, - as if Donne had been their only master - the religious poets of whom perhaps the most typical are Herbert, Vaughn, and Crashaw. These religious poets, metaphysical, if you will, expressed beyond Spenserians or Sons of Ben, an

105 Ibid.
106 Carew, Elegy On The Death Of Dr. Donne.
everlasting truth. In their work, as surely as in that of their contemporaries, one feels how the poetic form, even in their spiritual utterances, was inevitably influenced by the poetic forms of the generation before them." 107

"The critics of the succeeding age saw a direct relation between Waller and Denham. Dryden said that the excellence and dignity of rhyme were never fully known till Waller taught it; and this sweetness of his lyric poesy was afterwards followed in the epic by Denham in his Cooper's Hill. It is not what we now call an epic; it is a topographical poem, but it contains a direct allusion to Waller as the first of poets, showing that the author had perceived and had accepted the reform suggested by Waller." 108

"Waller derives most of his fame from his lyrics; Cowley was a metaphysician with a strong hankering after something different; Denham had devoted himself chiefly to doggrel; but Davenant, though perhaps not so good a poet as any of the other three, was a more living influence." 109

"Cowley was the chief one of the men who mark the transition from the metaphysical age to the age of reason, and it is no wonder that he seemed to his contemporaries a new and wonderful phenomenon. But he missed the strength of the kind of

107 Saintsbury, Short History Of English Literature, p. 366.
108 Gosse, History Of English Literature During The Eighteenth Century, p. 6.
109 Saintsbury, Life Of Dryden, p. 16.
poetry that he was leaving, which was indeed withering, "and he did not attain to the goal toward which, without his realizing it, all English poetry was moving." 110

Another transition poet was Denham, whose work is of interest in the development of the rhymed couplet. Denham is not a poet of importance, but he supplies a link between Waller and Dryden. To Waller is due the distinction of being the coryphaeus of this long procession of the commonplace. His earliest verses prove the formal character, the exact prosody without irregularity or overflow, which we find in the ordinary verse of Dryden and Pope.

As in the case of Ben Jonson, so it happened to Cowley, that posterity values his writings for very different qualities from those which obtained his high reputation among his contemporaries.

"Cowley, more than any other seventeenth century poet, seemed designed to satisfy in every respect the immense majority of his contemporaries. He acted as their representative in the field of letters, and they loved him accordingly. He gave them what they asked, and managed to gratify their contradictory desires. He offered them first the quintessence of metaphysical subtlety. By its deliberate hunt after novelty, his wit expressed the growing intellectual restlessness. The J.A. Macy, The Story Of The World's Literature, p. 96.
joy of purely artistic creation had died away; it had been replaced by a longing for spiritual creation. Words, images, and rhythms, no longer existed for their own sakes, but only as far as they aptly embodied a meaning or shade of meaning. Not the sense, but the intellect, now predominated. Donne has been the supreme master of this mood. Cowley proved in many ways his disciple, but to the men of the age, the disciple was vastly superior to the master. They wanted passion no more, nor sensibility, and Donne's individualism, his intensity in thought and phrasing, had grown alien to them. What they found, and so much relished in Cowley, was an imagination grown intellect, an enthusiasm born of the mind and not of the heart, a self-mastery proving the conscious use of reason. Even his wildest conceits are truly flashes of reasoning. No doubt the readers of 1660 found in his subtle discoveries, in his pursuit of resemblances in ideas of symbols, precarious and excessive though they might sometimes be, the full satisfaction of their intellectual curiosity. Their restlessness seemed to result in a longing for utter freedom. They felt impatient of any bounds; they rejected tradition. Having so long fed upon the flowing strains of the Elizabethan Muses, the exquisite choice of words and images, the regularity of rhythms, the harmony of versification of Spenser and his disciples, they welcomed the naturalness of Cowley's vocabulary, his use of everyday phrases, even of technical terms.
As Sprat justly pointed out, he took his words as he found them to his hand; he neither went before, nor came after the use of his age. Sprat preferred the Pindarics for their near affinity to prose, that is to say because they bridged the gulf between the two means of expression, and would help to make prose more dignified and poetry more useful. Sprat also defended the homeliness of Cowley's Latin Epistles and the humbleness of his Essays. Thus were made manifest in the poet's works the confused tendencies of his age; tendencies making for a deep change in the national mood. Even in Sprat's Account, eulogies had to yield some little space to an apology of Cowley. For some minds were apparently evolving before the rest out of the transitional stage, towards a conscious form of neo-classicism, and by these Cowley, the representative man of the transition, had already been criticized.

But these criticisms were few and timid, mere hints at imperfections in his works, faint murmurs drowned in the chorus of applause of a whole generation. They only dealt with details and their authors would not have dreamed of questioning Cowley's genius. The nature and trend of his wit escaped all censure. His conceits roused in his admirers a wondering delight. He remained, and was for many years to remain, the great, the incomparable Mr. Cowley, the pattern of poets, and
the favorite author of the reading public." ��

Of his contemporaries, Crashaw ranked among the brightest, as both saint and poet. On the other hand, Cowley jeered at moral writers like Quarles, Heywood, Prynne, and Sternhold. He referred to the wit of Tom Coriat, and commended Lord Broghli's verses and Tucke's comedy. He had an exalted opinion of Davenant's Goudibert, which he expected to open new paths in literature. But for no one did he have higher praise than for Mrs. Katherine Phillips, the "matchless Orinda", whose verse he predicated would endure longer than Sappho's.��

Among the modern writers, in addition to Spenser, Cowley mentioned Chaucer as representative of "our old Poets" whose authority was no longer to be taken. Of the dramatists he named Shakespeare, Fletcher, and Jonson most often. The wittiest writers of the last age were Jonson and Donne; the most learned person was Selden; Sidney depicted a shepherd as in the old poetical golden age. He referred to Montaigue admiringly in several places.��

In the matter of versification Cowley was so far ahead of his time as not to be understood by his contemporaries. The form on which he most prided himself was the loose and free one of Pindaric, which he thought suited to all kinds of sub-

�� Jean Loiseau, Cowley's Reputation In England, p. 18.
�� Ibid., p. 386.
jects because of its untrammelled nature, the easy accommodation of its rimes and meters to the sense of the passage, and its consequent avoidance of monotomy. He emphasized the necessity of a good ear in reading it, so that its rhythms would appear, and though far from claiming any methodical smoothness, he defended himself against all charges of roughness. It does not require too much of an imagination to say that if Cowley had lived in the second decade of the twentieth century he would have been in the front rank of these fighting in the cause of verse libra - and practicing them.

It was Cowley's misfortune that as a poet he did not have the courage of self-reliance to carry out these liberal and modern principles which he seems to have held as a critic, and which he undoubtedly would have enunciated had he lived to complete his Discourse Concerning Style. 114

"Mrs. Katherine Phillips, renowned as the matcheless Orinda, welcomed him into her Society of Friendship. Cowley proclaimed his admiration for the poetress in his Pindaric Ode, On Orinda's Poems, and in her turn she expressed her esteem in her Ode - Upon Mr. Cowley's Retirement, calling him the Mighty Cowley, the man whom all mankind admired." 115

Scientific men like Worthington and Hartlib discussed

Cowley's *Proposition For The Advancement Of Experimental Philosophy* as soon as it was advertised in the *New Book*. Pepys went to see his play *The Cutter Of Coleman Street* in December, 1661, and had his latest book given him by Cowley's brother. Evelyn exchanged visits, messages, and gifts with him, and took care to place in front of his *Kalendrium Hortense*, the essay which Cowley had dedicated to him, *The Garden.*

"The testimonies of admiration and esteem were not idle compliments. Cowley knew the supreme satisfaction of gathering disciples about him. His influence gained strength and impetus when his complete works lay before the wondering gaze of the next generation. He was for a long time after his death, even as Spenser had been to him, a poet's poet. But, though he died too young to relish this fame fully, he lived long enough to enjoy some of it."

"He was at the head of contemporary literature. Part of his exalted praise may be ascribed to his gentle disposition. He was rather a center for literary men to group themselves around than their captain. Neither the man nor his works provoked attack. Though he invented new meters and experimented in rhythm, men, while their ear was caught by novelty of sound, heard no thoughts of a kind to offend their

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117 Saintsbury, *Minor Caroline Poets*, p. 577
conservatism. Sprat declares that his rough verse was his choice, not his fault, and that he affected variety to divert men's minds. It is no greater merit in a poet to hunt after variety, but it helps and explains both the subsequent neglect, and also his favor with his contemporaries. Cowley has become for us not equally antiquated with Waller, because mental greatness and want of exclusive sympathy with his party and the Court prevented him from reflecting their tone alone. But his general reflection of the fashion of his day explains his burning popularity than as compared with his present neglect."

"Cowley's literary fortunes have been in marked contrast with those of his contemporary, Robert Herrick, who died unnoticed in his remote Devonshire vicarage in 1674. You may search the literature of England for a hundred fifty years without finding one single acknowledgment of Herrick's gifts to literature. The folio edition of Cowley's works in 1668 was accompanied with an imposing account of his life and writings by Thomas Sprat. Dr. Johnson's Lives Of The English Poets begins with the life of Cowley, in which he gives his famous analysis of the metaphysical school. Although Cowley's poetry had failed long ago and he had lost his readers, Johnson treated him as a dignified memory, worthy of a solid monument.

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No one thought it worth while to write Herrick's biography, to address him in complimentary verse, to celebrate his death in elegy, to comment upon his work, or even to mention his name. Dryden, Addison, Johnson and all the other critics are quite silent concerning Herrick. But for the circumstance that some of his little pieces, with the musical airs to which they were set, were included in several seventeenth century song books, there is nothing to show that there was any English poet named Herrick, until Dr. Nott reprinted a number of selections from "Hesperides" in 1810. But now Herrick is thoroughly revived and almost a favorite. His best things are in all the anthologies. Critics rank him with Shelley among our foremost lyrical poets, and Swinburne thought him the best of English song-writers. 119

The influence of Cowley's poetry on contemporary taste was powerful. His keenest intellectual powers express themselves, however, in his verse. In his prose he aimed rather at charm and clarity, after the fashion of the new standards of France. Here his critical opinions are casual and fragmentary, and unlike Milton's they explain the externals rather than the essence of his own poetic practice.

The study of Cowley's influence as a man of letters on

later poetry gives us significant material for the study of aesthetics and the laws of the literary imagination. A cursory glance at his types of work indicates at once the range of interests and hospitality of taste that should characterize a man of letters. To remind the reader briefly, there is the enormous sweep from the childhood poems and schoolboy play, which looks back to the earlier Elizabethan world, to the Anacreontics; from these to the love lyrics of The Mistress, and again to the Pindarics, which open up a type of reflective lyric new to England. There are the exuberant boish Latin play, and the half satiric Cutter Of Coleman Street, written in college and revised years later, and the long Latin Libri Planatorum, written after he had studied medicine in his middle years, and amazing for the virtuosity and fluency of their elegiacs and lyric measures. Then there are the familiar essays, the projects for an agricultural college and experimental laboratory, and finally the notes to Davideis and the Pindarics, which are remarkable for their considered theory and definitions, as well as for their appreciations.

If we look at Cowley's themes, we find the same catholicity and enterprise. Let me only note in passing that he added two new themes to the then traditional and current subject of lyric poetry, - namely, critical theory and the new science and philosophy. In style, he began with Spenser and Fletcher,
wrought under Donne and again under Ben Jonson, garnered much from the classics. Here too he innovated; he both enlarged the scope of irregular verse and set the English pattern for it; he built up the couplet and gave currency to the Alexandrine.

His experimentation is in extraordinary proportion to his actual accomplishment. Other poets of robust nature try a number of modes of poetry and a number of styles before they find their own; but we feel through all the shifts of their work the gradual emergency of one poetic personality, of one poetic vision, and of one style able to hold the impress of that vision. Cowley's various endeavors, on the other hand, though we feel one intelligence behind them, have no such continuity of poetic personality and do not merge into one whole. Cowley never found himself. He brought none of his endeavors to sustained excellence, except the Anacreontics, and they are the simplest and most obvious of his poems, as well as the ones most readily translatable from the classics. He almost never has steadily at his command a style as adequate as that of a hundred much lesser poets though he has moments of greater style than they. Even the play of ingenuity which pervades all the surface of his writing, and which is really so characteristic of the man's temper, is not an integral style. Why was this? In truth, intelligence more than poetic fury possesses his work. His intelligence, which coolly used his poetic feel-
ing as a tool, rather than becoming itself the instrument of that feeling, turned to one and to another experiment; and his energy went successively into exploring the theory of these new modes, so that he never subdued and absorbed them into creative feeling. Cowley lived in a poetic age, and he is caught up in its spirit, but in him intelligence was more active than primary poetic or philosophic imagination. That was one reason, indeed, why he accomplished so much.

To explain more fully, Cowley himself felt that he was too much hindered by circumstance and by the attendant dissipation of spirit to drive his work though to its full promise. But in the same disturbed age, Marvell, working in a completed tradition, and Davenant, as a transitional poet reaching out to the new feeling and the French influence, are poets equally hindered who brought their vision and style to completion. Cowley attempted more and had something deeper to say than Davenant, and hence his material was far more difficult to assimilate and create into new poetic life; this, however, does not fully explain his incompleteness. In detail he does not show the quickening, the assurance, the high clear light of the Seventeenth Century. Dryden is an example of the accomplishment in the absorbing and perfecting of new modes which can be achieved by the great man of letters who has also a very great artistic gift. In truth, Cowley's gift,
as this comparison shows more clearly, was primarily intellectual, and only secondarily poetic. I do not mean by this that Cowley had not a deep and fine imagination, and a sensitive personality. But the range and scope of one's thought, and its sympathetic participation in life, do not necessarily become an immediate part of one's efficient poetic and philosophical creative power unless there be special creative gift. Lacking this, Cowley can only say meditately and in terms of analysis, sometimes dry, what the poet says immediately. His *Ode On The Death Of Mr. William Hervey*, in its later stanzas, is an example of this limitation. True, the spacious and poignant opening stanzas, under the whip of perhaps the strongest emotion Cowley ever sought to express, concentrate thought and feeling in imagery that is immediate and splendid:

It was a dismal, and a fearful night,  
Scarce could the Morn drive on th' unwilling Light,  
When Sleep, Death's Image, left my troubled breast,  
By something liker Death posset.  
My eyes with Tears did uncommanded flow,  
And on my Soul hung the dull weight  
Of some Intolerable Fate.  
What bell was that? Oh me! Too much I know.  

This tide of feeling moves onward into the great traditional elegiac reflection upon the emptiness of the world and the bareness of a friend left desolate by the death of a noble man. The traditional imagery and thought, with their glow, are

120 Cowley, *Ode On The Death Of Mr. Hervey*. 
recast into terms of Cowley's and Hervey's actual experience; and in piercing simplicity the realization of grief transcends Lycidas.

"My dearest Friend, would I had dy'd for thee! Life and this World will henceforth tedious bee Nor shall I know hereafter what to do If once my Griefs prove tedious too. Silent and sad I walk about all day, As sullen Ghosts stalk speechless by Where their hid Treasurers ly; Alas, my Treasure's gone, why do I stay? 

Ye fields of Cambridge, our dear Cambridge, say, Have ye not seen us walking every day? The Love betwixt us two? Henceforth, ye gentle Trees, for ever fade; Or your sad branches thicker joyn, And into darksome shades combine, Dark as the Grove wherein my Friend is laid."  

But as the reflection grown more actual, the movement slows up, and even though it does not lose its nobility, it passes into the step by step analysis of prose:

"His mirth was the pure Spirits of various Wit, Yet never did his God or Friends forget. And when deep talk and wisdom came in view, Retir'd and gave to them their due. For the rich help of Books he always took, Though his own searching mind before Was so with Notions written ore As if wise Nature had more that her Book."  

The effect of the close of this ode is due in part to the nature of the world Cowley was experimenting in, the world of Hobbes, Harvey, and the Royal Society. But on the whole, it...  

121 Ibid.  
122 Ibid.
may be ascribed to the fact that reason rather than poetic imagination is at work in a poetic stream. 123

Inferior as is Cowley to Wordsworth as an original thinker, he had an extraordinary and almost an unique faculty for inspiring his imagination with grand philosophical ideas not his own. He is not so much a metaphysical or philosophical poet, as the poet of science and philosopher. Any reader who is sceptical has but to study Cowley as a whole and not in fragments, and his conversion is certain. He may commence by despising Cowley's contemporaries for worshipping his genius; he will end by blushing for the modern desertion of the shrine. 124

Thomas Sprat and Katherine Philips were his earliest Pindaric disciples. The latter chose the irregular ode to congratulate Cowley upon his retirement. Sprat deliberately followed his lead and became his most enthusiastic, if not very successful, pupil.

Another adept of Cowley's was Thomas Shipman, who in a piece called Gratitude thanked Mr. Cowley, the excellent poet, for praising him.

Hence forth, my Muse, more boldly claim the praise, Ennobled now by Cowley's generous praise. 125

Cowley, according to Shipman, only had two rivals, Waller and Donne, but Cowley towers over them. Even the greatest poets of

123 Wallerstein, Cowley As A Man Of Letters, p. 127.
125 Thomas Shipman, Gratitude, From Collections of poems called Caroline.
the age expressed in any unmistakable manner their admiration for Cowley's genius. Dryden was deeply influenced by the darling of his youth. Mr. Margoliouth points to several striking resemblances between the love-poems of Marvell and Cowley. 126

Dryden attributed Cowley's use of triplets and Alexandrines in heroic verse to the examples of Spenser, and furthermore suggested that his use of hemistichs might also have come from Spenser as well as Virgil. In some other respects than his own admission of discipleship, then Cowley may be regarded as a limited Spenserian.

Though ponderous in style, there is ever shrewed sense behind the statements of Samuel Johnson, who as critic and historian of the period is the unquestionably high authority on the poets. Being a contemporary, he is at a disadvantage. Johnson in his Essay On Cowley makes some shrewd observations on the school of poets among whom Cowley is not the least figure. The Professor speak lucidly and forcibly on his theme:

"In pursuing the works of this race of authors, the mind is exercised either by recollection or inquiry; something already learned is to be retrieved, or something new is to be examined. If their greatness seldom elevates, their acuteness often surprises; if the imagination is not always gratified, at least the powers of reflection and comparison are employed; and in the mass of materials which ingenious absurdity has thrown together, genuine with the useful knowledge may be sometimes found buried perhaps in grossness of

expression, but useful to those who know their value; and such as, when they are expanded to perspicuity and polished to elegance, may give lustre to works which have more propriety though less copiousness or sentiment." 127

The learned critic is discussing the metaphysical school of poets who flourished before his time. Sometimes their works are ingeniously absurd and gross in expression, but quite often there is meritorious wit and polish in their productions. By "metaphysical" is meant a tendency to rationalize in a variety of ingenious particulars, such as analogies and comparisons as also to spin out extended reasoning in poetry, for want of any pressing emotion to give vehemence and body to their subject-matter.

"Their immediate successors, of whom any remembrance can be said to remain, were Suckling, Waller, Denham, Cowley, Cleveland and Milton. Denham and Waller sought another way to fame, by improving the harmony of our members. Milton tried the metaphysic style only in his lines upon Hobson the carrier. Cowley adopted it, and excelled his predecessors, having as much sentiment and more music. Suckling neither improved versification nor abounded in conceits. The fashionable style remained chiefly with Cowley; Suckling could not reach it, and Milton disdained it." 128

128 Ibid., p. 11.
CHAPTER II

Dr. Johnson, whose masculine English and critical acumen have raised his Lives Of The Poets to the dignity of a classic, had a high opinion of Cowley as a man, a poet, and a writer of forceable prose. With insufficient reason he ranks him amongst the metaphysical poets, possibly because his poetry embodies the nice subtelty of metaphysics. The worthy Doctor, like Addison, could see faults in the subject of his criticism; but its conclusion, though spoken with a high degree of truth, has a ring of eulogy, which must be estimated at its proper value.

That Johnson's statement does not exaggerate Cowley's merits, will be denied by no one who has read the poet with due attention, and thus earned the sole right to criticise his verse. Johnson was by no means blind to his predecessor's faults, which are indeed comparatively obvious; but like a true critic, after pointing out such blemishes as he was able to perceive, he concludes his estimate with such commendation as he could honestly bestow. Would that all modern critics would imitate the great Doctor's method in this respect at least.

A few of the main facts of the poet's life will be serviceable in the effort to arrive at any fair estimate of his

123 Johnson, Lives Of The Poets, p. 64.
work, as his circumstances coloured his political vision, and had a tendency to enforce in him that overpowering love of solitude which filled his soul and his earliest years.

