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Religio Laici and the Fate of Texts

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In form and purport, Dryden's *Religio Laici* (1682) makes a powerful statement for order. Its verses reflect careful and deliberate crafting, and it shapes its exposition with a studied and self-conscious symmetry, an organization so striking in its own right as to affirm ordered self-discipline as the best answer to social and religious flux. Contained within this impressive formal structure, however, is an argument that somehow resists stability, one that tends, as David Vieth has remarked, "to generate lengthy scholarly disquisitions which disagree with one another" and "which detour the reader away from the poem."[1] Various interpretations of intellectual history obviously account for some of this disagreement; but contributing to it, too, certainly, are the persistent authorial anxieties that assert themselves throughout the poem and its preface, anxieties about the stability of texts, about the reliability of interpretation, and about the competence of language. To review the prefatory writing of Dryden is to perceive that by 1682 these anxieties—intensified by his resentments of Whig partisan rancor—had risen to a high level of aggravation. They inevitably found expression in *Religio Laici* (both preface and poem), and in so doing they jeopardized the arguments made there for the doctrinal sufficiency of the biblical text.

As the prefaces of Dryden clearly reveal, the authorial concerns thus affecting *Religio Laici* reach back to the beginning of his literary career. "You will soon find I write not this without concern," he complains in the preface to "Annus Mirabilis" (1666), after attempting in eight or so pages to legitimate the genre of his poem.[2] To justify this attempt, he recalls the ill-judged reception of his "Verses to Her Highness the Dutchess" (1665), a poem, he says, careful in all its decorums but still misunderstood by untrustworthy readers, whose interpretive liberties, having badly abused his intent, now provoke this apology for "Annus Mirabilis." Earlier, in his dedicatory epistle to *The Rival Ladies* (1664), he quavers even at the thought of having his work scrutinized by so careful and informed a reader as the earl

of Orrery, upon whose experience as a writer he can only depend (8.96); and, for all that he observes in the preface to *The Tempest* (1670) that literary prefaces are "probably invented by some very ambitious Poet, who never thought he had done enough" and that English readers found them "an imposition" (10.3), he is rarely willing to launch his own work without them and through them to reduce as best he can the hazards of reader response.

Aggravating his anxiety is the nagging realization that the poetic effort can never be fully controlled, that the poet cannot hope to encompass Nature even by stretching as on a rack all reserves of memory, fancy, and judgment (8.97). A disciplined judgment might control the "frame and contexture" of a literary work (9.116); but no creative effort, however deliberate, can wholly suppress the fancy, which Dryden labels the "Danger of Writing" (8.95). Issuing from the insistent self-love of the poet, this subtle faculty neither controls its own effects nor assesses them. It heightens the appeal of a literary work while weakening its security, and from it springs the irony that to write successfully is to accede in some measure to blind chance (9.116).

Anxiety also lies for Dryden in the variable responses of audiences and readers, who, as he puts it in the dedication to *The Rival Ladies*, indulge "stubborn Minds, which go not all after the same Grain" (8.97). He is not prepared to concede to literary response the whole definition of genre: tragedy is tragedy, he thinks, irrespective of audience taste, and a tragedy may be good whether or not an audience thinks so (9.12). But he sees response to bear enormously upon the form and quality of literature. In the matter of contemporary English tragedy, for example, he perceives in audience response a call for variety in character and action and for relaxation (within limits) of the classical unities (9.20). (It follows to him, then, that if Aristotle had known seventeenth-century British response, he would have written a different *Poetics* [17.191].) In the matter of comedy, he sees response beckoning the poet downward to a shallow apprehension of Nature (10.203). Creative independence truckles constantly to its whims, yet the poet is still obliged, as Dryden writes in "Of Heroique Playes" (1672), "to endeavour an absolute dominion over the minds of the Spectators: for, though our fancy will contribute to its own deceipt, yet a Writer ought to help its operation" (11.14).

His strictures against Elkanah Settle in "Notes and Observations on *The Empress of Morocco*" (1674) suggest that this help depends upon the poet's deep mastery of classical and biblical learning and especially of language; for, as Settle's play too clearly demonstrates, inattention to the details of language subjects the work to "the worst luck in Sentences" and reduces it to a mere

"Lottery of words" (17.158;100). Even in well-mastered language, however, Dryden finds cause for anxiety, for in language he sees a vulnerable and much-abused resource.