A. Cowley was born in the early part of a century which was to prove the most eventful in the history of the British Isles. Aubrey, Wood, Johnson, and most of the other authorities have stated that Cowley was born at London in Fleet Street near the end of Chancery Lane, and that his father was a grocer. It has been reserved for an American Genealogist, Colonel Chester, to show, with almost absolute certainty, that Cowley was the son of a Stationer, Thomas Cowley, of the parish of St. Michael le Querne, a church in Cheapside. When this church was destroyed by fire the registers were burned, but the will of Thomas Cowley has been found among the wills of the Perogative Court of Canterbury. 130

A wealthy citizen of London, stationer or grocer, dying in the summer of 1618, left a sum of £1000 to be divided among his six children and another not yet born. In the autumn of the year, this heir appeared and was christened Abraham Cowley. Looking back upon the history of the time, we see that it was a period of rapid poetic decadence into which this child was born. Shakespeare was dead; Jonson and the philosophic poets were already past middle life. The years directly after the

birth of Cowley were to be darkened by the deaths of many poets, but none were to be born for forty years, except Marvell, Vaughn and Dryden. Of his immediate compatriots, Milton was ten years of age, Denham three, Suckling nine, and Lovelace only a few weeks older than himself.  

"The father having died before Cowley was born, the education of the boy became the great work of his mother. She soon saw the manifestations of an ardent love of reading, and of an unusual quickness and activity of mind. To guide these tendencies to high and noble ends, seems to have been the great object of her care. But one of those occurrences which we call accidents, gave the decisive direction to the thoughts of the child, which made Cowley a poet. Soon after he had learned to read, he met a copy of The Faerie Queene. The boy opened and read; and as he read, new emotions and bolder thoughts stirred up his spirit. The spring for fancy began to flow, and poetry became the business of his life."  

Although he was the youngest of seven children, he was not allowed to run wild, even had he the disposition to do so. Mistress Cowley was obviously a woman of strong personality, and the boy in Sprats' telling phrase "was bred up under her discipline until he went away to school."

While at Westminster School, he showed wonderful precocity, perhaps the most wonderful on record. Milton, as well as Pope, may be said to have "lisped in numbers", but we have nothing from the former before his fifteenth year, nor from the latter before his fourteenth year. Even the marvelous boy, Chatterton, was sixteen before he attracted the attention of the world.

As is usual with high gifted youths, the school curriculum was irksome and we find that Cowley could not be induced to learn the rules of grammar. Still he seldom violates the rules in Pyramus And Thisbe nor in Constantia And Philetus.

At the age of ten he wrote a poem; another when twelve, and composed a comedy at the age when most children think more of games than of dramas. His first written work was printed when he was in his fifteenth year. While admitting that these early works have little of the poetic in them, we must say that they indicate a singularly early talent for versification. A boy who at the age of ten, writes a poem, is at least a proper subject for some degree of wonder.

"His intense interest in versification and the grace and charm of his manner won him many friends and patrons. To his schoolfellows he might well seem the prodigy that we know they considered him; and the masters of the school, with a gentleness unusual in these austere times, encouraged his con-
continued production of verses. He did not confine himself to the acquisition of learning; he was a poet born, and poetry soon laid claim to his hearty allegiance. By the year 1633 he had accumulated such a store of poems that his friends determined to hide the treasure no longer from the world."

The first edition of Poetical Blossoms, by A.C. is a charming little quarto of thirty-two leaves. It is now one of the chief prizes of book-hunters, and a great bibliographical rarity. It ought to possess, what is often lost, a large portrait of the author at the age of thirteen, as the frontispiece. Let any reader of Pyramus And Thisbe consider how naive, artless, and infantine are the writings of the very cleverest child often that he has ever known when compared with this first work of Cowley. After more than two hundred years it remains still readable - much more readable than many of the author's more elaborate poems of maturity.

The amazing promise of Pryamus And Thisbe is hardly justified by the cleverness of the poem written two years later - Constantia And Philetus. It is indeed singular that, at the age of twelve, the child should be so much the father of the man as to produce the most Cowleyan stanza, illustrative of the author's high-flown rhetoric:

133 Emma Yarnall, Abraham Cowley, p. 10.
Oh! might Cupid! whose unbounded sway
Hath often ruled the Olympian Thunderer,
Whom all celestial dieties obey,
Whom men and gods both reverence and fear!
Oh! force Constantia's heart to yeild to love,
Of all they works the Masterpiece 'twill prove. 134

**Constantia And Philetus** is an extremely tragical tale, not so
briefly or so simply told as **Pyramus and Thisbe**, and is padded
out by songs and letters to the extent of nearly seven hundred
lines - an extraordinary feat for so young a child.

When the **Poetical Blossoms** appeared in 1633 it enjoyed
an immediate popularity. Just as Cowley was leaving West­
minster to go to Cambridge, in 1636, a second edition of
**Poetical Blossoms** was called for, and appeared in small form,
much augmented. Among the additions was an ode containing fine
and thoughtful verses for which Cowley won the enthusiastic
praise of such didactic writers as Denham and Roscommon, and
in a certain sense originated a school.

This only grant me, that my means may lie
Too low for envy, for contempt too high.
Some honor I would have,
Not from great deeds, but good alone.
The unknown are better than the ill known;
Rumor can ope the grave.
Acquaintance I would have, but when 'it depends
Not on the number but the choice of friends. 135

He was entered at Trinity College, Cambridge, and pro­
ceeded thither with the MS. of his pastoral drama, **Love's**
Riddle, in his pocket. Suckling, Cleveland, Fanshawe and

134 Cowley, **Constantia And Philetus**.
135 Cowley, **A Vote**.
Crashaw were all at Cambridge. In 1637, a third edition of Poetical Blossoms was published, and in 1638, his pastoral comedy of Love's Riddle. In February of the same year was published a five act Latin comedy, Naufragium Joculare, a prose and verse. With the visit of Prince Charles to the College, Cowley was called upon to write a comedy - The Guardian - an ill-digested, unrevised performance, acted before his Royal Highness on March 12. The prologue fiercely satirized the Roundheads, and sneered at Prynne, who had just published his ridiculous Jersey poem of Mont-Orgueil. The farcial parts were in prose, but the most important characters spoke in blank verse. This was the first appearance of the play which was destined to have a varied history. On it alone rests Cowley's right to be placed among the dramatists of the seventeenth century. The Guardian was never included in the works of Cowley, and underwent some curious vicissitudes. It was not printed till 1650 - Cowley entirely rewrote the plan in 1658, and it was brought out on the stage as The Cutter Of Coleman Street.

Under the changed name it afterward appeared and though not at first accepted, finally received applause. It was generally considered as a satire on the King's Party. In the preface, however, Cowley defends himself from this charge. Grosart makes the following interesting contemporary notice of
the play:

"This Comedy being acted so perfectly and exact, it was performed a whole week with a full audience." 136

The evening of December 16, 1661, found Thomas Sprat at Lincoln's Inn Fields in company with John Dryden. Up in the gallery sat Samuel Pepys, who, after the play, went home and entered in his diary that it was a very good play. 137

The Cutter Of Coleman Street was a lively and rapidly moving comedy, of the Spanish intrigue type coming into vogue, and with many elements of farce.

Langbaine says of it:

"It was acted not only at Cambridge but several times afterwards privately during the prohibition of the stage and publicly at Dublin, and always with much applause." 138

Mason thinks:

"The Cutter of Coleman Street was an absurd, illtempered thing, coarsely worded, and utterly unworthy of Cowley's genius." 139

To a reader of the twentieth century the plan certainly gives the impression of a satire. A veil of concealed and doubled meaning seems to run through the whole play and one can easily imagine the Royal party to have taken offense. The Drama was not the field in which Cowley's genius is seen to best advantage. We must agree with Masson in thinking this

effusion unworthy of Cowley's genius. He was never again guilty of an attempt in the dramatic field.

Shortly after he went to Oxford, 1646, a satire appeared from his pen called The Puritan And The Papist. Cowley could have had little knowledge of the Puritan, except from the side of their enemies who were totally incapable of doing them justice even had he wanted to do so.

The Civil War, attributed to Cowley by Dryden in his collection of 1716, is considered doubtful by Grosart.

In 1648 appeared a satire The Four Ages Of England, and a doggerel called A Satire Against Separatists. These though printed under Cowley's name were not his. He openly disavowed the former. 140

When Cowley completed his twentieth year, he found himself an admired and popular poet, author of three successful works, and highly estimated as a rising scholar. Past all the praise of the present, he looked wistfully forward to the future; but with some inkling, perhaps that his fine talents could not promise the lasting crown he sought, for he set himself the memorable enigma that commences his Miscellanies:

"What shall I do to be forever known
And make the age to come my own?" 141

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140 Emma Yarnall, Abraham Cowley, p. 28.
141 Cowley, The Motto.
Political troubles caused his expulsion from College with his friend, Crashaw, for refusing to take the oath at that time prescribed to all members of Cambridge University. He left Cambridge with a sorrowful heart as his Latin elegy addressed to the University testifies:

"Mother most rich from thy poor son to thee,
This scanty pledge of vast affection see.
Oh, better gifts for thee I fain would pour
Had but my grateful hands a larger store.

O name of Cambridge, O most pleasant sound!
Deep in my heart the love of thee is found.
Fair, without luxury, thy Halls are seen;
And happy are the lives led there, I ween."¹⁴²

Cowley went to St. Johns College, Oxford, where he remained two years. Shortly after going to Oxford, he appears to have taken himself to the protection of Jermyn and the Queen's faction. Materially it was fortunate for him that he gained the friendship of Jermyn for into his household and consequently into the Queen's, Cowley was admitted as a favored confident. He found active employment in deciphering the correspondence between the King, now a captive, and the Queen, and other Royalists. The intervals between political journeys were filled with poetry. While in France in 1647, he thought it his duty to show his conformity with the principles, if not the practice of the Cavaliers, by composing his Mistress. The subject quickly made it popular, rather than any special merits

¹⁴² Cowley, Ode To Cambridge.
of the poem. It is not without occasional beauties:

"Love in her sunny eyes does basking play,
Love walks the pleasant mazes of her hair,
Love does on both her lips forever stray,
And sows and reaps a thousand kisses there."\(^\text{143}\)

At times a tone is caught which appears an anticipation of Tennyson.

When the King was given up by the Presbyterians into the custody of Cromwell in 1647, Cowley was recalled to Paris to undertake a duty for the Queen. To no one less trustworthy than himself would Henrietta Marie delegate the preparation of those letters in cipher by means of which she communicated with her husband till his execution in 1649.

Cowley was next occupied in corresponding with the leaders of Royalist reaction in Scotland and Ireland. But when the young King Charles took refuge in Holland, and the Anglo-Parisian court was in some measure broken up, it was suggested that Cowley should return to England. He was immediately caught and imprisoned; nor did he regain his liberty on a less bail than of £1000. At Cromwell's death he returned again to France and remained there until the Restoration.

In the course of eighteen years of enforced inaction, much had occurred to literary men, though little in literature itself. Just before the Civil War broke out, a whole group of

\(^{143}\) Cowley, *The Mistress*, "Inconstacy", p. 11
eminent dramatists had passed away - Jonson, Ford, Massinger, Field and Carew. The years of contention saw the deaths of Suckling, Cartwright, Quarles, and Drummond. In 1650 Cowley's dear friend, Richard Crashaw, died at the shrine of Loretto. A new generation had meanwhile been born - Shadwell, Wychesley, Southerne and Otway. Even in the civil wars much poetry was read and published. In 1647, an edition of Cowley's love-cycle called The Mistress was issued in England. From the last of these pieces we learn, or are intended to believe, that Cowley wrote them in three years. The Mistress was fated to become one of the most admired books of the age. To us it is the most unreadable production of its author, dry and tedious, without tenderness, without melancholy, without music. Here and there we find a good rhetorical line, such as

"Love is the soul of body and the soul of me;" 144 and what is curious, almost all the pieces lead off with a sonorous and well-tuned phrase. But not one is readable throughout; not one is even ridiculous enough for quotation. While Donne, in a brilliant and masculine way, errs in the introductions of unsuitable and monstrous ornament, Cowley is hardly ornamental at all. He siezes an idea, perhaps sensible, perhaps preposterous, but in no case beautiful; he clothes this idea with illustrations, drawn, not from external nature or

144 Cowley, The Mistress.
objects of any kind, but from the supposed phenomena of the human mind. We can trace all this pedantic ingenuity to the personal training and example of Dr. Henry More, who was the great oracle of English Platonism at Cambridge during Cowley's residence there, and whose volume, Philosophical Poems, published in 1640, may be constantly found reflected in the lyrics of the younger poet.

When Cowley was urged, by way of diverting political suspicion to study for some profession, he chose that of medicine. In December, 1656, he passed the final examination at Oxford, but it does not appear to be recorded whether he ever practised as a physician. The principal consequence of this line of labor was to interest Cowley in Botany, which thenceforward became his favorite study.

He returned to England in 1600 just in time to see through the press the Ode On His Majesty's Restoration And Return, a Pindaric poem of immense length, very bombastic and rhetorical. Cowley was not the man to win honors in such a court as that of Charles II. Of auster life, a sincere and rigid religionist, an earnest lover of scholarship and holy living, he was looked upon with suspicion by the gay butterflies that flocked to Whitehall. Charles himself admired his genius and respected his character, but was prejudiced against him by spiteful tongues, who pointed to certain passages in his writ-
ings as if they proved his lukewarmness in the Royalist cause. Nothing could be more unjust. Cowley found himself alone and in his despair he resolved to go to America, but he did not have enough money for the voyage. He had two faithful friends, however, Lord St. Albans, and the young Duke of Buckingham. By the united efforts of these noblemen, a generous provision was made for the poet, who by this means was relieved from all anxiety.

This part of Cowley's life has been the subject of much criticism and much difference of opinion. His friend Sprat justifies his conduct and seems anxious to give proof of Cowley's loyalty. Sprat says it was Cowley's opinion that a mistaken zeal for the King's cause hurried many of his followers to their ruin and that for himself he found it impossible to pursue the ends for which he came over if he did not make some kind of declaration of peaceable intentions.

In the preface to the edition of poems which Cowley published immediately on coming back to England he says he accepts the inevitable and treats the controversy at an end as God seems to have decided against the Stuarts.

This compliance with the men in power was enough to make him unpopular with the Royal party. Some of the critics

146 Cowley, Preface First Published by Grosart.
seems to think there was no cause for the indifference with which he was treated by the King after the Restoration. "Mr. Cowley's pardon is his reward", King Charles is quoted as having said when asked to reward Cowley for his loyalty.

Masson in his *Life of Milton* says:

"It was not possible for Cowley to live in London as a spy for the King's party as such a game could not have been played under the watchful eye of Thurloe." 147

Masson seems to think it more than likely that Cowley was tired of exile and of a court with which he could have no need of sympathy.

Dr. Johnson looked rather liniently on Cowley's compliance for he says:

"He promised little and that little justifiable. It does not appear to have gained his confidence enough to be trusted without security, for the bond of his bail was never cancelled." 148

That the neglected and abused poet deeply felt the ingratitude and malicious envy of his former friends may be seen from the pathetic poem, *The Complaint*, which he must have written not many weeks after his *Ode On The Restoration*. Cowley's state of mind over the whole affair is revealed in this poem. That Cowley sang from the bitterness of his soul cannot be denied. He was conscious of having deserved well and won no

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recognition of his deserts. From this time on he was the melancholy Cowley, as he had thoughtlessly dubbed himself in his lament.

It was at this time that Cowley determined to retire into the country life and to devote himself to those peaceful pursuits of rural life which he had loved from his earliest boyhood. At first he had little enough to keep him from starvation; but he was content with little, though undoubtedly, disappointed that his royal master should have shown such complete forgetfulness of him and his services. 149

Perhaps it was Horace who first put into his head the motion of retirement in the country. At any rate, when Cowley was a small boy at Westminster, we find him thus phrasing his longing:

"Books should not business, entertain the light; 
And sleep, as undisturbed as death, the night. 
My house a cottage, more 
Than palace, and should fitting be 
For all my use, no luxury. 
My garden painted o'er 
With nature's hand, not arts'; and pleasures yield Horace might envy in his Sabine field." 150

During the storm and stress of the Civil War, while he was engaged in deciphering the correspondence between the King and Queen, he fulfilled his duties ably, but his thoughts continued to dwell longingly on a snug cottage hidden away in some green

149 Fox, Books Of Bachelors, p. 220.
150 Cowley, A Vote, St. 2
English village. So he wrote the poem:

"Ah, yet, ere I descend to the grave,
May I a small house, and a large garden have!
And a few friends, and many books; both true
Both wise, and both delightful, too!"

Cowley's air castle had at last become a reality and for the last two years of his life he lived at Chertsey.

There is, perhaps, an unwonted tinge of sadness in his later poems and essays, which may be due to solitude, to ill-health and many other causes.

Cowley remained true to the wish of his boyhood, and though he was often tempted to quit his calm retreat by promises of profitable employment, he resisted all temptations, preferring to devote his remaining days in the study of science and to literary pursuits.

At Barm Elms a long and enfeebling fever fell upon him which did much to weaken his robust constitution. Even at his healthier home in Chertsey, a similar fever attacked him and thus the quiet years of his solicitude were disturbed. The house in which this second fever laid hold of him was called Porch House.

The house of Cowley at Chertsey yet remains, though it has been considerably altered. It is still called the Porch House, but the porch has been cut away because it projected into the street. Over the front door is a tablet of stone on

151 Cowley, The Wish, St. 2.
which is inscribed a line from Pope's *Windsor Forest*:

"Here the last accents flowed from Cowley's tongue." 152

Here Cowley was always glad to receive his old friends and speedily made new ones among his neighbors. He was often visited by friends who liked his genial, unaffected companionship. Hither came that gentleman and famous diarist, John Evelyn 153, who took the keenest interest in Cowley's scientific pursuits. Sprat 154, the florid poet, was a frequent and welcome guest at Porch House.

The country around was very agreeable. For a heart that loved solitude, there could have been no pleasanter spot. In Cowley's time, how much deeper must have been the retirement of such a retreat. Poor Cowley did not enjoy his retreat here long. Within two years he died at the Porch House in the forty-ninth year of his age. He was buried with great pomp in Westminster Abbey, near Chaucer and Spenser. A marble monument was erected by his friend Buckingham. 155

I still revere thee, courtly though retired;
Though stretched at ease in Chersty's silent bowers,
Not unemployed; but finding rich amends,
For a lost world in solitude and verse. 156

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152 Pope, *Windsor Forest*.
153 Evelyn, *Diary*, May 14, 1663.
Elegies were hastily made and circulated by the poet's friends. Denham and Scarborough were among the first. Sprat also wrote a long elegy - 'On The Death And To The Memory of Mr. Abraham Cowley'. By the time the eighth edition of Cowley's works had appeared in 1693, the last printed eulogies included the names of Orrery, Denham, Thomas Higgins, Thos. Flatman, Samuel Wesley, Nahum Tate, Aphra Behn and others.

What Cowley would have thought of the extravagance of these elegies can only be surmised. The authors probably meant what they said; although most seventeenth-century verse tributes are not to be trusted much farther than most funeral sermons. However, when one recalled the reiterated wishes that Cowley had made in his essay to pass out of the world even more quietly than he had entered it, one wonders whether his own 'Epitaphiun Vivi Auctoris', composed at Chertsey, and translated by Bryant, might not have made a more fitting inscription for a monument to be placed in a spot somewhere less overrun than Westminster Abbey:

Here, Stranger, in this lowly spot,
The buried Cowley finds at last
Rest from the labours of his lot,
And leaves life's follies with the past.157

The Earl of Orrery composed a funeral poem and Sir John

Denham wrote an elegy, beginning,

"Old Chaucer, like the morning star" 158

which is quoted in all works of English literature.

All the poets of the day wrote Pindaric Odes in imitation of the transcendent poet of that form of verse, and his heroic couplet became the despair of all who wrote with ease.

"He who would worthily adore his hearse Should write in his own way, in his immortal verse", said Thomas Higgins, who indited a very good Pendaric ode to his memory.

His fame was more materially served by Sprat, afterwards Bishop of Rochester, who published a life of Cowley, which is one of the very best examples of memorial prose of elegic monograph in the language; being pure, elegant and forceful in style, and full of fine thoughts.

The most complete and accurate eulogy Cowley received was the Account Sprat wrote. In it we find, not only a living portrait, but a sympathetic analysis of the work and through it we can understand what his contemporaries so highly appreciated in his verse.

What appears most striking at first is the stress laid by the biographer on the character of Cowley, not as an author, but as a man. Indeed, Cowley's personality seems to have fascinated those who came to hear him, as much as his talent im-

158 John Denham, Ode To Cowley.
159 Thomas Higgins, Ode To Cowley.
pressed them. Reading through Sprat's eloquent sketch of his character, we understand his power of attraction. But this charm died away with him, only a faint flavor of it lingering in some works and by-places of his works, and the only ground for critical estimates has of course been his printed work. What then did Sprat and his contemporaries find in Cowley's books, that they could look upon him as the best poet of the age?