In dedicating *The Rival Ladies* to Orrery in 1664, he declares strong confidence in the potential of English as a literary language. French, he concedes, is much better regulated than English, thanks to the ministrations of the French Academy; but English can yet serve complex literary ends, assuming strong mastery of it on the part of the poet, who should employ it with scrupulous patience and in doing so should prefer the common word stock to neologisms and Latinisms (8.98). Since English can benefit from such cultural progress as that provided by the Court of Charles II, it emerges in Dryden's own time a language of wit and refined expression, a much abler instrument of communication than it had been for Chaucer and Shakespeare, whose works Dryden modernizes in dutiful tribute to the English literary heritage (11.216-17). He is always aware, however, of the limitations of his own English, especially as he undertakes translations into it from such manifestly stable languages as Latin and Greek, and he knows that when battered by abuse it is subject to rapid and catastrophic decline.

Concern for this decline especially colors his prefatory writing of the late 1670s and early 1680s, when he attacks Whig duplicity in terms of language abuse. For example, the dedicatory epistle to *All for Love*, addressed to the earl of Danby in 1678, taxes political dissidents not only for stupidity, ingratitude, and Satanic resentment of good fortune but also for overturning language by representing slavery as liberty and for cloaking sedition in "Discourses which are couch'd in ambiguous Terms" (13.7). While not openly aimed at political offenders, the dedication to *Troilus and Cressida*, addressed to the earl of Sunderland in 1679, certainly adopts political overtones when it contemplates language as abused by the insincere, who counterfeit passions with it, and urges Sunderland first to restore confidence between king and people and then (as if to stabilize this confidence) to help in reforming the English language, which has become so barbarous that Dryden, to avoid troubling Anglicisms, must often frame his thoughts in Latin before penning them in English (13.222). Even so, the preface to *Ovid's Epistles* (1680) finds him admitting that English, a language somewhat barren of vocabulary, does not lend itself to really efficient renderings from Latin (1.115); and in the prefatory comments to *Absalom and Achitophel* and *The Medal* (both 1681) he reveals all too clearly his sense of language under stress. In the first of these pieces he affects the roles of moral physician and

impartial historian and challenges those who would question his sincerity to assess their own, for "if men are not to be jug'd by their Professions, God forgive you Common-wealths-men for professing so plausibly for the Government" (2.4). In the second of them he abandons all thought of moral healing and scoffs furiously at the Whigs for subverting language to every kind of actual and supposed offense: for corrupting art, for rationalizing sedition, for re-interpreting laws, for sacrificing wit to animus, for bending scriptures to the service of malice. "A Dissenter in Poetry from Sense and *English,*" he snarls, "will make as good a Protestant Rhymer, as a Dissenter from the Church of *England* a Protestant Parson" (2.42).

By the time he turns to *Religio Laici*, then, Dryden has long acknowledged the hazards of authoring. Realizing that literature eludes full authorial control and accedes to the influence of audience taste, he yet feels that responsible authors must attempt to control it, even in the face of widely divergent audience/reader response. Extensive learning and mastery of language might widen the margin of control, especially if language is properly nurtured, but even under such nurture English is quick to accommodate barbarisms. By nature it is uncooperative to the translator's art; and, when bent to the service of hypocrisy and false interpretation, it readily defeats the proper aim of literature, which, as Dryden emphasizes in the dedication to *The Spanish Friar* (1681), is Truth.[3] In the arbitrariness of the Whig partisan mind, which, for purposes of falsehood, corrupts authority, interpretation, and language, he finds the literary enterprise (a vulnerable one at best) to be deeply compromised, and the preface to *Religio Laici* everywhere reflects this anxiety.

The first third of this preface communicates to the reader an unrelenting crisis of authority. Feeling obliged to "say somewhat in defence both of himself, and of his undertaking" (2.98), Dryden invokes double negatives to aver that "perhaps" laymen such as he "are not the most incompetent Judges of Sacred things" (98). But he draws no authority even from this modest assertion. He speaks only for himself, not for the general laity, and such church doctrines as he borrows for support yet risk association, he knows, with errors of his own (from which he self-consciously offers to acquit them). With the polite reserve of a sceptic, he identifies himself only with such sentiments as are "Authoriz'd, or at least, uncondemn'd" by the church (98); but, when faced with the strictures of a respected churchman, "a Man indefatigably zealous in the service of the Church and State" (99), he follows his own lights and detaches a large part of his work from church authority.

Authority struggles, too, against the phrasal hesitations that lace the text: "It has always been my *thought*" (99), "Truly I am apt to think" (99), "If my supposition be true" (100), "(till I am better inform'd)" (101), "to my weak understanding" (102). No strategy of presentation allows the discourse a stable mooring.