Sprat discovered in The Mistress the whole passion of love, inimitably described, with all its mighty train of hopes, and joys, and disquiets. The Pindaric Odes were remarkable for their extreme variety, and the irregularity of the number, far from being a fault, gave them new beauties.¹⁶⁰

Sprat apologizes for the space The Mistress took in Cowley's work, and excuses him for having written at such length on subjects so lacking in weight and moral purposes. The reason he found was that Cowley had indulged in those nimble fancies when young, and that he had made through them his apprenticeship for his later and gayer themes. On this point most of his seventeenth century readers would, no doubt, have demurred, for The Mistress was to stand for a good many years as one of the pillars on which Cowley's Temple of Fame was erected.

¹⁶⁰ Jean Loiseau, Cowley's Reputation In England, pp. 15 ff.
In every other respect, they would have heartily agreed with him, especially when he emphasized the versatility of the Poet's genius and wit:

"The variety of arguments that he had managed is so large that there is scarcely any particular of all the Passions of Men, or works of Nature and Providence, which he has passed by underscribed." 161

The variety of treatment was, in Sprat's eyes, as excellent as the variety of argument was surprising. Whether in familiar lyric and satire, or in philosophical and heroic poetry.

.....he still observes the Rules of Decency..... To all these matters that are so wide asunder, he still proportions a due figure of speech, and a proper measure of wit. 162

Fertility of invention and a supreme power of adaptation, were, according to Sprat, the main feature of Cowley's poetry. His wit consisted above all in the combination of great agility of mind with sound discrimination. An unbounded wealth of ideas, fancies, images, such as the final impression left by his verse upon his readers, a suggestion that, on any theme, when he stopped, it was in his power to have said more.

Stauffer thinks:

"The Cowley depicted by Sprat cannot be identified with the sparkling and confiding personality which appears in the poems and essays." 163

161 Sprat, Life Of Cowley.
162 Ibid.
But so few details of Cowley's life are preserved in Sprat's funeral oration, and so scanty are other evidences from those disturbed times, that we know very little of Cowley's actions outside a few main points. We cannot tell exactly how he acquired his Epicureanism; how far he practiced it, and with what results; but the amiability, the delicacy in friendship, the love of solitude, and obscurity in life are all definitely Epicurean. From the essays themselves we learn what Cowley thought. Cowley's Epicureanism is intellectual and bourgeois, partly because of his temperament, and partly as a result of his frequentation of Pierre Gassendi and his disciples. Gassendi was probably his master in Philosophy.

We know from Sprat that Cowley was out of England from 1644 to 1656, part of the time in Paris, and though he was busily engaged as a royal secretary to the exiled English Court, it is hardly likely that Lord St. Albans kept him hard at work or that he had no access to Parisian society. We may assume that in twelve years Cowley made some acquaintances in France, and that some of those would be men of letters. When we find confirmation of it in his writings, we may still further assume that he was influenced by their conversations and culture.

It may be claimed without undue exaggeration that
Cowley found his natural tendencies greatly strengthened by the writings of Gassendi and his pupils. And, what is interesting, Cowley's Epicureanism is purer and more orthodox than that of most of the other Epicureans of the time. To parody a famous phrase, he was a naturally Epicurean soul. From childhood he loved solitude and study.

There is no need to remark on Cowley's intense love of flowers and of gardens. His essay The Garden, addressed to Evelyn, begins with this truly Epicurean wish:

"I never had any other desire so strong, and so like to Covetousness, as that one which I have had always that I might be master at last of a small House and a large Garden, with very moderate Conveniences joined to them, and there dedicate the remainder of my life only to the culture of them, and the study of nature." 164

One might quote whole essays which are pure Epicureanism of a Latinized kind. The very titles of his essays proclaim his doctrine. He quotes Montaigne, Gassendi, and Epicurus; he translates many famous passages of Latin poetry which are Epicurean in tone, but chiefly from Horace. Seneca, Claudianus, Virgil, and Martial are represented, but not Lucretius, for Cowley's Epicureanism is more Horatian, pastoral and elegiac than elevated and speculative. 165

Cowley's Epicureanism was not the vulgar one of "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." Rather it was the

165 Richard Aldington, Literary Studies And Reviews, pp.103,ff.
Golden Means as Horace saw it—moderation in the indulgence of the mind as well as all the senses. Although Cowley sometimes used the term Epicure and Epicurean in the loose, popular sense he never actually distorted them, and twice, in *Of Liberty* and in *The Garden*, he discussed the real doctrine of Epicurus so definitely that his study of them is clear. In *Of Liberty*, in a passage of voluptuousness, he wrote:

"Metrodorus said that he had learned to give his belly just thanks for all his pleasures. This by the calumniators of Epicurus his philosophy was objected as one of the most scandalous of all their sayings; but according to my understanding is that he thanked his own belly for that moderation in the customary appetites of it which can only give a man liberty and happiness in this world." 166

When in *The Garden*, he wrote his ode for Evelyn, he spoke even more plainly:

"When Epicurus to the world had taught, That pleasure was the chiepest good, ............................................... Whoever a true Epicure would be, May there find cheap and virtuous luxury." 167

These are the lines upon which Richard Hurd, a century later, based his assertion that Cowley knew the writings of Pierre Gassendi on Epicurus. 168.

According to Mr. Nethercot, Aldington makes two slight errors. He says that Cowley alludes to Gassendi in the essays, whereas he does not, and that he fails to mention Lucretius,

166 Cowley, *Of Liberty*.
whereas he does so twice in the essays, and many times in other works.

Cowley's Epicureanism extended only to rather general ideas, and never to details. He had read widely, and his notes and illusions throughout his works make a great showing of learning. But he was a highly original thinker, even with the step-ladder of other thinkers to stand on. He was content to reflect what other men had written and what other men were thinking about. For this reason he was one of the most typical persons of his age, and so his essays, the language of his heart, became doubly interesting. 169

Cowley, whose genius Denham declared to be a twin to that of Virgil, occupies a place somewhat outside the main channel of the poetry of his day. It is difficult to give one general character to his works because of the difference of their subjects and their various forms. The general style of Cowley's poetry does not lead us to class him among men endowed with a keen perception of natural beauty; but he was a thoughtful man and therefore could not have been insensible to the pure and soothing influence of rich and quiet landscapes. 170

Perhaps not a little of what we think forced, unnatural, and artificial in Cowley's poems may be traced back to his precocious facility of versifying, which by out-running his

170 Richard Hurd, Select Works Of Cowley, p. 20.
power of conception, tempted him to look to novelty in manners of originality, and for the satisfaction of his absorbing thirst for literary glory. Next to Chatterton, he is the most remarkable instance of success in the ambitious imitativeness of childhood, which sometimes develops into poetry. Cowley's poetical power was hardly hereditary. The posthumous son of a shopkeeper did not start under favorable auspices for winning the smiles and patronage of a Jermyn and a Buckingham. Mrs. Cowley, to whom was left the task of bringing up three sons, was a tender mother, and gifted with the power of exciting an affection in her children which no years of fame could diminish. But she knew no more about poetry than her neighbors and possessed no large stock of books.

At the school at Westminster he speedily exhibited very remarkable classical taste. An ear for Latin verse, inferior to Milton's in sweetness and delicacy, but stronger, and showing on the whole more freedom and power of thinking in the language, is sufficient testimony to his early industry. Hand in hand advanced his power over both English and classical diction. His masters grew proud of him, and cherished the genius from which they expected yet riper fruits. Cowley's gratitude to one of them, Mr. Jordan, led him to commemorate in an elegy. The earliest extant poem by the satirist of Cromwell was dedicated to the schoolmaster.
Cowley was soon distinguished favorably by the notice of the fellows of his college. Among his fellow-students his chief associates seem to have been William Hervey and Richard Crashaw.

One of the most pleasing of his poems is that entitled The Garden, addressed to Evelyn, between whom and himself there existed a strong friendship, arising probably from conformity of tasks and similarity of character. This poem has the quality which gives interest to The Complaint. The author is in earnest, and instead of elaborately toying with his subject and casting about for unexpected illustrations, expresses with warmth the thoughts that came crowding upon his mind when a country life is mentioned such as his friend Evelyn enjoyed at Say's Court. Cowley's love of such a life, whatever Dr. Johnson may have said, was most sincere and hearty. His early writings show that it was a passion with him in his youth. His Discourse In Verse And Prose give us the idea of one who was contented in his retirement. Dr. Johnson would make it appear that Cowley was not happy in his retirement in Chertsey. Dr. Johnson had not a single rural taste, and hated country life with all his heart.

Some of the other of Cowley's poems deserving of special remark, as illustrative of his genius, are Ode On Wit.

171 Wm. Stebbing, Some Verdicts Of History Reviewed, p. 49.
a series of just critical precepts delivered in verse; the 
Hymn To Light in which there are some noble stanzas; and The 
Chronicle, the best of Cowley's love-poems. 172

Cowley rarely speaks so simply and sincerely as in the 
stanza from the poem on the death of Mr. Hervey:

"He was my friend, the truest friend on earth; 
A strong and mighty influence joined our birth." 173

Speaking of the merit of the different poems, William 
Cullen Bryant makes this remark:

"The reader finds in none of these poems any 
strain of the grossness which had become 
fashionable in the latter part of Cowley's life. 
Everything which Cowley wrote had a certain ex­ 
pression of the purity of his own character. I 
have sometimes wondered how it has happened that 
in the reprinting of old English authors it has 
ever occurred to any publishers to give the 
public a reprint, by themselves, of the Dis­ 
courses In Verse And Prose. 174

Although Dr. Johnson speaks in a tone of derision of 
The Complaint, yet it is really a beautiful poem. William 
Cullen Bryant says of it:

"In none of Cowley's poems is the thought 
nobler, the verification more harmonious, and 
the expression more free, or if we expect the 
phrase "melancholy Cowley", more dignified 
than The Complaint." 175

172 Cowley And The Metaphysical Poets, Spectator, XCVI, 
(Jan. 20, 1906), p. 95.
173 Cowley, Ode to Hervey.
174 Wm, Cullen Bryant, "Abraham Cowley", No. Am. Review, CXXIV, 
(1877), p. 368.
175 Ibid., p. 370.
Nethercot has this to say of The Complaint:

"It is a depressing document, for it shows its author in one of his worst lights. Instead of standing up manfully and accepting his fortune, he is still willing to patter, conciliate, and flatter. Ready to abandon court and city life, he is careful to leave the door on the latch against a possible return. He is weak when a perfect hero would have been strong. But none know better than he how infrequent perfect heroes are, except in odes and epics." 176

His poems are singularly unequal. His Odes are nothing inferior to his Essay. Cowley has left behind him the pleasantest of all ballads. It is entitled The Chronicle, and contains a catalog of all the fair ladies with whom he had at different times been enamored. Never was there anything more amusing. The expression when the haughty Isabella, unconscious of her conquest, and marching on to fresh triumphs, "beats out Susan by the bye" has passed into a proverb, but they who use it now little guess its origin:

"But when Isabella came,
Armed with a resistless flame,
By the artillery of her eye,
While she proudly marched about,
Greater conquests to find out,
She beat out Susan by the bye." 177

The Chronicle was written two hundred years ago, but might we not acknowledge that the conquette is very little altered since Cowley's day; and that a similar list compiled by some gay

177 Cowley, The Chronicle - a Ballad, St. 8.
bachelor, allowing for difference of customs and of costume, might serve very well as a companion to Cowley's catalog.\textsuperscript{178}

An original stanza which shows Cowley's characteristic merits and defects is this one:

"Hail, old patrician trees, so great and good!
Hail, ye plebian underwood!
Where the poetic birds rejoice,
And for their quiet nests and plentious food,
Pray with their grateful voice." \textsuperscript{179}

Cowley loved to celebrate in verse the genius and virtue of the great men who, in his time, appeared on the stage of the world and passed away. In one of his poems the following characteristic passage occurs:

"His all-resembling pencil did out-pass
The mimic imagery of looking-glass,
Nor was his life less perfect than his art;
Nor was his hand less erring than his heart." \textsuperscript{180}

Cowley lamented the death of Sir Henry Molton, the diplomatist and poet, in an elegy containing the famous couplet:

"So many languages had he in store,
That only fame could speak of him in more." \textsuperscript{181}

Elegiac poetry is not uncommon in English Literature, but Milton's \textit{Lycidas} and Cowley's \textit{Elegy On Crashaw} are the first notable instances of it. Crashaw, a man and poet, was the subject of one of Cowley's most successful poems, where he is addressed:  "Poet and saint, to thee alone is given
The two most sacred names of Earth and Heaven." \textsuperscript{182}

\textsuperscript{178} Mary Mitford, \textit{Recollections Of A Literary Life}, p. 46.
\textsuperscript{179} Cowley, \textit{Of Solitude}.
\textsuperscript{180} Cowley, \textit{On The Death Of Sir Anthony Vandike}.
\textsuperscript{181} Cowley, \textit{Elegy On Sir Henry Molton}.
\textsuperscript{182} Cowley, \textit{Elegy On Crashaw}, St. 1.
In his earliest poem Cowley writes:

"From too much poetry that shines
With gold in nothing but its lines,
Free, O you powers, my breast". 123

And in all his works he endeavored to show his wit. In this respect, as Dr. Johnson pointed out, he is a follower of Donne, but lacks Donne's imagination and emotion. The Mistress is hard reading; it has little feeling and its ingenuity of thought is not great enough to hold the flogging interest.

"But do not touch my heart, and so be gone;
Strike deep thy burning arrows in,
Lukewarmness I account a sin,
As great in love, as in religion." 124

With the revival of the heroic couplet in the seventeenth century, four poets are identified in greater or less degree; Waller, Cowley, Denham and Davenant. Waller was the poet to whom the movement was due. He openly rejected the older conventions and marked the course which English poetry was to take on its way to the couplet of Pope. Sir William Davenant, says Masson:

"Had a remarkable inheritance of that language of light elevated, profuse and careless ideality which we recognize as the Elizabethan." 125

Sir John Denham was the first disciple of Waller. He used the couplet in his Cooper's Hill. This lengthy poem is the first sustained piece of descriptive and reflective verse

123 A. R. Waller, Essays And Plays Of Cowley, p. 49.
124 Ibid., p. 66
in English Literature. Pope's *Windsor Forest* is a direct imitation of *Cooper's Hill*. The most illustrious disciple of this new school was the poet Cowley. A rather unruly one, however, as he was apt to wander off into new fields as fancy led.

Dryden says of the trio - Waller, Denham and Cowley:

"In all Greek or Latin non-dramatic poetry nothing so even, sweet and flowing, as Mr. Waller; nothing so majestic, so correct as Sir John Denham; nothing so elevated, so copious and full of spirit as Mr. Cowley." 186

So began the long reign of the heroic rhymed couplet which was to find, in the following century, its most illustrious disciple in the 'Saga of Twickenham'; and to be immortalized by being used as the measure of his translation of Homer.

Another influence and forming a background to this court school of poets was the majestic figure of Milton, emulating his own words "they also serve who only stand and wait." 187 His word was to overshadow all the rest of the seventeenth century literature. Wordsworth says of him:

"Thy soul was like a star and dwelt apart,  
Thou had'st a voice whose sound was like a sea,  
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free." 188

As the sea and the naked heavens often exert an influence unseen and unfelt, so we cannot forbear thinking, the sweet echo of *Comus, Lycidas, L'Allegro, Ill Penseroso*, was not without its response in the soul of Cowley.

186 Ibid., p. 380.  
Though Waller introduced the new style, Cowley was the most famous representative, his fame overtopping that of the master himself. He was the greatest figure between Jonson and Dryden.

In his verse he is not merely a most curious bridge of communication between the couplet poets, the "school of good sense", and the metaphysicals, but almost more than Waller, and much more than Denham, a bridge between one whole period of poetry and another. His purely poetical works, which are by no means so easily to be distinguished by mere chronical orders as might be thought likely, fall pretty easily into three classes when judged from the point of view of form - namely, couplet verse, lyrics and stanza poems of various kinds, and Pindarics.

It was not Cowley's Lyrics but his Odes that introduced a new poetic style. There is a long list of writers, from his day to our own, who have paid homage to Cowley by their use of his "Pindaric stanzas". When we consider the veneration in which the classics were held, it is surprising that no English poet had hitherto adopted Pindar's method. A full century before Cowley's work appeared, Ronsard had won the title of "le Pindar francois" by writing a series of odes imitating the Greek "poets" language and thought much more closely than Cowley ever attempted to do. The Elizabethan's translated Ronsard's

189 George Saintsbury, History Of English Literature, p. 403.
sonnet; they were not attracted by his Pindaric flights.

Cowley introduced the Pindaric Ode—a highly artificial form of the lyric, in which the language was tortured into a kind of superious grandeur, and the meter teased into a sound and fury, signifying nothing. Nevertheless the fashion spread, and "he that could do nothing else, could write like Pindar". The best of these Odes were Dryden's famous Alexander's Feast, written for a celebration of St. Cecilia's Day. To the same fashion we owe Gray's two fine Odes, The Bard and the Progress of Posey.

In his prefaces Cowley had discussed his Odes. He tells us that in two of his versions of Pindar he took, omitted, and added what he pleased. He aimed to show the reader not what Pindar said, but his manner of speaking. Pindar's style, though it is the noblest and highest kind of writing in verse, had not yet been introduced into English literature. He fears these Pindaric odes will not be understood even by readers well versed in poetry because of the sudden and long digression and their hold on unsensual figures. "The numbers are various and irregular, and sometimes seem harsh and uncouth, if the just measures and cadences be not observed in the pronunciation". The music of these poems lies wholly at the mercy of the reader. So much for this poetic theory, his practice

190 Edward B. Reed, English Lyrical Poetry, p. 309.
is well shown in a single stanza from the Ode Upon Liberty, in which he speaks once more of his Pindaric style:

"If Life should a well-ordered poem be,
(In which he only hits the white
Who join true profit with the best delight)
The more heoric strain let others take,
Mine the Pindaric way I'll make,
The matter shall be grace, the numbers loose and free.
It shall not keep one settled place of time,
In the same tune it shall not always chime,
Nor shall each day just to his neighbors rhyme.
A thousand liberties I shall dispense, 191
And yet shall manage all without offence."

The Ode was a product of the Renaissance, and like other literary forms, reached England late. Between 1582 and 1600, several poets wrote so-called odes, but John Southern was the only one of them who seems to have thought of the word as having any distinctive signification. He was the earliest poet to make any kind of an effort to write an English Pindaric Ode. The Odes of Michael Drayton, a little later, show a further advance. Later still, with Milton and Ben Jonson, the ode came fully into its own. With the publication of Cowley's Pindarique Odes in 1656 the ode entered a new period, not so much because of the excellency of Cowley's work as because of its immediate popularity. In his Pindariques he frankly discarded the stanzaic structure of Pindar's Odes, and adopted instead a free form of verse that gave him greater liberty, as he thought, for the style and manner alone of Pindar. This

191 Cowley, Essays And Plays, p. 391.
free verse had had its beginning in England as early as the last decade of the sixteenth century, and had been written in one form or another by many English poets between then and the middle of the seventeenth century. So when Cowley used it in his *Pindariques* he used a form of verse already well known in England, and one that English predecessors had developed and made ready for him. That Cowley wrote his *Pindariques* in irregular verse because he was ignorant of the structure of Pindar's Odes, as is generally supposed, is certainly not true. Cowley knew the structure of Pindar's Odes as well as Greek scholars of the Renaissance, and Italian and French Poets, and Ben Jonson had known it, but deliberately chose to imitate only the style and manner of Pindar, and not the stanzaic structure of his odes. Cowley's odes had small inherent excellence, but they made the ode immediately popular, so that Cowley went far to fix it firmly in the minds of Englishmen as a separate lyric genre, and the gain thus made has not since at any time been lost through the neglect of English Poets. Cowley made that species of lyric fashionable, popular, a thing to be attempted by all who wrote. Thereby he also made himself partly responsible for any unparalleled flood of bad poetry, but some compensation at least for the now forgotten masses of irregular odes that were the immediate result of Cowley's example lay in the fact that the ode was in addition thereby rees-
established in literature, and this time definitely and finally, as a distinct species of lyric, whose general nature could scarcely again be forgotten or misunderstood.

To Cowley is due the praise of introducing a style of ode which was a new thing in modern literature, and which took a firm hold on poetry, until, in Collins, it received its apotheosis and its death-blow. After one hundred years appeared the Pindaric Odes of Gray, the last and greatest follower of Cowley. Though the chaster form of ode designed by Collins from a Greek model has ruled poetic art ever since his day, there has always been a tendency to return to the old standard of Cowley. As lately as our own day, Mr. Lowell's Commemoration Ode is a specimen of the formless poem of unequal lines and broken stanzas supposed to be in the manner of Pindar, but truly the descendant of our royalist poet "majestick numbers". Keats, Shelley and Swinburne, have restored to the ode its harmony and shapeliness. Until the days of Collins, however, the ode modeled upon Cowley was not only the universal medium for congratulatoire lyrics and pompous occasional pieces, but it was almost the only variety permitted to the melancholy generations over which the heoric couplet reigned supreme. Dryden, in his Song On St. Cecilia's Day, directly imitates Cowley's Ode On The Resurrection.

The language of the heart had not much to do with the odes of 1656. They are fifteen in number, and open with two paraphrases of Pindar himself. Following these is a praise of Pindar's Unnavigable Song, in imitation of Horace. The remaining twelve are supposed to be original, but two are taken from prophetic Scriptures. The one on Destiny, contains the following lines, which form a favorable example of Cowley's style of Pindarizing and of the construction of his odes:

"Thou of my church shall be; Hate and renounce", said she." \(^{193}\)

The language and versification unite to weary the ear and defy the memory; nor can the Odes ever again take a living place in literature. But to the student they are very interesting as the forerunners of a whole current of lyric invocations not yet silent after more than two centuries. \(^{194}\)

Sprat gives the Pindarics his highest praises and says if any are displeased with them they contend not with Cowley but with Pindar. In the following century the Odes of Gray and Collins were closely modeled on the ancient style. Keats, Shelley, Swinburne, and Lowell have all written odes. Pope only once deviated from his regular classicism. This was his attempt to imitate Dryden's great ode. From Dryden to our own time almost every critic has given Cowley as the intro-

\(^{193}\) Cowley, Ode To Destiny.
\(^{194}\) E. W. Gosse, _Living Age_, CXXII, (Jan. 6, 1877), p. 50.
ducer of the Pindaric into English poetry.

Gifford makes these remarks on Cowley's Pindarics:

"Cowley mistook the very nature of Pindar's poetry, and was led away by the ancient allusions of those wild and wonderful strains of which not a line has reached us. The meter of Pindar was regular, that of Cowley is utterly irregular." 195

The metrical structure that Cowley affected in his Pindarics was frankly impulsive. He wanted for himself a perfect freedom in writing these poems, and so adopted a structure that would leave his inspiration as free and untrammelled by consideration of form as possible. The essential characteristic of this system was, then, its absence of restraint, its superiority to all rules. In practice it meant simply that Cowley left himself free to rime his lines as he pleased throughout a poem, to make each line whatever length he pleased and to make each of his stanzas just as long or as short as convenience or caprice might dictate. It was what we call free or irregular verse that Cowley used. In such verse the amount of freedom actually exercised may vary almost infinitely, which the principle of unlimited license behind it remains ever the same. In other words, to write upon some abstract theme, using an irregular verse form, was to catch the very spirit of Pindar.

As a matter of fact, the Odes of Pindar have a regular structure, "a system of stanzas recurring in the same order till the end of the poem, and consisting of two stanzas of identical form, the strophe and antistrophe, followed by the epode, entirely differing from the other two." 196

Cowley never perceived this, though Jonson had understood it, and it was left for Congreve to point out that Cowley never followed Pindar, even afar off. 197

To Cowley's immediate contemporaries, his irregularity of metre implied imagination and even sublimity. The poet had only to group together a certain number of long and short verses and his thought assumed an unmistakable majesty. If Waller's couplets on the escape of Prince Charles had been transformed to irregular stanzas and not a syllable of their substance altered, by some mysterious process the verse would have been lifted to the realms of the imagination. We understand today that no device of metre can atone for a lack of inspiration. The question is not whether odes are regular or irregular, but whether there is any life in them. In his Progress Of Posey, Gray follows exactly the regular structure of the Greek ode, but it is doubtful if many readers perceive this; what they do notice is the imagination and thought. Cowley has cleverness and ingenuity of thought rather than

197 Wm. Congreve, Discourse On The Pindaric Ode.
imagination and a gentle melancholy rather than deep emotion; accordingly he was temperamentally unfitted for this most difficult of all lyric types. At the close of his Ode On The Resurrection it is curious to hear him beg his Muse to "allay thy vigorous heat", to

"Hold thy Pindarique Pegasus closely in, Which does to rage begin." 198

for in most of the verses Pegasus has certainly ambled.

In writing odes, when Cowley chooses his own subjects, he rises to truly Pindaric style; his strains are such as those on the Theban bard were to the Greeks of ancient days:

"Begin the song, and strike the living lyre; Lo how the years to come, a numerous and well-fitted quire, All hand in hand do decently advance, And to my song with smooth and equal measure dance." 199

Cowley's Pindarics are, undoubtedly, the most peculiar efforts of his talent, and those which, upon his own time produced most of the effect of genius. They are little read now, and there can be no doubt that both their structure and the presumed necessity of imitating Pindar's style of obscure conceit encouraged the metaphysical manner very treacherously. But they would be interesting to us even were they far worse than they are intrinsically, because nothing can ever be un-

198 Cowley, Poems, p. 182.
199 Cowley, Ode On The Resurrection.
interested which has, for a long time, supplied an obvious literary demand on the part of readers and provided employment for great writers. To Cowley we owe the really magnificent odes of Dryden, Gray and Collins pretty directly; indirectly the still greater ones of Wordsworth which is almost his solitary claim to have reached the highest summits of poetry; and many great things of Shelley and Tennyson, not to mention lesser men. The eager adaptation of the form, which for more than half a century produced libraries full of unreadable Pindarics (the most interesting and nearly the most hopeless examples being those of no less a man than Swift), shows us what the time wanted, how it was sick of the regular stanza, how blank verse was still a little too bold for it, while it had not yet settled down or become satisfied with the regular tick of the couplet-clock. But as a matter of fact the things themselves are not contemptible. *Life and Fame, Life, the Ode To Mr. Hobbes,* and others contain very fine things.

Cowley possessed one quality which we should not overlook. His best odes have an intellectual element, a reasoning in verse, which is not without attraction and which goes far to explain his popularity with his contemporaries and why Milton valued him with Spenser and Shakespeare. To see this we have merely to turn to the *Ode To The Royal Society* or to

the Hymn To Light. Here with a certain felicity of phrase at times approaching the language of imagination, he traces light from the rose to the jewel, from the rainbow to the firefly:

"Nor amidst all these triumphs dost thou scorn
The humble glow-worms to adorn,
And with those living spangles glide
(O greatness without pride!) the bushes of the field."

From the age when Homer bequeathed to admiring Greece his two immortal epic poems, it has been the ambition of every nation to enrich its literature with a poem on the same plan.

During the last few months of his residence at Cambridge Cowley was engaged in the most magnificent flight he had yet attempted - the Epic Davideis.

Of this work Johnson says:

"The materials could not have been collected without the study of many years, except by a mind of the greatest vigour and activity."

The Davideis is divided into twelve books, not because of the Tribes but after the pattern of Virgil. Only four of these books are finished, also in imitation of Virgil and Homer. For Cowley says:

"Poets never come to the end of their story, but only so near that all can see the end of it."

The description of Gabriel's dress is a good example of Cowley's

202 Johnson, Life Of Cowley, p. 49.
203 Cowley, Notes Upon The First Book.
play of fancy, for he says:

"He took a skin a cloud most soft and bright,
That ere the midday sun pierced thro' with light,
Upon his cheeks a lively blush he spread,
Washed from the morning beauties deepest red." 204

It is in four books, composed in the heroic couplet varied with occasional Alexandrines, another innovation introduced by Cowley and accepted by Dryden, but excluded from the rules of verse by Pope. In certain passages in the first book such as the description of David and his wife walking among the lemon trees, Cowley approaches nearer than usual to a naturalistic style of poetry. The other three books of this epic are tedious and redundant beyond all endurance. It is, in fact, the sort of poem with which, if you sit on the grass in a quiet place some summer afternoon, you cannot by any means fail to slumber soundly. This is indeed its only merit, save that of marking a distinct step in the process of the ossification of the English heroic couplet. One point, however, deserved mention. In the third book there is a serenade, Awake, Awake, My Lyre, which ought to rank among Cowley's most accomplished lyrics.

His consistent cleverness stimulates the reader's curiosity even if it does not provoke his admiration. Cowley's couplet has in it more the weight of Sandys and the older

204 Cowley, Works, 1700, Davideis, Book Second, p. 44.
couplet-writers than of the melody of Waller or the brevity of Denham.

Mr. Gosse says of the Davideis:

"Its principal interest is that it is the earliest example of a sustained narrative poem in the new distich, and it is quite plain that if Cowley had only possessed a little more genius and Milton a little less, there would have been the greatest possible chance that the couplet would have become the normal epic form with us, as it had become with the French. Fortunately Milton showed us a better way. We may recollect any passage of Paradise Regained and compare with the following fragment from Cowley's Davideis." 205

Whilst thus his wrath with threats the Tyrant fed, 
The threatened youth slept fearless on his bed; 
Sleep on; rest, quiet as thy conscience, take 
For thou sleep'st thyself, thy Dog's awake." 206

Samuel Wesley looked up to the Davideis as the supreme model. In his eyes, both Spenser and Davenant were faulty for various reasons. He says:

"But Mr. Cowley's Davideis is the medium between both. It has Gondibert's majesty without his stiffness; and Spenser's sweetness and variety without irregularity. It is a great loss to the world that he left the work unfinished." 207

John Evelyn, the son of Cowley's friend, remarks:

205 Edmund Gosse, From Shakespeare To Pope, p. 150.
206 Cowley, Davideis.
207 S. Wesley, Discourse Concerning Heroic Poetry.
"So long shall Cowley be admired above, 
The crown, as David's troubles pity move,
Till women cease to charm, and youth to love." 208

Swift certainly voiced the opinion of many readers when he asserted that of all of the works of Cowley, Davideis would best survive the test of time. Swift chose Cowley and Boileau to command the light horse against the Ancients. 209

Its interest is high. It is an essay in the recovery of poetry to solemn purpose. It is full of learning. It explains itself in copious notes. To modern readers, however, save for points of technical interest, it is dead. But such was to be expected. The tragedy is in the sequence. Had the times been different Cowley might have forgotten his pendency in some quiet parsonage or cherished bearing to ripeness with the precincts of a college, and we might then have had work in his true vein of whimsical simplicity and quiet wisdom. Instead he joined the Royalists at Oxford and followed the Court of Henrietta Marie into exile and we have The Mistress and the Pendarique Odes and solemn deliberate abandonment of fine poetic phrensy on such subjects as Mr. Hobbs and The Plagues Of Egypt. That is a measure of what uncongenial circumstances can do for a man of infinite charm and ability who has not the strength to dominate them. Dryden says of him that 'he has a greater portion of wit than any man I know.' 210 Sprat found

209 Jonathan Swift, Battle Of The Books.
210 Preface, To An Evening's Love.
in the famous Mr. Cowley 'unaffected modesty and natural freedom, and easy vigor, and cheerful passions, and innocent mirth, which appeared in all his manners, and fell in love with 'the native tenderness and innocent gayety of his mind'.\(^{211}\) But all this, in the work up to 1663, he is assiduous to bury. And only in a late, brief, wistful interlude,

"As a fair morning of the blessed spring,  
After a tedious stormy night," \(^{212}\) while he lived in retirement at Barn Elms and Chertsey, did he write purely for his own pleasure.

Neither affairs, nor success, nor baroque conventions ever quite killed his affection. That fact gives a wistful charm, if it be but fitful, to his otherwise deservedly forgotten work, and lends a peculiarly piogant appeal to his last years.

This side of the man is in evidence in the elegies in the _Miscellanies_ on William Hervey. 'Cowley's exquisit "Elegy On The Death Of His Friend Hervey'', as lamb calls it and on Crashaw and his 'innocent mirth' takes its pleasure very delightfully in _The Chronicles_ and the _Anacrontiques_ of the same collection. _The Mistress_, even with _The Wish_ taken out, provides passages in each mode, such as -

"Though you be absent here, I needs must say  
The blushing morning open'd not more fair." \(^{213}\)

\(^{211}\) Sprat, _Life of Cowley_.  
\(^{212}\) Cowley, _The Complaint_.  
\(^{213}\) Cowley, _The Spring_.
On the following:

"Or I'm a very Dunce, no Womankind
Is a most intelligible thing
Alas, Alas, it will be always so." 214

Even The Pindarique Odes can be most un-Pindarique:

"If then, young year, thou needs must come
Let neither Loss of Friends or Fame or Libertie
Yet, gentle year, take heed." 215

Dr. Johnson speaks as follows of the poems in The Mistress:

"They have all the same beauties and the same faults and nearly in the same proportion." 216

Stebbing evaluates The Mistress thus:

"The subject quickly made it popular, rather than the merits of the poem. It is not without occasional beauty - at times a turn or a tone is caught which appears in anticipation of Tennyson, but the general impression on the modern reader is laborious monotony." 217

Although we may feel inclined to echo the unreadable of Gosse and the laborious monotony of Stebbing, we must confess that it contains some genius. One especially:

"Well than I now do plainly see
This busy world and I shall ne'er agree;
The very honey of all earthly joy,
Does of all meats the soonest cloy." 218

Cowley's love poems are his very worst failures. One can take a kind of pleasure in the sheer mental exercise of tracking the thought through one of his big Pindaric Odes - the

214 Cowley, Women's Superstitions.
215 Cowley, Love's Ingratitude.
217 Wm. Stebbing, Essay On Cowley.
218 Cowley, The Wish.
kind of pleasure one gets from solving a riddle or an equation, but not the kind we ask of poetry. It is as Pope says: his epic and Pindaric art is forgotten; forgotten the four books, in rimed couplets, of the *Davideis*, forgotten the odes on Brutus, on the plagues of Egypt, on his Majesty's restoration, to Mr. Hobbes, and to the Royal Society. His elegies are among his best writings. There are passages well worthy of remembrance in his elegy on Crashaw, and several fine stanzas in his memorial verses on his Cambridge friend Hervey. A hundred readers are familiar with the invocation of light in *Paradise Lost*, for one reader who knows Cowley's ingenious and in many parts, really beautiful *Hymn To Light*.

There is one little poem which remains an anthology favorite, *The Chronicle*, Cowley's solitary experiment in society verse, a catalog of the quite imaginary ladies with whom he has been in love. This is well enough, but compared with the agreeable impudence, the Cavalier gayety and ease of a genuine society verses, like Suckling, it is sufficiently tame. For the Cowleian wit is so different from the spirit of comedy that one would have predicated that anything that he might undertake for the stage would fail. Nevertheless his play, *Cutter Of Coleman Street* -- has been selected by Professor Gayley for his series of representative comedies, as a noteworthy transition drama, with political and religious
Throughout Cowley's verse we are aware of a singularly alert and self-conscious intelligence. It is less the spirit of poetry than of prose. Therein Cowley was a necessary pioneer. It was an age of prose that was needed. The Renaissance would have been an age of poetry; of poetry not only in verse but in science, in religion, in philosophy, even in life. It was an abnormal state of affairs, and the reaction was excessive. It banished the spirit of poetry for a time even from poetry itself. Yet the movement was one of progress even more than of reaction, and Cowley was its natural leader. His services in the sphere of verse were recognized by all contemporary critics, from the embittered and sardonic Milton down, and appreciated by the multitudes, who brought out ten editions of his work in twenty years. His task was so completely done that we almost fail to see what he effected. With better reason than Tennyson, who was no such pioneer, he might have complained that now that most can raise the flower, for all have got the seed, the people call it but a weed. It is an ungrateful task, as Cowley himself pointed out, to use the plain magic of true reason's light, to chase away the ghosts of the old giants,

"Nor suffer living men to be misled
By the vain shadows of the dead". 220

At the close of the Miscellany were printed, in the volume of 1656, twelve translations or imitations of the Odes of Anacreon, done into octosyllabic verse, or rather into that iambic measure of either seven or eight syllables, but always of four cadences, which Milton used with such admirable effect in his minor poems, and in Comus. Cowley could ill afford to compete with Milton in melody, and made some sad discords. Still Cowley's Anacreontics are frequently pretty and sparkling, and they have been praised even in our own times at the expense of other writings.

Among these poems are The Grasshopper, The Swallow, and Gold, three poems which are very familiar to many people. They are lively and sparkling and have been much praised. Speaking of them Dr. Johnson says:

"These little pieces will be found more finished in this kind than any of Cowley's works. The diction shows nothing of the mould of time, and the sentiments are at no great distance from our present habitudes of thought. Real mirth must be always natural, and nature is uniform. Men have been wise in many different modes; but they have always laughed in the same way." 221

Bryant speaking of the Anacreonos says:

"Even those who have never read anything else that Cowley has written, are familiar with the most felicitous of these, The Grasshopper. They are few in number - only eleven in all, but they surpass the Greek originals." 222

221 Johnson, Life of Cowley, p. 59.
What a diversity of riches has been packed into the English essay! The essay has served the turn of every sort of English writer. Francis Bacon spilled into it the superflux of his wisdom. Milton and Sir Thomas Browne have played upon it as though it were the noblest, and not the least of instruments. Addison has sunned himself thereby in the rays of his flawless self-content. Macaulay and Burke have used it as King's Counsel; Johnson as a just and impeccable judge. All good critics, from the father of the sons of Ben, with whom English criticism begins, to Hazlitt and Pater, have established their right to the essay; and three centuries are filled with the amiable pipings of the personal essayists with — Fuller, Cowley, Steele and Lamb the greatest of them all. 223

It is as impossible to define the essay as to define the novel; but we may at any rate distinguish between essayists who were born and essayists who have simply used the essay as an instrument of criticism, or of history, or of philosophy. Milton was not an essayist. He was a poet and a thinker who wrote essays. Macaulay was not an essayist. He was a historian with prejudices and opinions who in essays occasionally declared them. Cowley, on the other hand, was an essayist. He wrote essays, not because he had something of importance to tell the world, but because the essay expressed him. It was 223 John Palmer, "Cowley, The Little Talker", Living Age, CXXXII, (May 8, 1915), p. 285.
the little form that enabled him to disburden himself of the little talk that lay under his tongue. Cowley has described the temperament of the born essayist. "I confess", he tells us, "I love littleness almost in all things. A little convenient estate; a little cheerful home; a little company; a little feast." 224

Inevitably this reminds us of Lamb and of the "middle interest" whereby he loved to escape the pressure of big events and great emotions. It reminds us indeed of the whole succession of the personal essayist - men whom the essay borrowed and used, as distinguished from men who merely borrowed and used the essay. Cowley is the ancestor of these table-talkers, the familiar people who chat with us in so vivid and personal a way that we can almost see the play of their faces.

The great period of the essay is undoubtedly the seventeenth century--even the last historian of the essay, Professor Hugh Walker, in a work recently published, recognizes that this is so. Lamb, who was claimed by the essay as its most perfect practitioner, harks back in style and temper not to the calm and perfect Augustans of the eighteenth, but to gossips like Cowley and Fuller of the seventeenth century. The Augustans talk of little things, but they talk as well bred authors, accurate and concise, suiting plain words to simple ideas, holding fast to their styles and temper, but holding

224 Cowley, Of Greatness.
very much aloof from the reader. The seventeenth century essayists are not all like that. They are intimate and friendly. The essay is so natural with them that it has no need to be formal or precise. If we read a page of Cowley or a page of Lamb, who is pure seventeenth century, we find the author's fancy let loose for a scamper. It will check at a word or run off with a smile. All this is far removed from the Augustan essay. Lamb's page is the very echo of Cowley's --the love of littleness, the friendliness, the candor, the beautiful liberty of language, language so felicitous that it can spare energy for play after its work is done--these belong to the century to which Cowley belongs and to which Lamb returned.

Cowley tempts the writer to a gleeful virtuosity, a very frolic of the pen. It is pure revelry of the tongue that recalls Lyly and Fuller and Sir Thomas Browne rather than Addison of the eighteenth or Hazlitt of the nineteenth centuries. Lamb loved and understood the seventeenth century better than any Englishman of letters. That is why he wrote the perfect essay.

"Forgot his epic, nay, Pindaric art, But still I love the language of his heart."

What was the language of Cowley's heart which could compel love in another heart so generally tough as that of
Pope? A modern editor has interpreted the lines as referring to those enduring poems which were the outcome of his heart. Bishop Hurd applied the phrase to Cowley's prose works. Joseph Warton, writing on the genius of Pope, was of the same mind. Both W. J. Courthope and Sir. A. W. Ward are found taking a similar position. The true language of Cowley's heart was the essays which Charles Lamb described so warmly in a letter to Coleridge in 1797 as delicious.

Cowley cultivated a form of essay more intimate and confidential, though less profound, weighty and philosophical, than the Baconian. The style is less elaborate than Drummond's or Browne's. It is a form of essay which can be traced with intervals of partial oblivion from Cowley's day to this; and in it he has written the best-loved, even if they are not the greatest, of all the essayists - Addison, Lamb, Thackery and Stevenson. To have taken one of the longest steps toward this result is perhaps Cowley's best title to fame.

The whole of Cowley's prose would fill but a slender volume. It was rather his misfortune to be accepted early as, not merely a poet, but the greatest poet of his time. To

227 Joseph Warton, Essay On The Genius And Writings Of Pope, II, 42.
230 Charles Lamb, Works, VI, 82.
modern critical taste, no judgment seems more surprising than this. But Cowley accepted it and the consequence is that his admirable prose is limited to a mere handful of prefaces and discourses. The charm of these is due largely to their simple and sincere revelation of self. They are the friendly chat of a thoughtful and reflective spectator of life. Nothing Cowley has written is more delightful than what he has written directly about himself. It is natural to turn for illustration to the essay Of Myself which is perhaps the finest of his compositions. It is one of the most unique and original of which our literature can boast. It is an autobiographical sketch, but all too short. We wish for more in the same strain. 231

Cowley's essays were first published under the title of Several Discourses By Way Of Essay In Verse And Prose in 1668, the year after his death.