In writing the prefaces to *The Medal* and *Absalom and Achitophel*, Dryden clearly feels that the stability of written texts depends upon the good characters of readers, that even sacred texts must fall before the treachery of villains. In the preface to *Religio Laici*, then, he centers stability not in clerical authorities but in his own character. He is, perhaps, sceptical, tentative, and disengaged, but he is nevertheless a good man. His errors are those of "Charity to Mankind" (98), and he asks the charitable indulgence of others. "I could not have satisfied my self, that I had done honestly not to have written what was my own" (99), he explains in rejecting the counsel of his "Friend," the zealous churchman; and, just as he prefers honesty to prudence in this choice, so he recognizes as mere prudence the practice of reading aloud at certain church services (as a hedge against apostasy) the preface to the Athanasian creed. The honest mind, such as his own, perceives an unnecessary severity in this preface and prefers for the texts supporting it "a kinder, and more mollified Interpretation" than they usually receive (101). The honest mind, not limited to language and logic, perceives Truth in apprehensions supported by faith. It declines to aggravate the confusions of Babel (Dryden's metaphor [101]) by reducing the Infinite to rational analysis. It accepts in silent, uninterpreting confidence the doctrine of *scriptura sola*, a doctrine which, in the phrase of Douglas Atkins, "makes interpretation supererogatory."[4]

Since this doctrine does not appeal to self-serving minds, Dryden attacks in the last two-thirds of his preface the Roman Catholic and dissenting factions that abuse interpretation for selfish political ends. Character remains the issue. For their part, the Roman Catholics affirm the Pope's authority to depose kings and cancel political allegiances. Some of their own apologists hold that they need not make this affirmation, that in such undecided points of faith "they may follow which part they please" (104). Their usual practice, however, is to adopt the position "most receiv'd and most Authoriz'd" (such as this of papal dominion [104]); and, even while avowing a liberal view of such matters, they surrender trustworthiness by practicing a kind of "Christian Prudence," an authorized license, for example, to declare allegiance to a protestant sovereign while withholding it in

conscience (104). Were they of proper character, "they would joyn in a publick Act of disowning and detesting those Jesuitick Principles [of devious prudence]; and subscribe to all Doctrines which deny the Popes Authority of Deposing Kings, and releasing Subjects from their oath of Allegiance" (105). They would reject self-serving interpretive license (as Dryden purports to do in embracing *scriptura sola*), and they would adopt despite specious authority the principles they apprehend to be right.

Like the Jesuitical papists, the fanatic sectarians also manipulate interpretation for self-gain. Their history from the time of Henry VIII shows them founding heresies in a corrupt translation of the bible, embracing and promoting uncharitable Calvinistic doctrines, preferring slander, invective, and billingsgate to good sense, bending the biblical text to whatever meaning suits their interest, misinterpreting as weakness or cowardice the restraint shown them by others. They base their claims upon fraud, and the recourse available to them is the same one to which Dryden invites the papists: abandon false and selfserving interpretation and return to Truth as apprehended by faith. "The best way for them to confute me, is, as I before advis'd the Papists, to disclaim their Principles, and renounce their Practices" (108).

The attitude emanating from Dryden's rhetoric disallows any illusion that such a reform might ever take place. Self-serving interpretations of vulnerable texts and false authorities have already defeated the charity and confident faith necessary to the *scriptura sola* doctrine. Even Dryden himself, the committed advocate of this doctrine, violates his own principles in arguing divine charity for virtuous heathens. "I have left myself no right to interpret obscure places, such as concerns the possibility of eternal happiness for Heathens," he confesses (102), but he undertakes the interpretation anyway. Agitating the response of the reader is the sense that no text, however sacred, can escape the allure—and consequent corruption—of interpretive meddling. *Scriptura sola* does not emerge in the preface to *Religio Laici* as a truly viable ideal.

If the preface communicates misgivings about this doctrine, however (and about the violence visited upon any text by the vicissitudes of human character), it asserts a focused authority in addressing its final subject, the literary identity of the poem that follows. In type and execution, says Dryden, this poem is "what it ought to be," an Horatian epistle, plain, natural, and majestic in style, instructive in intent, suitable to the poet as "a kind of Lawgiver," reasonable in appeal, not a poem for the passions (and so not florid, elevated, and figurative), and not committed to "the Smoothness, the Num-

bers and the Turn of Heroick Poetry" (109). Thus, out of a welter of misgivings about authority and interpretation, the reader emerges from the body of the preface to confront in the final paragraph an absolutist and authoritarian literary manifesto. A curious and disquieting mix of impressions flows from the preface to the poem itself.

In many ways, the preface closely conditions the reader's response to the poem. Since, for example, it anticipates every major subject developed in the poem, it builds backgrounds for them all and provides associational domains in which they may flourish. Consequently, references in the poem to Catholic offenses against the scriptures recall the backgrounds of this issue as provided in much wider historical detail by the preface, and the preface immediately amplifies the poem. Similar amplifications accompany the discussions in the poem of the limitations of reason, of the persistence of revelation, of the *scriptura sola* doctrine, of the hope of salvation for heathens, of the corrupt protestant schismatics. So far is the poem a direct versification of the preface (even in general organization) that the reader encounters two interrelated forms of discourse—one following immediately upon the other—engaged in communicating the same subject matter.