If Thomas Sprat's life of Cowley is important in the development of biography, Cowley's self-study in his delicate and original essay, Of Myself, is no less important in the history of autobiography. It makes a significant advance in technique and a liberation from the colorless formality of the objective tradition. Passages of such freshness and poetic truth are rare in any biography before this time, and Cowley's essay on himself, though short, is of major importance in

231 Hugh Walker, The English Essay, pp. 82-84.
biographical history. For intimacy and charm and whimsical sentiment it has no forebears. Furthermore, he had the literary skill to select those incidents that might set forth his character in a small space. Cowley's diffident amateur approach, his casual confidences, his informality, makes his Of Myself an attractive pioneer work among reminiscences and biographical essays.

Praised in his day as a great poet, Cowley is now chiefly known by those prose essays, all too short and too few, which, whether for thought or for expression, have rarely been excelled by any writer in any language. They are eminently distinguished for the grace, the finish, and the clearness which his verse too often wants.

Here is a bit of autobiography, singularly interesting, as coming from one who was an eminent scholar, and the most precocious of all poets:

"It is a hard and a nice subject for a man to write of himself. It pains his own heart to say anything of disparagement, and the reader's ears to hear anything of praise from him. There is no danger of my offending in that kind; neither my mind, nor my body, nor my fortune, allow me any materials for that vanity." 233

It is in this same essay that Cowley tells us how he was influenced by Spenser for he says:

232 Mitford, Recollections Of A Literary Life, p. 45.
233 Cowley, Of Myself.
"When I began to read and take some pleasure in it there was wont to lie on my mother's table a copy of Spenser's works. This I happened to fall upon, and was delighted with the stories of the knights, giants, and monsters; and by degrees, with the tinkling of the rhyme and dance of the numbers; so that I think I had read them all over before I was twelve years old; and was thus made a poet." 234

We find another graceful bit of autobiography in any essay addressed to Evelyn:

"I never had any other desire so strong and so like to covetousness as that one which I have had always that I might be master at last of a small house and a large garden, with every moderate convenience joined to them, and there dedicate the remainder of my life only to the culture of them and to the study of nature." 235

The opening of the first essay, Of Liberty, offers the topic for the whole succeeding group. The ground having been prepared by showing the danger of the world, Of Solitude, is the natural sequence. It is good to live away from a crowd, according to Of Obscurity, better even to live unknown, free from temptations of vanity and able to do what one desires with one's time. Of Agriculture shows that though a man may find solitude and obscurity in a city, the husbandman and philosopher are the men most to be envied. The fifth essay, The Garden, is essentially a supplement to the discussion of agriculture.

234 Ibid.
Having stated that he loves littleness almost in all things, Cowley next recurs to the inconveniences of Greatness, and shows how even the so-called great seek opportunities to escape the consequences of their situations. Avarice is a frequent consequence important enough for a section of its own, entitled Of Avarice.

To the question, what is likely to happen if one does not live according to the advice already given, the answer is found in The Dangers Of An Honest Man In Much Company. Essay ten, described As Letter To Mr. S. L. points out The Danger Of Procrastination. The most widely known and quoted of all Cowley's essays, however, is the one Of Myself.

The continuity and organization of the eleven essays is plain in spite of their author's neglecting to set up guide posts along his way. But he has left three or four clear ones, and a simple glance into the probable association of ideas in his mind has supplied the rest.

Many enthusiastic critics have praised Cowley's prose style. Some have gone so far as to name him the real father of the English essay. Practically all critics have favored his friendly character, his intimate and colloquial touches, his ease and sureness of diction, his shy humor, and his familiar use of anecdotes and pithy sayings of various natures. Cowley's paragraphs sometimes lack unity, and his sentences coherence,
but these essays were composed while English prose writers had for a time succeeded in disengaging themselves from the spell of grammarians and rhetoricians, while Lyle and Sidney were out of fashion, and while Montaigue still ruled the kingdom which was soon to descend to Addison. 236

The whole essay Of Liberty is full of the happiest adaptations of classical examples of Cowley's peculiar views. He speedily dismisses the public side of the question, and enlarges on the slavery to which ambitious men, like Catiline and Ceasar, voluntarily subject themselves in the pursuit of their object. There are in this eloquent discourse many felicitous translations from Cicero and Sallust, which, with the specimens of Anacreon may lead us to lament deeply that in that age of translators, Cowley did not devote his cherished leisure to versions of some of the great masters of antiquity, especially the orators and historians. 237

It was Cowley who gave a new turn to the essay. He has often been called a transitional writer. He is one in the sense that, both in prose and verse, he made a complete transit from the old school to the new. It is particularly interesting to trace this progress in his prose writings. In the earlier of these, the preface to the 1656 edition of his poems, his

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237 Mitford, Recollections Of A Literary Life, p. 63.
sentences are at first cumbrous and involved, and though when he warms to his work, they become shorter and better balanced, there remains a certain stiffness in the style quite unlike the conversational ease of his later essay. It is nearer to Jeremy Taylor than to Dryden. To the older school belongs the Discourse By Way Of Vision Concerning The Government Of Oliver Cromwell, of which the latter part is a fine example of rhetorical prose. Even in the preface to Cutter Of Coleman Street, though the sentences, as a rule, are short and well coordinated, Cowley has by no means shaken himself free from the old mannerisms.

The essays proper, eleven in number, were all written during the last four or five years of his life. Before he had retired to Barn Elms in 1663, he had written the essay entitled The Danger Of Procrastination. It is not without charm, but long sentences still occur. Transitional in style also are the essays Of Agriculture and The Garden.

To the last two years of his life, after he had moved to Porch House in Chertsey, belong the Essays Of Obscurity, Of Myself, The Danger Of An Honest Man In Such Company, Of Solitude, Of Greatness, The Shortness Of Life And Uncertainty Of Riches. In these six essays Cowley has found his style and his method. The influence of Montaigne is unmistakable. Not only the titles but some of the contents in Of Solitude and
Of Greatness are borrowed from him. Of these chief characteristics which mark the essays of Montaigne in its final phase of development--the examples from classical authors, the personal element, the artistic workmanship--none is wanting in Cowley. We can see, too, in his essays, other qualities ascribed to him by Sprat - his lack of affectation, his modesty and humility, and the pleasant gravity of his speech.\textsuperscript{238}

It is in the essay that Cowley exhibits his mature and calm spirit. Since these essays are reflective and largely concerned with poetic themes, they are in effect prose poetry. They have for their keynote the happiness of one who loves liberty and is happy in quietude and possession of his own, such as the value of books, of quiet slumber, a garden and an ordered home. This sort of philosophy betrays the influence of the pastoral poets and even of Milton. He himself has given a frank picture of his soul in the essay \textit{Of Myself}, and an estimate of the quantity of his verses, which estimate he considers true and inspired, though not as to its elegance:

"Thou, neither great at court nor in the war, 
Nor at the exchange shall be, nor at the wrangling bar; 
Content thyself with the small barren praise, 
Which neglected verse shall raise." \textsuperscript{239}

\textsuperscript{239} Cowley, \textit{Of Myself}. 
Cowley's prose style, which owes something to a very intelligent study of Bacon, has a grace and a sweet enthusiasm unusual in writing of the Restoration period. The value of the prose essays in connection with the poetry of Cowley is that they give us the key to his scholarly and sensitive nature. Cowley is an author by profession whose prose is as easy and sensible as his poetry is strained. He is a polished man, writing for polished men, pretty much as he would speak to them in a drawing room. The writers of this coming age take his talent for their model. He is the first of that amiable group which, continued in Temple, reaches so far as to include Addison in its sensible and well controlled influence.

Cowley's prose works are justly classed with the best English prose. They form in their style a direct contract to his poetry. They are simply and natural, without a trace of the profuse ornamentation which so often disfigures his poetry.

That oft quoted remark of Dr. Johnson about whoever wishes to form an English style familiar but not coarse must give his days and nights to the volumes of Addison, might with equal propriety be applied to Cowley's prose.

240 Yarnall, Abraham Cowley, p. 64.
Mitford says of the essays:

"All too short and all too few, which, whether for thought or for expression, have rarely been excelled by any writer in any language. They are eminently distinguished for the grace, the finish, and the charm which his verse too often wants." 241

Grosart makes these remarks on the essays:

"I place these only a little beneath the Essays of Bacon for weight and worth, and if it be not literary treason to say so, far above the brilliant essays of your sensational writers of the day. There is a naturalness and artlessness, a freshness, a directness and a wholesomeness about it that is nurturing as it is exhilarating, and as delightful as inspiring." 242

Fortunately Cowley did not attempt to make his prose the counterpart of his verse. "What shall I do to be forever known?" he exclaims at the opening of his Miscellanies. He was, happily for himself and for us, content to be unknown in his prose. He had tried to be great as a poet, and had succeeded in becoming merely grandiose. His great hopes, his great ambitions, his great friends had played him false, and on his farm in Surrey he turned to the contemplation and the cultivation of little things. How different, and infinitely more charming, is the philosophy of his prose from that of his verse! If only he could have evolved this philosophy in his youth, how much he and we should have been spared! And who

241 Mitford, Recollections Of A Literary Life, p. 45.
knows how much greater had been the reputation of this lover of little things. The simplicity of Cowley's prose has, indeed, saved it. He is almost the first of the line of English essayists in the chatty, rambling, discursive, personal vein, and surely it is the greatest of all the paradoxes connected with the fate that, having been considered by his own age as of the company of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Chaucer, he should have his name linked by the present generation with those of Lamb and Montaigne.

No one, open to conviction, can doubt from the essays, written in his retirement, as well as from passages scattered through his writings that Cowley had a genuine love for country life. Being weary of active life and longing for the retirement which the cruel war had denied him, he resolved to retire to the country to pass the remainder of his life. He wrote:

"God the first garden made,
And the first city, Cain." 243

He loved rural life. His desire for solitude and retirement from the world has been much sneered at as insincere. Dr. Johnson, who could not appreciate the desire expressed by Cowley, sneeringly recommends those who pant for solitude to read Cowley's letter to Sprat describing his coming to Chertsey. Of the letter in question Stebbing says:

"Surely the catalog of ills in this epistle was compiled in sport and by a very cheerful mind." 244

An amusing epitaph, composed in Latin by Cowley, supposed to be written on his house in the country, certainly shows him in a very merry mood. This translation of it is from the pen of William Cullen Bryant:

"Here, stranger, in this lonely spot, The buried Cowley finds at last, Rest from the labors of his lot, And leaves life's follies with the past." 245

In that sphere of prose towards which Cowley's mind naturally tended, it is easier to recognize him not only as a pioneer but as a master. We could not today write prose in the passionately torrential way of Milton or the barbarically jewelled way of Donne, and we might hesitate to do so even if we could. But we should be well content to write prose with the lucid simplicity and the delicate music of Cowley. Something of his tone of courteous familiarity with the reader he doubtless learned from his favorite Monsieur de Montaigne, who also began his essays in the same easy, direct way. But in English that was altogether new, and Cowley is distinctly English, the leader in the great succession of English essayists. 246

The essay, with its near allies, the literary preface

244 Wm. Stebbing, Some Verdicts Of History Reviewed, p. 77
245 Wm. Cullen Bryant, The Living Author's Epitaph.
and the political pamphlet, played a large part in the formation of the new prose. It was in the same year, 1665, that Cowley and Dryden achieved independently the mastery of their instruments. Cowley only played on his for a brief moment, but Dryden's mastery became more and more perfect, till, in the last year of the century, he produced his masterpiece in the harmony of prose. The Preface To The Fables. When, nine years later, Steele wrote his first number of The Tatler, he found an instrument ready at his hand. Steele's style suggests Dryden, while Addison's model in the first paper which he contributed to the same journal is Cowley.247

Had Cowley's Essays been written at the same time as his boyish poetry, his moralizing over the rights of personal independence, the pleasures of the country, the delights of solitude, and the disadvantages of Court life, would have been felt to be the mere rhetoric of school. But the Essays were the deliberate work of his declining years. He had expressed a longing for a life spent with the Muses, but Fortune seemed to take pleasure in thwarting his inclinations. She had caused him to be expelled from a university that he loved; had forced him to mix in political intrigues that he hated; had engaged him in the loyal service of a cause he believed to be hopeless; had exposed him to exile and imprisonment. Even when the

royal cause had temporarily triumphed, she had disappointed him of the reward his ambition had a right to expect. 248

It is regrettable that we do not possess more of Cowley's prose. Apart from The Discourses Concerning The Government of Oliver Cromwell, all Cowley's prose is pleasing, whether it be the rapid popular speech of The Cutter Of Coleman Street, the easy familiarity of his letter writing, or the urbane sententiousness of his Essays. Unhappily, Cowley did not live to complete the Essays he had planned, and those we have are more burdened with citation and translation than modern taste allows; though, if this be a fault, it is one shared with Montaigne and Bacon.

It is only by an accident that Cowley is not also among our best letter-writers. He combined all the qualities that make a good letter-writer. His friends bear witness to the gaiety and tenderness of his letters, and one or two fragments that survive confirm their evidence; but that tiresome Sprat thought them too personal and familiar for publication. No one knows what has become of them. The loss to literature must be considerable. Sprat tells us that Cowley excelled in his letters to his private friends - as we can well believe from one letter which escaped destruction; Sprat declined to pub-

lish them. Many interesting facts might have been learned from letters passing between him and his friends, had not Sprat's and Clifford's scruples about the propriety of publishing compositions designed for those only to whom they were addressed, led them to suppress the entire correspondence. Whether the letters were destroyed or only secreted is still a curious question. 249

The letters, which Sprat and Clifford felt justified in not giving to the world, would undoubtedly have been valuable aids in forming a just estimate of Cowley's character.

Mary Russell Mitford closes her Essay on Cowley with what Grossart calls uncharacteristic vehemence:

"I cannot conclude without a word of detestation toward Sprat, who, Goth and Vandal that he was, destroyed the familiar letters of Cowley." 250

One of the minor literary mysteries of the seventeenth century has to do with Cowley's letters to his private friends. Sprat, in his edition of Cowley, suppressed the letters and they have never since been found. Though Miss. Mitford scolded Sprat severely as a Goth and a Vandal; 251 though Coleridge called him a prude, 252 though such widely diversified critics

249 Stebbing, Some Verdicts Of History Reviewed, p. 52.
250 Mitford, Recollections Of A Literary Life, p. 65.
251 Ibid., p. 65
252 Samuel T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, p. 44.
as the Critical Review 253 in 1775, and Richard Aldington 254 in 1921, lamented the loss; though Mr. Grosart 255 in preparing his edition on Cowley searched everywhere diligently, the letters are still missing and bid fair to remain so.

Mr. Nethercot claims a forgery, The Familiar Letters Of Cowley, published in Fraser's magazine XIII (1836), 395-409, supposed to have been found in the possession of a descendant of Dr. Sprat.

The only known letter of Cowley's is the one which somehow escaped from Dr. Sprat's drawer in spite of his precautions, and is to be found in Johnson's Lives Of The Poets. Cowley's letters from Paris, where he was secretary for Lord Jerym and Queen Henrietta Marie, have always been passed over as being only of a political and diplomatic nature. 257

A collection of Cowley's letters might have preserved his name though those fluctuations of public taste which have so diminished his poetical reputation. To enjoy the reflective and familiar moods of Cowley we are now reduced to the

Essays, a slight collection, but much praised, for theirs is a slowly distilled sweetness that grows more attractive by frequentation.\(^{258}\)

Stebbing, one of the best modern contributors to our literary history, calls Cowley The Poet Politician. Cowley was surely never in any true sense of the word a politician. Had Cowley been a politician his play, *The Cutter Of Coleman Street*, would have shown more tact - more capacity for grasping the situation and would have been better adapted to please the fickle crowd of court favorites and followers.

In his retirement, Stebbing says, Cowley laid aside the politician. The garment was an easy one to throw aside as it had never sat easily upon the wearer. In Cowley's youth, at Westminster School, he was under an influence which if continued might have made him a follower of Milton and Marvell. It is interesting to imagine what change might have been wrought in Cowley through contact with Milton and Marvell instead of Jermyn and Buckingham.\(^{259}\)

CHAPTER III

The beginnings of the classical heroic couplet cannot be explored with advantage earlier than in the works of Sir John Beaumont. Dryden accepted Edmund Waller as the forerunner of the classical school and calls him the first who made writing verse easily an art. Waller persisted long without gaining a single scholar, but in 1642 Sir John Denham joined him with his smooth, arid, and prosaic Cooper's Hill, and Cowley and Davenant were presently converted. These four poets are those who re-emerge in the next age as the harbingers of rigorous prosody and the forerunners of Dryden and Pope.

Another precursor of the classic school in poetry was Sir Wm. Davenant, a godson of Shakespeare. In 1650 we find him in Paris with Waller and Cowley, converted to the new prosody of Waller. He published in that year an epic poem called Goudibert. This poem is mainly interesting because of the extraordinary influence which it exercised over the early style of Dryden, who was slow in escaping from the fascination of it. It was written in the four-line heroic stanza, with alternate rhymes, which Gray made so popular in the following century by his Elegy In The Country Churchyard. 260

260 Gosse, From Shakespeare To Pope, p. 157.
The position Cowley holds in the history of the classical movement is much less influential than that of Davenant.

Edmund Gosse says:

"I consider Cowley to have been a poet of a higher class than Davenant, the only poet, indeed, of very high native merit between the romantic school and Dryden, but his allegiance to the classical innovators was only half-hearted. He was their friend and companion, he was associated with them in political ambition and in the adversity of exile, and he was too vivid, too modern, not to be interested by what they were doing and to be affected by it. While Waller, Denham, Davenant, and such followers as Lowe, Katharine Philips and Lord Orrery, fade and become almost undistinguishable, Cowley was much too strong to relinquish his individuality even for the sake of endowing his country with a school of correct writers." 261

Cowley emerged from this interesting school of Cambridge writers. With him, rhetoric takes the place of a colored fancy, and the development of rhetoric in his verse was what drew him towards Waller, whose work was all in the direction of oratorical effect.

Again Gosse says:

"I am inclined to think that Cowley was born with gifts in the way of poetic rhetoric which have seldom been excelled. He is so extremely unequal that he almost eludes criticism, but at his very best he possesses, more perhaps than any other English writer except Milton, that peculiar Latin magnificence of phrase which is so characteristic of Victor Hugo. It seems absurd to compare the author of Les Chatiments with the author of Davideis. But

261 Ibid., p. 146
if I am understood to mean no more than this; that in the rare passages where Cowley excels, it is with a tendency towards the excellence so general in Victor Hugo, I wish to retain the criticism."

The elegy on Crashaw has this equality of Hugo. This passage shows to how great an extent Cowley, when he chose, conformed to Waller's new rules for the conduct of his heroic couplet:

"Pardon, my Mother Church, if I consent
That Angels led him when from thee he went,
For even in Error sure no Danger is
When joyn'd with so much Piety as his.

And when my Muse soars with so strong a wing,
'Twill learn of things divine, and first of
thee to sing." 262

This Gosse considers very tender and beautiful; quite an oasis of real literature to cheer us in our journey through the wilderness. The individuality of Cowley is too strong in the elegy on Crashaw to make it a good example of classical writing. The principal contribution which he made to the new order of style was a sacred epic, on the history of David, which I suspect of being as little read in the present day as any epic poem in existence. It does not invite persual, although it would not be Cowley's if it did not contain a great many oddities and a certain number of beauties. 263

The attitude of the Neo-Classicists toward such a writer

262 Cowley, Elegy On Crashaw.
263 Edmund Gosse, From Shakespeare To Pope, p. 148.
as Cowley is easy to understand. At first admiring him for his moral and intellectual qualities, they soon begin to grow disturbed by the lack of simplicity in the expression of his ideas and in the seeming lack of polish in some of his verse. The fact that Cowley had written several pieces with the Neo- Classical requirements served to keep him read by a limited group while poets like Donne were stuffed away on the highest and dustiest shelves. Cowley's simple and frivolous little ballad _The Chronicle_, was, like the Anacreonitits, always admired. As for his didactic quality and his ability to condense ideas, Dr. Johnson once withered Boswell by saying that there was more sense in a line of Cowley than in a page, or a sentence, or ten lines of Pope. 264

It seems legitimate to say that Cowley's Classicism is of much the same discriminate and assimilative variety as Ben Jonson's and Herrick's. Probably this has not been understood as clearly as it might have been, both because Cowley did not follow up his early odes with any greater and similar achievement and because on account of certain tricks of style and ways of thought more prominent in his later works, he has rightly enough been considered as in this respect a follower of Donne's. We may be permitted to think, however, that had it not been for Jonson's example Cowley would not have shown--any more than

had any other English poet before Jonson—the same willingness and ability actually to learn from the classics. We are supported in so thinking by the statement of Clarendon that Cowley ascribed much of any merit in his work "to the example and learning of Ben Jonson." 265

From the birth of Spenser to the death of Milton, English thought passed through many changes and there were several successive phases of style in English literature. Milton, who acknowledged Shakespeare as his master, lived long enough to witness the establishment of an entirely new school of poets, in the persons of John Dryden and his contemporaries. 266

Milton was in a special sense the representative of the past. His poetry was a monument in which whole centuries of conflicting thought united their final expression. Dryden, on the contrary, was essentially the man of his age, its servant and representative. Cowley, he tells us, was the darling of his youth 267 and as long as he continued to practice the panegyrical style, he looked, for his models, to Cowley and Donne. 268

Milton learned much from his predecessors, especially Shakespeare and Spenser. Milton, according to his widow, said that the English poets he most approved of were Spenser, Shakespeare and Cowley. Indeed, it may be safely surmised that

267 Dryden, Essay On Satire.
one of the determining reasons why Milton chose to turn his *Paradise Lost* into an epic poem was the example offered by the *Davideis*. It seems ludicrous now to consider Milton as an imitator of Cowley, yet many exterior resemblances, many common themes and notions, can be detected, which prove that Milton, when writing *Paradise Lost* constantly bore Cowley's epic in mind. Milton's influence on other writers has been conspicuous. Pope, Thomas, Gray, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats were especially indebted to him.

The greatest writer of the period, in fact the greatest in English literature between Milton and Wordsworth, was John Dryden. In comparison with his stately figure those precursors of the classical school pass into insignificance. Even Waller is intellectually a dwarf by the side of Dryden. But the change from the romantic to the classical manners in English poetry, the rejection of the overflow in favor of the distich, had been carried out to the full before Dryden came to the front and stamped his own powerful character on the movement. Waller was writing excellent couplets before Dryden was born. It was part of Dryden's greatness not so much to introduce phases of thought as to adopt and illuminate them when they had once become national. For this reason he was not happy till all question of transition was over. What is of greatest importance is to observe what progress Dryden made in the new
prosody and how by means of it he drew out those qualities which had been too much neglected in the verse of the previous age, ease, intelligibility and flexibility.

It was during the brief reign of James II that Dryden first began to cultivate the Pindaric Ode of Cowley, in which he achieved some success, notably the beautiful Elegy on Anne Killigrew in 1686.\(^{269}\)

Several more or less successful attempts have been made to correct prevailing misconceptions concerning the influence of Cowley on succeeding writers. More has been said about his Pindaric Odes, perhaps, than about any other of his writings. The articles by Edmund Gosse on Odes and Pindarics in the eleventh edition of Encyclopaedia Britannica are indicative of the preponderance of popular opinion and are so mistaken in several particulars that they should be corrected. To quote a part of the treatment of Pindarics:

"The invention is due to Abraham Cowley who found a text of Pindar and determined to imitate the Greek poetry in English, without having comprehended the system upon which Pindar's prosody was built. The erroneous form of these Pindarics of Cowley and his imitators was first exposed by Congreve exactly half a century later. He describes them thus:-----bundles of rambling incoherent thoughts, expressed in a like parcel of irregular stanzas, which consist of another complication of disproportioned, uncertain, and perplexed verse and rhymes." \(^{270}\)

\(^{269}\) Gosse, History Of English Literature, p.9.
\(^{270}\) Congreve, Discourses On The Pindarique Ode.
This is harsh, but it describes a Pindaric with absolute justice. Cowley had not been aware that there is nothing more regular than the Odes of Pindar.

Mr. Gosse would imply that Congreve was attacking Cowley. But what Congreve actually says of Cowley is:

"There is that difference due to the memory and learning of that gentleman that nothing should be objected to in the latitude he has taken in his Pindaric Odes. The beauty of his verse is an atonement for the irregularity of his stanzas; and though he did not imitate Pinder in the strictness of his numbers, he has very often happily copied him in the force of his figures and the sublimity of his style and sentiments. I believe those irregular Odes of Mr. Cowley may have been the principal, though innocent, occasion of so many deformed poems since." 271

Mr. Nethercot goes on to say:

"It is hard to conceive that for fifty years, from the publication of Cowley's Odes in 1656 to Congreve's Essay in 1706, there was no one well enough acquainted with Greek to perceive that the form of Cowley's Odes was not that of the original Pindar. There must have been many people who commented upon it, but there was only one man who published his criticisms. This was Edward Phillips, Milton's nephew." 272

He analyzes various verse forms found in poetry. Speaking of Odes, he says:

"The Pindaric Odes comes not so near in resemblance to the Odes of Pindarus as the Canzon. That which we call the Pindaric hath a nearer affinity with the Monostrophic used in the choruses of Aeschylus' tragedies." 273

In his account of Cowley, Phillips speaks of:

"Abraham Cowley the most applauded poet of our nation both of the present and past ages. In imitation of him, it is pleasant to observe what a notable trade hath been driven of late in Pindaric Odes." 274

Thus even if Cowley's own classical attainments, so often alluded to by his biographer, Bishop Sprat, and by his contemporaries, did not enable him to appreciate Pindar, it is at least certain that there were those nearer his own time who understood him and what he was doing better than most modern readers and critics.275

It was Congreve who was destined to purify the English Ode and return it to its classic form. For half a century English Literature had been overrun by the false Ode of Pindar as it had revealed itself to Cowley in his hasty study of that poet during his exile in Paris. Misconceiving the form of Pindar, and seeing in the elaborate metrical system of the master of technical lyric nothing but an amorphus chain of longs and shorts, cut up into irregular lengths according to the licentious fancy of the poet, Cowley had introduced this kind of Ode which delighted the formlessness of the Restoration. Congreve, now in his leisure, reading Pindar, the error of Cowley became patent to him. He had made a great discovery, and he proceeded to show what the form of a real

274 Ibid., pp. 32-33.
Ode of Pindar is, with its strophe, anti-strophe, and epode. Congreve's appeal to the English poets to return to the pure Greek form of Ode was presently recognized by all the best writers, and in particular the two great Odes of Gray show how scrupulously faithful that learned lyrist was in his discipleship of Pindar. The pseudo-Pindarics went on being written, but from 1706 onwards these deformities have been obliged to confess themselves irregular.

It is probably that Congreve's appreciation of the prosody of Pindar dated from about a dozen years earlier when he enjoyed the conversation of Dryden. We cannot tell whether the younger poet persuaded the elder or the elder converted the younger. But Dryden, in 1693, when he was seeing so much of Congreve, exhorted Dennis, in a private letter, to adopt the Pindaric style introduced, although not perfected by the famous Cowley.

In his own Odes, Dryden has shown little consciousness of what an Ode strictly fashioned with strophe, anti-strophe, and epode should look like. 276

More or less irregular strophes of great beauty and considerable length had been achieved by Spenser. Ben Jonson had attempted regular strophic correspondence, but the Pindaric which Cowley practiced and personally made popular,
which Dryden raised to a really great poetic medium, in which Swift made notoriously unsuccessful attempts, and which, in the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century, burdened English poetry with masses of intolerable verse, had no regular correspondence in the line of strophe, anti-strophe, and epode. It was merely a string of stanzas of unequal but considerable length, arranged and rimed entirely at the poet's direction.

In later times as regularized by Gray, and since the Romantic Movement, it has produced much magnificent poetry. But few of its practitioners, except Dryden, between 1650 and 1750, made anything of it but a row of formless agglomerations of line and rime.

To say that the heroic couplet could not have received its actual firm establishment without Dryden would be less philosophical than to say that the necessity of its establishment in its turn necessitated the arising of a poet like Dryden. If Pope, and he had exchanged places, it is rather certain that the domination of the form would have been much shorter than it actually was. For Dryden had by no means Pope's attachment to the couplet. He took from Fairfax and Waller the sententious tramp of the stopped measure; he took from Cowley the Alexandrine license with its powers of amplification and variation.277

Cowley's work in the development of the couplet form was neither to smooth its roughness nor to disencumber it of superfluous content. He strove to make it an adequate vehicle of narrative verse, and to make its movement responsive to the demands of its subject. His weakness in performance lay in his self-conscious ambitiousness, and the mannerisms in which his thought habitually found expression. Without his example, however, the couplet could hardly have attained that force which, in combination with flexibility and ease, it acquired in Dryden's hands. In many respects, the ease and majesty of Dryden's couplets seem more closely allied to the masculine style of the earliest couplet-writers than to the artificers and not infrequent tameness of Cowley and Waller. Yet it is the case that the intermediary work of each, in its own way, made those qualities in Dryden possible, and that their efforts helped to give his couplet that polish, balance, and good sense which, in his case, became a second nature.

What Cowley failed to do, was accomplished by Dryden, whose Pindaric Odes have both vigor of thought and dignity of expression. Dryden's great Odes are a marked advance in respect to rhetoric, over the Pindarics of Cowley and of Cowley's imitators. Dryden by his new use of the heroic couplet in poetry, his direct prose style, and his development of literary criticism became the foremost writer of the
Restoration and exercised a great influence on eighteenth century literature. 278

It was the eighteenth century that proved to be the most crucial stage for the reputation of Cowley. Neo-classical writers commented on his works in obedience of Dryden's directions, and consequently denied him the rank of a first-class poet. Readers began falling off, until, by the middle of the century, Cowley had become the recondite author of a chosen few. It would be wrong to think, however, that the change was sudden, or even clearly perceptible at the beginning. The old enthusiasm showed at first little sign of decay, and Cowley's works were still read and still praised. He continued to hold the rank of a favorite with many readers of every description. All literary men knew him, and most of them loved him as a friend. Cowley's true popularity was nowhere better exhibited than in the great periodicals of Addison and Steele, The Spectator. 279

It may be asserted that Cowley enjoyed the posthumous friendship of the most eminent men of the age. Swift, Prior, Addison, Steele and Pope all expressed their affection for him.

Poets continued to obey him as a master and leader. When Matthew Prior began to write his heroic poem, Solomon, or The

Vanity Of The World, he took up his position as a disciple of 
Cowley. He borrowed from the customs and manners of the eastern countries just as Cowley had done in Davideis. The example of Cowley was so much in his mind that he seemed unable to break free from his very works. His preface opens much like the Essay Of Myself:

"It is hard for a man to speak of himself with any tolerable satisfaction or success. It is hard for him to speak of his own writing." 280

Pope submitted to his guidance at first and wrote professed imitations of his poems. Wm. Patterson, a minor poet, and a lover of solitude, chose Cowley as his master. Thomas Brown feebly tried to ape his love poems. 281

Readers who find Marvell's charm unfailing can hardly be aware of the suggestions which Marvell drew from Cowley's Mistress and which he built up into great beauty. It would be rash to say that Marvell was unfamiliar with any of these poems before publication in 1647, for Cowley had been the precocious genius of that age when he and Marvell were scholars at Trinity.

Perhaps the most striking instance to bring forward is that of Marvell's opening lines To His Coy Mistress. If only time will allow, he would consent to as slow a wooing as might be:

"An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze." 282

282 Marvel, To His Coy Mistress.
Not for nothing had Cowley in My Dyet written:

"On a sigh of pity I a year can live,
One tear will keep me twenty at least,
Fifty a gentle look will give;
An hundred years on one kind word I'll feast;
A thousand more will added be,
If you an inclination have for me,
And all beyond is vast Eternity." 283

Cowley is here trying a difficult metre and Marvell an easy one. That does alter the fact that even if the merit of the accomplishment is Marvell's, the merit of the suggestion is Cowley's.

Marvell's love poetry is where chiefly Cowley's influence is to be noted. Apart from The Mistress there is another strong point of comparison between Cowley and Marvell. In his Essay Of Obscurity, Cowley translated into twenty-six lines a thirteen line passage from a chorus in Seneca's Thyestes. Marvell translated the same into fourteen lines. Of course it may be just a mere coincidence that both poets translated the same passage. Cowley's Essays were published in 1668. If it is not a coincidence, Marvell either knew Of Obscurity long before its publication or wrote his own lines after 1668.284

But most of Cowley's disciples more specifically followed him in the Pindaric track. To number them all would be an almost impossible task, and in any case a barren task, since

283 Cowley, My Dyet.
most of them have fallen into oblivion. A few notable examples may suffice to prove that the vogue of the irregular odes had not in the least abated. Samuel Cobb, in a Pindaric Ode, sang the triumph of Cowley and Prior, his pupil, in Carmen Secular. Wm. Collins wrote The Passions, an irregular ode, in the manner of Cowley. De Foe turned it for the first time into satiric use in his Hymn To The Pillory. Among the Pindarists of the age we find the names of John Hughes, Elijah Fenton, Isaac Watts, Savage, Hamilton and Shenstone, who in 1749 wrote An Irregular Ode After Sickness.

One of the most convinced Pindarists was Arron Hill, who kept up the sacred flame of admiration at Cowley's altar, and was one of the last upholders of the Cowleyan Pindaric Ode.

It is quite characteristic of the age to mix praise and censure, and it is often difficult to decide what attitude the critic would ultimately adopt. It follows that great caution must be exercised before calling a critic adverse to Cowley. Many later commentators have understood Congreve's onslaught on Pindarics as directly aimed at Cowley. Congreve actually denounced their irregularity, but his indictment did not in the least apply to Cowley's Odes. Not only does his name not appear in it, but a few pages later, Congreve delivers his

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286 Wm. Collins, Poems.
opinion of him in terms of undisguised admiration and respect. Instead of censuring Cowley, Congreve made it perfectly clear that, not his Odes but those of his imitators were to blame, Cowley merely bearing the responsibility of having allured many a poetaster into writing Pindaric Odes:

"Yet I must beg leave to add, that I believe those irregular Odes of Mr. Cowley, may have been the principal, though innocent occasion, of so many deformed poems since." 288

Cowley's early influence on Milton is shown when attention is focused upon one of Milton's best known minor poems:

"How Soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth, Stolen on his wing my three and twentieth year." 289

William Cullen Bryant was the first to express the opinion that Scott must have had Cowley's description of Merba and Michal in his mind when he described the two daughters of Magnus Troil, Minna and Benda in the Pirate. Scott's and Cowley's description may be found side by side in Grosart. 290

Pope seems to have borrowed from Cowley for the lines:

"Round the whole earth his dreaded name shall sound, And reach to worlds that must not yet be found." 291

appear in Pope in the following form:

"Nations unborn, your mighty name shall sound, And worlds applaud that must not yet be found." 292

289 Milton, On His Having Arrived At The Age Of Twenty-Three.
291 Cowley, Davideis.
292 Pope, Essay On Criticism.
Cowper's line:

"God made the country, and man made the town." 293

may be traced to Cowley's:

"God the first Garden made, and the first city Cain." 294

These familiar household phrases may be traced to Cowley:

"If we compare great things with small."

"By the bye". 295

Dryden's Ode on St. Cecilia's Day is in direct imitation of Cowley's Resurrection. Longfellow's poem The Arrow And The Song may have been suggested by Cowley's poem on the Shortness Of Human Life. One stanza of Wordsworth's Daffodils reminds us of Cowley's Poverty To Be Preferred To Discontented Riches.

A number of instances are found where George Crabbe seems to have been under the influence of Cowley.

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293 Cowper, The Task.
CHAPTER IV

The true critic judges a man primarily by his successes, not by his mistakes. Sometimes, indeed, mistakes may be taken for successes, and praise may be awarded for what it later recognized as an error. In such cases, time is essential for a fair and complete appraisal, but eventually the sifting process will be accomplished. A study of the development of Cowley's reputation therefore not only discloses what have been generally selected as his best works, but also give an interesting commentary on the progress of taste from his time to the present.

Fame comes to many poets only after death. They are doomed to live unknown or ignored. Cowley proved a brilliant exception to that rule, for he enjoyed, even in his lifetime, the most unmitigated applause.

The position now for two centuries assigned to Milton was, during his lifetime, held by Cowley. Cowley's popularity, extraordinarily high and extraordinarily brief, was not quite so unreasonable as his loss of it. The history of his reputation can be traced step by step, from its sudden blaze of glory, in his own time, through its slow decay, to the comparative obscurity in which it now rests.296

296 Loiseau, Reputation of Cowley In England, p. 23.
Success rewarded his very first literary efforts. He tells us of the favorable reception his Poeticall Blossomes had met with in 1633. He says modestly:

"They were then looked upon as commendable extravagance in a boy, and they had already passed through several editions which is a longer life than used to be enjoyed by infants that are born before the ordinary terms..." 297

Though the author of these poems was a mere boy, they could not be looked upon as boyish. Cowley did not disappoint the hopes he had aroused. His two comedies, Love's Riddle and Naufragium Joculare, definitely placed him in 1638 among the University Wits, and Prince Charle's enjoyment of The Guardian, in March 1642, made him favorably known at Court. He was not yet thirty when his Mistress ranked him on a level with Waller, the master of amorous lyric.

Literary circles began to show their appreciation of his talent when the compiler of Witt's Recreations, selected from the finest fancies of Modern Muses, enriched the collection with three poems taken out of The Mistress, Love's Discovery, The Heart-Breaking, and Silence.

A small detail may help us to realize how far his reputation then extended. When he was arrested in April 1655, The Weekly Intelligencer, announcing the event, wrote of him as "the memorable Mr. Abraham Cowley, more famous by his pen than by his sword." Thus was the poet's fame acknowledged publicly.

297 Preface To The Volume of 1656, p. 9.
It reached its climax in the volume he published in 1656. No title of glory could now be denied him. He stood, in the eyes of his contemporaries, not only as the greatest English poet then living and one of the greatest England had ever known, with Shakespeare and Spenser, but even as the worthy successor and rival of the supreme masters of the craft, the Ancients. The souls of Virgil and Homer were felt to breathe anew in the Davideis; that of Pindar in the Odes; that of Horace, Ovid, Anacreon in the more familiar lyrics.

The history of Cowley's reputation offers an easy text for a discourse on the variations of the standard of taste. A marvel of precocity, widely known as a poet at fifteen; the poetical wonder of Cambridge; so famous at thirty that pirates and forgers made free with his name on their title-pages while he was serving the exiled queen; issuing at thirty-eight, a folio of his poems which was destined to pass through eight editions in a generation; accepted by his literary contemporaries, men of cultivated intelligence, as not only the greatest among themselves, but greater than all who had gone before; buried in state at Westminster by the side of Chaucer and Spenser, and ranked by his biographer as equal not only to them but to the authors of true antiquity, the best of the Greeks and Romans; in thirty years he had sunk out of notice and his name had become a mere memory.

The reasons for this extraordinary decline in a poetical reputation are not difficult to find. Dryden absorbed all that was best in Cowley, and superseded him for the readers of the eighteenth century, who read Dryden little, naturally read Cowley less. Yet criticism has to justify great names. There must be something in a man who was regarded by his age, and that an age which boasted of having outgrown all illusions, as the most profound and ingenious of its writers.

When the subject is one that interests him, Cowley has something to say that we should not wish unsaid or said differently. Sonorousness counts for something, after all, in the treatment of such themes as the future of knowledge or the fate of a hero and a cause. The two Odes— that to Mr. Hobbes and that called Brutus— are rightly grandiose, and are therefore successful. Like the other leading spirits of his age, Cowley looked across the passing troubles of the day to the new world to which Bacon had pointed, and which Bacon's followers were hastening to occupy; and of this feeling the Ode To Mr. Hobbes is the best expression.

Cowley lived at the end of one intellectual epoch and at the beginning of another, he held of both, and he was marred by the vices of the decadence as much as, but no more than, he was glorified by the dawning splendor of the new age. What had been the extravagance of a young and uncontrolled imagi-
nation in Lyle and Sidney became the pedantry of ingenuity in the learned Cowley, the master of two or three positive sciences and all the literature of Europe. But this pedantry was not all for Addison says:

"I cannot conclude this head of mixed wit without owning that the admirable poet out of whom I have taken the examples of it had as much true wit as any author that ever writ, and indeed all other talents of an extraordinary genius." 299

Not, perhaps, all other talents of an extraordinary genius, but knowledge, reflection, calmness and clearness of judgment; in a word, the gifts of the age of science and of prose which set in with the Restoration; and with these a rhetorical and moral fervour that made him a power in our Literature greater, for the moment, than any other that had gone before. 300

In his own day this reputation was very high. The prime ambition and devotion of his life was centered in literature. The influence of Donne, lord of the universal monarchy of wit, was still powerful and the one who could surpass Donne in outlandish variety of conceits might well be hailed as his legitimate successor or even superior. If the reputation of Cowley declined with surprising rapidity while that of Waller and Denham remained undiminished, it is because, instead of pursuing, with them, the natural direction of poetry, he chose to limit his taste within the compass of fashions that were outworn.

299 Addison's Essay, Spectator, No. 62.
and to exhaust the last resources with which those fashions could supply their followers. Yet his influence on the verse of the younger generation of poets must not be judged entirely by the eclipse which overtook his fame within half a century of his death. That influence was summed up by Johnson at the end of a searching criticism of the fantastic school of poetry, and of Cowley as the last of the race, but undoubtedly the best, with which he concluded his Life Of Cowley:

"It may be affirmed that he brought to his poetic labours a mind replete with learning, and that his pages are embellished with all the ornaments which books could supply; that he was the first who imparted to English numbers the enthusiasm of the greater ode, and the gaiety of the less; that he was equally qualified for springightly sallies, and for lofty flights; that he was among those who freed translation from servility, and instead of following his author at a distance, walked by his side; and that, if he left versification yet improveable, he left likewise, from time to time, such specimens of excellence as enabled succeeding poets to improve it."

Cowley had a reputation independent almost of the merit of his published works. This must have been based mainly on his character, for his friend and biographer tells us that he did not surprise at first in his conversation, and that none but his intimates would have discovered he was a poet. There was nothing brilliant or showy in his general demeanor. When his eulogist declares that he was possessed of perfect natural

\[301\] Johnson, Life Of Cowley, p. 64.
goodness, great integrity, and nothing affected in habit, person, or gesture; that he understood the forms of good breeding enough to practice them without burdening himself; that he was modest and humble, we have no great difficulty in representing to ourselves a person destitute, like Addison, of external graces, but without Addison's capability of warming into eloquence and wit.  

Literal historians like to dwell upon the size and iridescence of the bubble reputation possessed by Cowley during his lifetime. Indeed, few phenomena in the annals of English literature are more curious than the relative value placed by the seventeenth century upon Cowley and upon certain poets of his time. Take for example Robert Herrick. The publication of his Hesperides caused not a ripple of interest; Corinna's Going A-Maying and To Daffodils found no imitators; even his grave is unknown; apparently he made no impression upon his contemporaries. But they could not praise Cowley enough. He was hailed as the second Pindar; as the prince of poets, unsurpassed by any of his predecessors. Sprat's assertion that Cowley was the equal of Chaucer and Spenser might be ascribed to the fact that Sprat was Cowley's biographer and editor as well as his close friend, but what shall be said to Milton's alleged ranking of him with Spenser and

302 Stebbing, Some Verdicts Of History Reviewed, p. 68.
Shakespeare as one of the three greatest of English poets? Even Dryden, arbiter of his age, declared: "His authority is almost sacred to me." When he died nearly a hundred coaches of noblemen and persons of quality followed his hearse to Westminster Abbey, where he was buried in the Poet's Corner beside Chaucer and Spenser; and over his grave the Duke of Buckingham soon erected a monument that makes up in size what it may lack in beauty and good taste.

The bubble on his reputation, although perhaps it never burst, certainly began to evaporate soon after his death. Even with Pope came the saner judgment, and critics today who find merit in his writings find it for quite different reasons from those that influenced his contemporaries. Pope admired Cowley for his wit, for his peculiar, grotesque figures. Today it is not his puns, his scintillations, his trees cut into the shapes of peacocks, to borrow a figure from Hazlitt, but his quiet, natural passages, written at the dictation of his heart, which pleases us. The Cowley who could be natural and sincere and charming has almost been forgotten amid the universal ridicule of his wit. 303

Speaking of Cowley's position, Mr. Firth says, in a letter dated Oxford, September 6, 1893:

"The following correspondence illustrates the position of Abe Cowley at the Restoration. The offence for which he had to apologize was his disposition to acquise in and accept Cromwell's government, shown by his preface to the collection of his poems published in 1656. Sprat laboriously apologizes for Cowley's conduct in his respect. The poet's own apology is of more interest; and the fact of Ormonde's intercession on his behalf is, to the best of my knowledge, unknown to his biographers."

Mr. Firth here gives a copy of the letters in the correspondence between Mr. Cowley and the Marquise of Ormonde. The letters are derived from the Carte MMS. in the Bodleian Library.

Edward Phillips hailed Cowley as the most applauded poet of the nation, both of present and past ages.

So did Langbaine; who warned his readers that:

"Mr. Cowley was a person of great merit and esteem in the world when living, and his memory is fresh in the minds of learned men. I have so great a veneration for the memory of this great man, that his very name seems an ornament to my book, and deserved to be set in the best light I can place it."

"Who now reads Cowley"? was the question asked by Alexander Pope, seventy years after Cowley died. Yet even after Pope's time there were a few who still read the older poet. At present there are doubtless fewer who read Cowley than there

304 Sprat, Life Of Cowley, p. 4.
305 Firth, "Cowley At The Restoration", Academy, XLIV (1893), p. 296.
306 Edward Phillips, Theatrum Poetarum.
were in the time of Pope, although now and then we hear of some who, with Charles Lamb, are willing to speak of Cowley as an author, ever dear to him, though now out of fashion.


Milton put Cowley with Spenser and Shakespeare. In this opinion we get an idea of Cowley's great contemporary reputation, which was unquestioned by anyone but Dryden, and by Dryden only at the end of his life.

Dunham thinks Cowley is as fine as Ovid.

In these days we can hardly expect that anyone should read the Davideis, save those who are attracted by what Cowper called the ingenuity of its author - his dexterity in stringing upon the slight thread of his narrative unexpected thoughts and remote allusions, never rejecting them because they are old or grotesque, provided they are ingenious. But the poem contains one beautiful lyric, a serenade in the shape of a love song, supposed to have been sung by the enamored shepherd young, David, under the window of Michal, the daughter of Saul. It is happily versified, and the fire and enthusiasm of the initial stanza contrast finely with the plaintiveness of the close. Appearing among the rugged
numbers of the third book, it scarcely seems to belong there:

"Awake, awake, my Lyre,
And tell they silent master's humble tale,
In sounds that may prevail,
Sounds that gentle thoughts inspire.
Though so exalted she
And I so lowly be,
Tell her such different notes make all thy
harmony." 308

At every step we find new evidence of Cowley's eminence. He was even given what may be considered the highest proof of popularity, he was anatomized in a burlesque collection set together by Thomas Jordan in 1658; Naps Upon Paranassus, a poem which reviews a long list of poets, all inferior to Cowley. The comic intention does not conceal the respect due to Cowley, and the linking of his name with Virgil's is characteristic enough. He shared with Cleveland, his rival in fame at the time, the distinction of having a whole poem devoted to him.

Almost as soon as he began writing, fortune favored him, and never forsook him. His reputation, established early, became firmly rooted and never ceased growing. Universal and spontaneous applause raised him to the rank of prince of poets.

The most unforeseen development in Cowley's reputation appeared in his prose works. In his own time and during the Restoration, his essays, his prefaces, his prose pamphlets, and his two prose plays were scarcely known or mentioned. But as

308 Cowley, Davideis, Book III.
soon as the periodical essayists began to write, Cowley's prose emerged from its obscurity.

Cowley during his lifetime and for many years after was much admired and was regarded as a literary critic. His influence on the development of English poetry was considerable. He introduced the Pindaric Ode and thus set the fashion for several succeeding poets, including Dryden, Gray and Thompson.

According to a tradition recorded by Dr. Johnson, Milton had declared that the three greatest English poets were Spenser, Shakespeare and Cowley; and we certainly know that he admired Cowley more than any other poet of his own time. Dryden, characteristically acknowledging his debt to Cowley says that his authority is almost sacred to him; while Pope, also characteristically, asked, "Who now reads Cowley"? having, as Dean Beeching has remarked, some interest in dissuading his own readers from doing so. Addison, who had learned so much from Cowley, could only compare his genius to the lambent radiance of the Milky Way.

The universal respect in which the poet was held, both on account of his undoubted genius and his amiable virtues, was abundantly shown at his funeral. Evelyn says:

"Went to Mr. Cowley's funeral, whose corpse lay at Wallingford House; and was thence conveyed to Westminster Abbey in a hearse with six horses, with near a hundred coaches.

of noblemen and persons of quality following. Among these all the wits of the town, diverse bishops and clergymen. He was interred next to Geoffrey Chaucer and near Spenser. A goodly monument is since erected to his memory."

No fitter resting-place could have been found for one who drew his boyish inspiration from Spenser, and whose genius sent forth the bards of his time in a new direction of poetic style and manner of expression. The Duke of Buckingham, his constant friend and admirer, was responsible for the erection of the stately, though by no means unconventional, monument over Cowley's grave.

The Nineteenth Century on the whole did not continue the appreciation of Cowley to quite the completion which might have been expected. Lamb, of course, loved Cowley for his flavor of oddity, eccentricity, and companionableness. Wordsworth called him an able writer and an admirable man. Hazlet, lecturing of Dryden and Pope, described him as melancholy and fantastical - a great man, but not a great poet.

The latter half of the century was enlivened by a friendly squabble between Edmund Gosse and the Rev. Alexander Grosart as to which of them was the last or the greatest of Cowley's admirers; Grosart's assertion that Cowley had always

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310 Evelyn, Diary, Aug. 3, 1667.
311 Fox, Book Of Bachelors, p. 224.
312 Lamb, Detached Thoughts On Books And Reading.
314 Hazlitt, Works, Vol. 84.
had, and will always have, an inner circle of readers and students seems to be tenable even today.

Edmond Gosse, in his *Seventeenth Century Studies*, gives us a paper on Cowley. Although Mr. Gosse may have been a most agreeable writer and critic, many people entirely disagree with him in regard to Cowley's fame. It is well that Cowley had a true friend and admirer in his native land, who was so competent to defend his fame and place him where he so well deserved to stand among England's worthies.

The Memorial Introduction of Mr. Alexander Grosart's *Complete Works Of Cowley* leaves nothing to be desired in regard to the literature concerning Cowley, and his most enthusiastic admirers cannot ask a better champion than Grosart. He criticizes most unrelentingly the Hallams, Wards, and Gosses who have presumed to rob Cowley of his well earned and enduring fame. Among the many letters of thanks and sympathy which he received, came one which had been tossed on the waves of the broad Atlantic, from our revered William Cullen Bryant.316

The unmistakable tokens of Cowley's popularity are fully borne out by what we might call speaking proofs; allusions to his works, borrowings, imitations, which are found scattered here and there in contemporary writings. Among men of

letters, tokens of admiration were numberless. Poets looked up to him and acknowledged him as their master. By common consent, Cowley seems to have been taken as the ideal model whom every poet must devoutly wish to approach. In truth, in the generation writing between his death and the end of the century there were few who did not deliberately submit to his influence. Even those who, as critics, were so bold as not to find his art faultless, proved his disciples when writing poetry themselves. Most poets were quite content to follow in his footsteps. It is not always an easy task to trace in love verses the influence of The Mistress, itself the product of so many influences, yet the poems of Wm. Walsh often echo the themes chosen by Cowley.  

The Pindaric Odes, after the manner of Cowley, swayed tyrannically over the whole field of lyricism. Every poet, good or bad, followed blindly in his track. Sprat had led the way; Mrs. Katherine Philips had followed. Books of poetry were now followed with Pindarics of every description. Swift addressed Sir Wm. Temple and the Athenian Society in Pindaric measure. Even Dryden served as an apprentice under Cowley's guidance.

317 William Walsh, Letters And Poems, Amorous and Gallant.  
318 Swift, Ode To The Honorable Sir William Temple, 1689.
Thomas Skinner, relating the *Contemporary History To 1669*, devoted a paragraph to praise of Cowley's memory, both as a man and as a poet:

"His poetical fancy seemed to be inspired with some divine breath, which in sweet numbers, the monuments of his own glory, after Mars and the delights of Rome, equaled the repasts of Pindar and the gracefulness of Athens. No man was more sublime, nor modest than he, and he lived with the same politeness and grace as he wrote, in verse and manners being equally conspicuous." 319

When Edward Phillips, in his *Theatrum Poetarum*, observed that a notable trade had been driven of late in Pindaric Odes, he was the first of a long line of critics to detect the inaccuracy of the term Pindaric Ode applied to the Cowleyan type of ode. 320

We hear little or nothing about the rest of Cowley's works, either about his plays, his prose writings, or his Latin poems. He was at that time essentially a poet. His fame rested on his epic and lyrical achievement, and there it was so firmly rooted, it had such a solid hold on the taste of the age, that a criticism of his talent was scarcely thought of. Admiration and reverence were the feelings roused by his name.

But the regime of Wit stood on the verge of ruin. A dangerous rival was rising, soon to overthrow it. People began to obey the dictates of the new master, Judgment. Thus began,

as far as Cowley's reputation was concerned, an age of restriction and censures. In proportion as the neo-classical instinct grew more conscious and shaped itself into a theory, he was felt more distant, and a break took place in his intimacy with his readers and disciples, who then became his judges. When his faults began to be perceived it was with a kind of shyness that they were publicly exposed. Cowley's admirers prepared to lose their idol with heavy hearts, and their reason had to struggle hard with their instinctive allegiance.

No one felt this struggle more clearly and keenly than the greatest poet then living, the Laureate, John Dryden. He had begun his literary life as a devoted follower of Cowley. We find him speaking of Cowley in terms of affectionate respect, calling him

".....the darling of my youth." 321

Dryden followed Cowley, at first, much as Cowley had followed Spenser, and we might add that he dealt with him in a similar manner. For just as Cowley abandoned Spenser to obey Donne, and later submitted to the same influences as Waller and Denham, Dryden, when his maturing taste developed along neo-classical lines, felt his enthusiasm for his old master grow colder and evolved a fairly comprehensive criticism of his genius. 322

322 Loiseau, Cowley's Reputation In England, p. 49
In 1677 Dryden was still whole-heartedly vindicating the boldest conceits in the *Davidæis*. He praised Cowley and Denham for setting free imitations above literal translations, and paid a magnificent tribute to Cowley's Pindaric genius. But the wheel was inexorably turning, and Dryden, gaining in self-mastery and independence, grew conscious that much of the old manner of writing must be sacrificed to the new. He was leaving the old track and bowing before the classical claims for pure style. He began to perceive that Cowley lay open to criticism. Eight years later he took up the charge brought forward by Wm. Walsh against *The Mistress*, Cowley's name being significantly linked with Donne's:

"He (Donne) affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses... Mr. Cowley has copied him to a fault; so great a one in my opinion, that it throws his *Mistress* below his *Pindarics.*" 323

The same Discourse contained a passage in which later critics inclined to see a death blow to Cowley. Dryden, pointing out the usefulness of the beautiful turn of words and thoughts in satires as well as heroic poems, found many instances of them in the poems of Waller and Denham. Then

"...I looked over the darling of my youth, the famous Cowley; there I found instead of them, the points of wit, the quirks of epigram, but no elegant turns either in the word or in the thought." 324

324 Ibid., II, p. 108.
This sounds like a sweeping condemnation of Cowley's style. The point, however, loses much of its keenness from the context, and when we find it stated that Dryden then consulted a greater genius, Milton, without offence to the name of the noble author, Cowley, and did it equally in vain, we may infer that Dryden did not aim at throwing Cowley down from his pedestal, but merely stated a fact, though in no way impairing his genius. Yet, when calling him the darling of his youth, he made it clear that he had, in part at least, outgrown his worship of the older poet, and banished him among disused toys.

The criticism itself shows how wide was the gap growing between Cowley and the younger generation.\textsuperscript{325}

While examining Cowley's position in the poetic literature of the age, we are struck by the fact that he was with the classicists, yet not of them. Their relations were with antiquity through France, his with antiquity through Spain. There is no direct imitation of Spanish literature in his writings, but he has the cultismo, the desire to speak politely and artifically, which the critics of the age rightly identified with the poets of Madrid.

Cowley's great influence, his great prestige, clashed with those of Waller, and after having at least as much to do

\textsuperscript{325} Loiseau, \textit{Cowley's Reputation In England}, p. 35.
with forming Dryden's style as Waller had, Cowley sank into second rank. Pope, while bending respectfully to Waller and Denham, could sneer at Cowley, and treat him as a dethroned monarch of literature.

But a curious thing to note is this: When the prestige of Pope was waning at last, and when Waller began to fade back into disrepute, the prosody of Cowley revived once more, and in the hands of Gray became the main poetic influence of the middle of the eighteenth century. It was the echo of Cowley's harmonies that broke the monotonous twanging of the distich, and in Shelley, in Coleridge, in Swinburne, we still hear variations upon that broken lyrical music, while the brilliant couplet that Waller was too assiduous in introducing has quite passed away out of our living literature. 326

Cowley found himself excluded from the land of the neoclassicists, as lacking in judgment and self-restraint, two unpardonable faults. The woefully apt image of the dragnet, the putting him down as an author for boys and women, marked the culmination of Dryden's neo-classical criticism of Cowley's metaphysical verse, with the distinction that though he must always be thought a great poet, he is no longer estimated a good writer, sharply drew the line between uncultivated native genius, and genius brought up and tended accordingly to the rules of art.

326 Gosse, From Shakespeare to Pope, p. 151.
Dryden stated that Cowley was sunk in his reputation, and was no longer read, but everything points to the reverse conclusion. Cowley by 1700 neither lacked admirers to comment enthusiastically on his works, nor readers to buy his large folios. The history of Cowley's reputation during the next half-century hardly bears out Dryden's judgment. It was more of a predication than an indisputable fact.

Some critics, and also some poets, had reached a point where they hesitated in calling Cowley their favorite author, and could no longer equally like all his works, but they were hardly followed by the reading public as yet. Moreover, they themselves hid their censures behind much louder eulogies, so that, except in Dryden's Prefaces, unfavorable criticisms of Cowley could scarcely be detected.\footnote{Loiseau, The Reputation Of Cowley In England, p. 55.}

Between the death of Dryden and the first public appearance of Pope there was an interval of nine years, during which any man who was strong enough might have seized the scepter. The only pretender was Addison, who if he had not come under the influence of Swift and Steele, would in all probability never had discovered his true power. In 1694 he produced a brief Account Of The Greatest English Poets, in verse; Chaucer and Spenser, at whom he sneered; Cowley, Milton, Waller, Dryden, and Congreve, whom he praised. Addison was totally
without lyric gift. He never excelled except in heroic couplet. His versification has been considered to make the transition between Dryden and Pope; but in the opinion of Mr. Edmund Gosse, it shows a curious absence of all influence of Dryden; and if it makes any transition at all, it is that between Waller and Pope. 328

As Dryden eminently represented his generation in their opinion of Cowley, so Pope may fairly claim to hold the same office as regards his own time. Cowley was, with Waller and Dryden, one of his early masters, and the judgments of Pope pronounced in his works cover a ground of over thirty years.

No poet then living was a more faithful disciple of Cowley than Pope, if we judge from the numerous borrowings scattered through his verse. We learn from Spence that, while still a boy fired with holy enthusiasm, he boldly attempted to unite in a heroic poem an Alcander all that was best in the style of the best epic poets:

"I endeavored in this poem to collect all the beauties of the great epic writers in one piece; there was Milton's style in one part, Cowley's in another; here the style of Spenser, and there of Statius." 329

Pope, too, loved Cowley and understood him better perhaps than the critics of the nineteenth century can hope to do.

323 Gosse, From Shakespeare To Pope, p. 105.
329 Joseph Spence, Anecdotes, p. 277.
He couples him with Sir John Denham in his *Windsor Forest*, of whose shades he sings:

"Here his first lays majestic Denham sung;  
Here the last numbers flowed from Cowley's tongue."

Denham shared Cowley's fate, though he scarcely deserves to be ranked in the same poetical circle with his great contemporary. Pope's criticism partakes of the nature of eulogy, and serves chiefly to show what one distinguished poet thought of another. There can be no doubt that he loved Cowley, both from certain points of faint resemblance between the two poets and for his own sake.

Pope rivalled Cowley in poetical precocity having edited eleven poems at the age of thirteen. Practically all his writings contain reminiscences of the older poet; a line here and an image there being derived from his poems. His *Pastorals* bore the stamp of Cowley. One couplet in *Windsor Forest* reminds us of the poem on *Somerset House*. Cowley had said:

"And here, Behold, in a long bending row,  
How two joynt Cities make one glorious Bow."

Pope adapted:

"I see, I see, where two fair cities bend,  
Their ample bow, a new Whitehall ascend."

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In the Essay Of Criticism we hear at least four distinct echoes of Cowley. The Temple Of Fame twice recalls The Complaint. The Rape Of The Lock owes a conceit to one of Cowley's paraphrases of Horace. The Essay On Man, though written much later, still bears traces of the influence of Cowley; and The Epistles and The Satires are not free from it. These borrowings come from all parts of Cowley's works. They point to an indisputable familiarity and a deep sympathy. Pope knew Cowley well, and enjoyed his company.

He naturally expressed his opinion of him at various times. Though his allusions to him are brief, they are fraught with significance, and carry much interest. He began, in Windsor Forest, with enthusiastic praise:

"Here his first lays majestic Denham sung; Here the last numbers flowed from Cowley's tongue. Who now shall charm the shades, where Cowley strung His living harp, And lofty Denham Sung." 336

Pope stated to Spence in 1734 that Cowley was:

"A fine poet in spite of all his faults." 337

333 Criticism, l. 189; On The Death Of Crashaw, l. 58.
334 Temple Of Fame, l. 10-11; The Complaint, St. 1.
335 The Rape Of The Lock, V. 150; Horace, IV, 2.
336 Pope, Windsor Forest, l. 271.
337 Spence, Anecdotes, p. 173.
Cowley's poetry had gone out of fashion, but that Pope himself had studied him with great attention is proved by the numerous images that he borrowed from him. In reading over Cowley's poems, we find some instances in which Pope borrowed from him without acknowledgment. It is hardly to be supposed that an author of such large original resources as Pope should do this purposely. It might be that he did it unconsciously. At least we like to give him the benefit of the doubt. For example, Cowley says of the Messiah:

"Round the whole earth his dreaded name shall sound,
And reach to worlds that must not yet be found." 338

Pope says of the poets of Greece and Rome:

"Nations unborn your mighty name shall sound,
And worlds applaud that must not yet be found." 339

In another place Cowley says:

"Nor does the roughest season of the sky
Or sullen Jove all sports to him deny.
He runs the mazes of the nimble hare;
His well-mouthed dogs' glad concert rends the air." 340

The lines appear in Pope thus modified:

"Nor yet, when moist Arcturus clouds the sky,
The woods and fields their pleasing toils deny;
To plains with well-breathed beagles we repair,
And trace the mazes of the circling hare." 341

But Cowley is so opulent that he can well afford to

338 Cowley, Davideis.
339 Pope, Essay On Criticism.
340 Cowley, Horace's Epodes.
341 Pope, Windsor Forest.
lend, and if the reader will look over Cowley's poems he will find much that is well worth borrowing, if that sort of appropriation is ever permissible.342

Pope was the leading exponent of English Classicism in the eighteenth century. As a young man he joined the group of admirers around Dryden and determined to learn the art of satire which the elder poet had so brilliantly exercised. Pope claimed he learned to write by reading Dryden. The Rape Of The Lock and The Duncaid established Pope as the second greatest satirist in English literature. If Dryden was the Mars of English Satire, Pope was the Venus. In the poems, The New Duncaid, Essays On Man, Epistle To Dr. Arbuthnot, and Imitations of Horace, there is no trace of French influence. These poems mark the full coming of age of the English Classical School.

Gray is the most important poetical figure in English literature between Pope and Wordsworth. From the somewhat cold and timid odes of his youth, we proceed to the superb Elegy and then pass on to the elaborate Pindaric Odes in which Gray prepares the way for Shelley. The Elegy In The Country Churchyard is the most characteristic single poem of the eighteenth century.

Speaking of Gray, the poet Mason, his first biographer, in his epitaph equalled him with Pindar. Britain has known says Mason:

"..... a Homer's fire in Milton's strains;
A Pindar's rapture in the lyre of Gray." 343

The Bard and The Progress of Poesy are somewhat Pindaric in style and suggest the influence of the Italian canzone.

Davys was the first to employ on a long flight the solemn four-line stanza of which the type is supplied by Gray in The Elegy In The Country Churchyard.

343 Gosse, Modern English Literature, p. 120.
CONCLUSION

To what rank in the hierarchy of Poets does Abraham Cowley rightly belong? That he is a poet of fancy would perhaps be a truer description of his peculiar gifts, than to say he is a metaphysical poet as Dr. Johnson asserts. His similies are fanciful; his imagery is the offspring of fancy; his comparisons are based upon fanciful resemblances; his very metres are the creations of a luxuriant but wayward fancy. Scarcely two of his poems are written in the same metre. Cowley made his lines fit his sense, and not his sense fit his lines. Every line of his has its full meaning, and every line fits into the proper place in its own particular poem. He is a poet of fancy endowed with a rich and fruitful imagination, whose rank as a poet is beyond a doubt with the immortals, though his appreciation in the present age of hurry and inattention is more than doubtful.

Some readers know and love his intricate mazes of thought; while others honor him for his forcible and dainty prose, as well as for his amiable life and his stainless loyalty. Some are attracted to him by what they are pleased to term his quaint style. That Cowley was quaint occasionally must be admitted; not because he wrote in the seventeenth century but because of his remarkable wit. As a man, a poet,
and a prose author of much distinction, who in each capacity has earned well-deserved honor, he merits loving admiration and patient study from those whose delight it is to linger over the varied pages of forgotten poetry.

Mr. Edmund Gosse, the critic of literature, has set about the task of estimating Cowley's place as a poet, and to explain the reason of his unpopularity or universal neglect today. Although he has avowedly purposed to do justice to Cowley, he does not seem to have entirely succeeded in his honorable endeavor. He has unduly exaggerated the harshness of some of the poet's verse, and his estimate of that series of poems known as The Mistress is needlessly severe. Indeed, the critic seems to blame the poet for writing in a rhythm which his own ear is not sufficiently sensitive to perceive. A careful study of Cowley's poems will lead the reader of a nice ear to the conclusion that each of them has a subtle rhythm of its own. Of course it may be said that the reader reads his own rhythm into the poet. But this appears hardly possible.

It is in this structure on the Pindaric Odes that Mr. Gosse speaks with cutting severity of their general harshness of rhythm; he even asserts that Cowley's ear for rhythmical

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344 Fox, Books Of Bachelors, p. 243.
345 Gosse, Seventeenth Century Studies.
niceties was somewhat dull. Cowley can answer this criticism in his own words, for he says:

"As for the Pindaric Odes, I am in great doubt if they will be understood by most readers; nay, even by many who are well enough acquainted with the ordinary tracks of posey. All their sweetness lines wholly at the mercy of the reader." 346

This quotation is a sufficient answer to Cowley's critic. There is a solemn grandeur of subtle, yet, sonorous, rhythm to be found in almost all of the Pindaric Odes, but it will only disclose its hidden music to reading and re-reading. If there are critics who can find little poetry in Cowley, there are readers, who are not critics, who assert that Robert Browning never wrote a line of poetry. The obscurity in Cowley consists, like the same fault in Chapman, in the rapidity of his thought, which required uncommon quickness to follow, and especially now, at a time when his conceits, which belong essentially to his own day, are hard to understand.

That his Odes are labored, Cowley's warmest admirers must admit; but that they are prevailing harsh in their style and rhythm is not true. Nor can it be said that their obscurity is impenetrable, nor that they are dull to those who will take the trouble to fathom their rich undergrowth of thought. Of the translations of Pindar himself it may be remarked that they are rather imitation than translations, and

thus perhaps help to a better understanding of their origin than would have been possible in a closer rendering. In his Ode To The Muse, the poet sings in a multitude of conceits and remote images:

"Nor dost thou only dive so low,
But fly
With an unwearied wing the other way on high,
Where fates among the stars do grow;
There into the close nests of time does peep,
And there with piercing eye,
Through the firm shall, and the thick white
dostr y,
Years to come a-forming lie
Close in their sacred secondine asleep,
Till hatched by the sun's vital heat,
Which o'er them yet does brooding set,
They life and motion get;
And ripe at last with vigorous might
Break through the shell and take their ever-
last­ing flight." 347

The same luxuriance of imagery, and the same elusive subtlety of thought are to be found in the fine Ode To Hobbes, the poet's firm friend.

With great passion Cowley begins another Ode which has in it something of the spirit and power of Catullus:

"Love in her sunny eyes does basking play;
Love walks the pleasant mazes of her hair;
Love does on both her lips for ever stray,
And sows and reaps a thousand kisses there." 348

That the Odes contain poetry, and upon occasion poetry of a high order, no careful reader will deny. His excellences

and defects in the class of writing are admirably summed up by Dryden when he says:

"The seeming easiness of it has made it spread, but it languishes in every hand except Cowley's. He has brought it as near perfection as was possible in so short time. In the masterly figures and the copiousness of imagination, he has excelled all others in this kind."

That the affectionate ardour of a disciple carried Dryden away is manifest. He excelled his model in his Alexander's Feast, and taught the Pindaric Ode a greater music than Cowley was able to infuse into its involved stanzas. Of both Pope and Dryden it must not be forgotten that they had the advantage of beginning where their predecessor left off.

The whole collection of Odes contains many isolated stanzas of rare beauty. The quaint and far-fetched conceits weary the modern reader is certain; but in spite of these and in spite of occasional metrical crudities, the collection of poems, as a whole, contain much true poetry. In the coolness of his passion Cowley bears some resemblance to Wordsworth. The heroic couplet which he uses in his Davideis, he found rough-hewn; and though his verse does not flow with the saccharine smoothness of that of Waller, there can be no question that he did much to prove the capabilities of that kind of metre. At all events he left many of its uncouth blemishes behind, and thus was of great service to Dryden and

Pope, who carried the aforesaid couplet to a monotonous perfection.

In considering why the poems of Cowley were popular, we must not forget to note that the prose writings of More and others of his stamp were greatly delighted in by the seventeenth century, and are now entirely unread. The taste for these ingenuities and paradoxical turns of thought came like a disease, and passed away. So Cowley, who confidently believed that time to come would admit him to have been Love's last and greatest prophet, and who was quoted as having written what ensphered the whole world of love, is now justly denied the humblest place among erotic poets. One piece alone may be excepted from this sweeping condemnation. The poem called The Wish is so simple, sincere and fresh, that we are disposed to wonder at finding so delicious a well in such an arid desert. Thus it begins:

"Well then, I now do plainly see
This busy world and I shall ne'er agree;
The very honey of all earthly joy
Does of all meats the soonest cloy;
And they, me thinks, deserve my pity,
Who for it can endure the stings,
The crowd, and buzz, and murmurings,
Of this great hive, The City." 351

Cowley had all the gifts required to make him shine as a representative poet. He possessed a fine fancy, a vigorous

350 Fox, Books Of Bachelors, p. 244.
351 Cowley, The Wish.
understanding, and the same quick recaptiveness that enabled Crashaw to sympathize with the ideas of earlier poets, and to imitate their modes of expression. His imagination was inspired rather by poetical form than by poetical matter. As he tells us himself, he fell in love with the medley of classic and romantic images presented to him by the Faery Queen, and he at once endeavored to combine this method of versified narrative with the conceits of Ovid made familiar to him by his school-boy studies. That a child ten years old should have been able to invent, and fluently express, a conceit so subtile as that contained in a stanza of Pryamus and Thisbe, shows a faculty of poetical imitation which is marvellous:

"Then through his breast thrusting his sword,  
life hies  
From him, and he makes haste to seek his Fair.  
And as upon the colored ground he lies." 352

As he began in his art, so he proceeded. He cultivated the Provencal style in The Mistress; the style of Anacreon; that of Pindar; that of Virgil; and in all these varieties he displays a masterly skill in adapting the metrical form which he employs for the moment to the matter in hand. He generally aids his invention by appropriating the thought of some previous poet, as Petrarch, Donne, or Waller.

352 Cowley, Pryamus And Thisbe.
Cowley's Essays, particularly those on country subjects, show that he possessed a graceful sense of humor, which made such verse congenial to him; and the praise which Johnson gives to his Anacreontics is deserved, though had the author of the Lives Of The English Poets read a line of Herrick, he must have perceived that in this form of English composition Cowley could only hold second place. In fairness the paraphrase of Anaceron's lines on the Grasshopper ought rather to be compared with the poem of Lovelace on the same subject, when the vast superiority of Cowley will at once be apparent. 353

Readers who take the trouble may find a good deal of self-revelation scattered through the pages of Cowley's works. In a sense every writer is his own biographer. Just as character, or want of it, appears in the face, so a man's nature, whether complex or simple, may be inferred from his writings. But, of course, there are degrees of simplicity, and of reticence. Of the latter quality Cowley is singularly devoid. His hopes and fears, his ambitions and his disappointments, the loyalty which no neglect can poison, his gentleness, his amiability, his courage, all these may be read at large in Cowley's writings.

You may not care for his poetry, while his essays it

would be hard to dislike, but you can scarcely help loving the man. Very likely it would have been happier for Cowley had he been able to sit in silence under unmerited coldness. But he was like Parson Yorick; it was not in him to pause and calculate; if a thing appeared to him unkind or unjust he must needs say it was so. Thus, when at the Restoration he found his twelve years of exile and of unflagging work in the service of the Stuarts callously disregarded, and himself threatened with absolute want, he could not submit to the slight in silence. He put forth The Complaint, a just and on the whole a dignified protest. Though the King ignored it and his enemies laughed at him, yet, Cowley, being what he was, must have felt the happier for having unpacked his heart. Liberavi animam meam, one can fancy him exclaiming.

Happily he did not free it quite in vain, for though Charles would not listen, Cowley had powerful friends by whose good offices he obtained the object of his desires - a retreat in the country far from the Court and London. Of this he had dreamed amid gay assemblages, or over his midnight tasks. A life of disinterested study and production has been his constant ideal, and he seemed about to realize it. Unfortunately his health began to fail. So perhaps the coveted reward came too late. He passed the remainder of his days in retirement, busied with the garden and his studies, in a fashion and a
spirit not unworthy of his friends Evelyn and Falkland. 354

There is throughout Cowley's life the charm of a certain wistfulness. At a precociously early age he fell in love with the delights of simplicity and quiet. That love he treasured through all the adverse events of civil war and contemporary fame. It flickered fitfully even in the most artificial productions which greatness demanded of him. It burned with a still small light in the last peaceful years of his life. It endears him, or indeed it should be sufficient to endear him, now that all the loud applause of long dead success has fallen upon stillness. 355

Cowley's is not the temperament of a man who is born to move the world, either by the energy of his action or by the profundity and originality of his thought. The enthusiasm of a Napoleon and of an Aristotle alike is stirred by that greatness to which Cowley deliberately prefers littleness. But this is exactly the temperament of a born essayist. It is because they display it with an easy grace that Cowley's essays preserve a perennial charm. Though his poetical reputation is gone, as an essayist, his position is sure. 356

The absence of an energetic imagination and strong decision are noticeable defects in Cowley's character. He was certainly a royalist at heart, yet he praised Cromwell in an elaborate Ode. He affected to despise honors, yet published his disappointments, and applied to himself the appellation of "the melancholy Cowley". He was nevertheless a man whom few could know without esteeming. His simple habits, kindness of heart, easy yet dignified manners, and his extensive knowledge of men and books, made his friendship prized by all who knew him intimately. The King himself, when he heard of the Poet's death, declared that Cowley had not left a better man behind him in England.

One reason why Cowley failed to find favor at court was that he never abused his talent for panegyric to the praise of any of those dissolute wretches by whom Charles II surrounded himself. He reserved his commendations for what he esteemed real worth, and it is no wonder therefore that he failed to find favor with such a court.

Cowley's personal character, learning, and public employments conferred dignity upon his literary work. He was the darling of Cambridge; and, when ejected by the parliament, joined the King at Oxford, and then followed The Queen to Paris. He was a steadfast loyalist; but among the reckless, intriguing, dissolute Cavaliers who formed the entourage of
exiled court, Cowley's serious and thoroughly respectable character stood out in high relief. He took a medical degree from Oxford, and became proficient in botany, composing a Latin poem on plants. Dr. Johnson thought his Latin verse better than Milton's. After 1660 a member of the triumphant party, he was, notwithstanding, highly esteemed by political opponents. He held a position of authority like Addison's or Southey's at a later day.

But, after all, the chief reason why Cowley was rated so high by his contemporaries was that his poetry fell in with the prevailing taste. Matthew Arnold said that the trouble with the Queen Anne poetry was that it was conceived in the wits and not in the soul. Cowley's poetry was cerebral, "Stiff not intellation", as Coleridge said of another. He anticipated Dryden in his power of reasoning in verse. He is pedantically learned, bookish, scholastic, crams his verse with allusions and images drawn from physics, metaphysics, geography, alchemy, astronomy, history, logic, grammar and constitutional law. Above all, he had the quality on which his century placed such abnormal value - wit: i.e., ingenuity in devising far-fetched conceits and detecting remote analogies. 357

A sentence in Johnson's Life Of Cowley, as terse and

pungent as Pope's couplets, accounts for the decline of the great poet in critical esteem:

"Cowley, like other poets who had written with narrow views, and, instead of tracing intellectual pleasures in the mind of man, paid their court to temporary prejudices has been at one time too much praised, and too much neglected at another." 358

Cowley was a profound and exact scholar; a poet of much compass and undoubted originality in certain directions, both in his English and Latin poems; a loyalist of unblemished constancy, in spite of the malicious slanders of his jealous rivals; and a man of deeply pious and stainless life. He was as modest as he was able; as capable of conducting public business as of enjoying the quiet of retirement; a friend of unwavering fidelity; and a companion of gentle and kindly, though pungent, wit. Such is the picture of the man which those who knew and loved him left to posterity. While they may have unduly magnified the excellence of his poetry, they could not exaggerate the tender goodness of his life. 359

Cowley was not only a poet but a scholar, and theologian, and a man of science. Denham says that no author was unknown to Cowley; while Bishop Sprat declares that his learning was large and profound, well composed of all ancient and modern knowledge. An examination of his works show that his

358 Johnson, Life Of Cowley, p. 18.
359 Fox, Book Of Bachelors, p. 226.
reading was extensive. References and allusions to the Grecian and Roman classics meet the reader at every turn. The ancient Christian Fathers had also received much of his attention, and he formed a plan for collecting into one view the opinions and practices of the primitive church, beginning with the apostolic times, and extending his researches through the first five centuries. Death prevented the execution of the design, but the scheme shows the scholarly habits of the man. On all occasions Cowley showed a strong desire for the advancement of learning and true philosophy.

Whatever we may think of Cowley as a poet, we cannot but admire him as an earnest student and noble-hearted scholar. If we forget Cowley the poet, and look upon Cowley the man, there is much in his character which will please all, and very little which all will condemn. He appears before us as a reflective, but unimpassioned man, panting for fame, yet eager for solitude; rather disposed to chide the world, but perfectly satisfied with his own friends.

Cowley stands with the small number of poets who have risen to great popularity during their lives, who know themselves or have worn an niche in the temple of fame. This has been granted to few. Woods calls him the prince of poets. Clarendon represents him as having taken flight beyond all who

went before him. Milton is said to have declared that the three greatest English poets were Spenser, Shakespeare and Cowley. Yet his name has become a proverb for the instability of earthly fame. The reasons for the popularity and the sudden fall are not far to seek.

Cowley had sufficient of the gifts of genius - creative power, depth of thought, versatility - to make him a great and popular poet in any age. While these contributed, they will not fully account for the almost unprecedented popularity during his life with a public which did not fully sympathize with his best efforts. There is a fashion in literature as in all else. The didactic, rhetorical poetry of Cowley suited the intellectual palate of the public cloyed with too much sweetness. Feeling, passion, the romantic, had been wrought up to the highest pitch of intensity and enjoyment. As in the physical, so in the mental a reaction is inevitable. Hence the popularity to which the intellectual element in Cowley's poetry lifted him.

Cowley's public was the court, the aristocracy. Cowley was a court poet. The taste of such a public is ever variable; seeking, as the Athenians of old, something new. To these causes may be ascribed the fame which Cowley won during the seventeenth century with the court public, with which he was closely identified. Such a popularity has, of necessity, an
element of the factitious and ephemeral. A fall from such a pinnacle of greatness is inevitable.

But are the depths to which Cowley has fallen so unfathomable?

Though the ephemeral court popularity of Cowley has been swept away with the pomp and vanity of the court itself - he had, and ever has retained an enduring fame which no age can obscure and bring under ridicule and depreciation. A something which was not for an age but for all times.

Pope with his usual felicity strikes the right chord when he asks who now reads Cowley. Yes, it is the language of the heart which runs and as it runs forever will run on.

Cowley has been constantly used to a point of moral. He is the capital instance, in our literary history, of the instability of fame; or, rather, if the wide variation between contemporary rating and the judgment of posterity. Time has given its ironical answer to the very first line in the first poem of his collection:

"What shall I do to be forever known?"

When Cowley died in 1667 and was buried in Westminster Abbey, he was, in general opinion, the greatest English poet since Spenser. *Paradise Lost* appeared in that same year, but at

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this date Milton's fame was not comparable with Cowley's. Milton's miscellaneous poems, first collected in 1645, did not reach a second edition till 1673. Meanwhile Cowley's works went through eight impressions.

The only contemporaries who rivaled him in popularity were Herbert and Cleveland for Waller did not come to his own until after Cowley's death. But neither Herbert nor Cleveland enjoyed anything like Cowley's literary eminence. For many years after his death, Cowley's continued to be a great name and fame; yet the swift decay of his real influence became almost proverbial. Dryden, who learned much from him; Addison, who uses him as a dreadful example in his essay on mixed wit; Pope, who speaks of him with a traditional respect, all testify to this rapid loss of his hold upon the community of readers. It was in 1737 that Pope asked, "Who now reads Cowley?" which is much as if one should ask today, "Who now reads Byron?" or if our grandchildren should inquire in 1960, "Who now reads Tennyson?"

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The thesis, "Abraham Cowley, The Transitional Poet," written by Stella F. Sheehy, has been accepted by the Graduate School with reference to form, and by the readers whose names appear below, with reference to content. It is, therefore, accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

James J. Young, M.A. Honors May 6, 1938
Morton D. Zabel, Ph.D. May 18, 1938
Samuel M. Steward, Ph.D. May 30, 1938