The symbiosis they establish with one another becomes, then, an interesting study in genre distinctions. Indulging in what Dryden had once called "the negligence of Prose" (8.100), the speaker of the preface systematically shapes an elaborate body of reference for the poem. He affirms his credentials; he defines his character; he ranges widely amongst historical eras, gathering in prominent names, distributing sympathies among them, directing severe animus only against the fanatics, who "were born with teeth, foul-mouth'd and scurrilous from their Infancy" (2.106). In an expansive and familiar manner, one untrammeled by the disciplines of verse, the speaker takes every means to minimize any confusion that might harass the reader of the poem—what its issues are, what its positions are, what its generic identity is.

Thus pointedly prefaced, the poem asserts its own character immediately and forcefully. With unremitting vitality, it demonstrates that to read treatise poetry is not to read prose essay. Energy and intensity derive in the poem not only from the couplets, which provide as artful and dazzling a metrical display as any to be found in Dryden, but also from the imagistic infrastructure that draws the reader through many domains of thought and evokes the psychic crises certain to accompany any hard quest for faith.[5] Asserting self-consciously its own distinctive form, the poem adds drama and intensity not

only to the arguments anticipated for it in the preface—arguments to which it implies frequent cross-reference—but also (indeed *especially*) to the nagging authorial anxieties expressed there.

These anxieties assert themselves at the beginning of the poem with the demonstration—in the first 125 lines—that reason, a faculty certainly basic to both authoring and interpreting, cannot readily be trusted. What, in reading the book of Nature, great thinkers might perceive as a Prime Mover, they cannot through reason interpret or understand. Hence they can no more agree upon the character of God than they can identify the good He represents or explain His purposes for humankind. The deists, then, in enunciating their five catholic principles, find authority not in reason, as they claim, but in revelation and faith. Reason cannot establish the relationship between people and God; it can only affirm its own insufficiencies. It "shews us *sick*; and sadly are we sure/ *Still* to be *Sick*, till *Heav'n* reveal the *Cure*" (119-20).

That the Bible reveals this divine cure is to Dryden a truth so far beyond dispute as to dwell above argument and exposition. "*Proof* needs not here," he declares, invoking the *scriptura sola* affirmation (126), but he again aggravates anxieties by yielding at once to the interpretive impulse. Not comfortable to see the scriptural text as its own authority, to accept the view that "*Proof* needs not here," he provides an extended litany of "proofs" (127-67), one culminating in a paean on the biblical style, which "speaks no less than God in every Line" (153); but then, in acknowledging with the deists the salvation of virtuous pagans, he accepts as well the position that divine law requires "A Style so large as not *this* Book can claim" (172). In thus examining (and subverting) the authority of the biblical text, and in proceeding then to interpret Athanasius to his purpose (212-23), he demonstrates through his own practice a phenomenon he had acknowledged in his preface, that no text, however sacred, can escape the allure of interpretation.

If divine texts stand vulnerable to interpretation, so certainly do secular ones, and when, in the next segment of the poem (224-304), Dryden comments on Father Simon's *Critical History of the Old Testament*, he develops a study in the destinies of well-wrought texts. For all that Simon has prepared his subject thoroughly and has accomplished through his studies "As much as Man cou'd compass, uninspir'd" (247), his book encounters hazards of all kinds. Its fortunes rest with translators, who presume to improve it (229), with plagiarists, who steal its erudition (240-42), with commentators, who, like Dryden (by his own confession [227]), fail to read it altogether closely. It runs incessant risks of having its "secret meaning ghes'd" (252), an

eventuality not sufficiently covered by Father Simon, who, while assailing old traditions of biblical authority, really says—and perhaps even *means* to say—that the new traditions he touts are no more reliable than the old ones he challenges, since the same arguments that explode written traditions perforce explode oral ones (252-75). The fate of Simon's book communicates to readers of *Religio Laici* the anxious futility of the authorial enterprise, and this sense of futility takes reinforcement in the poem from the irony that Simon has himself written a text upon flawed texts, a biblical study demonstrating "what *Errours* have been made/ Both in the *Copiers* and *Translaters Trade*: How *Jewish*, *Popish*, Interests have prevail'd,/ And where *Infallibility* has *fail'd*" (249-51). Having assailed the presiding logic of Simon's argument, which defends a dogma based upon corrupt (or non-existent) texts (292-94), Dryden offers his own "modest" alternative: that, despite the corrupt texts, "*God wou'd not leave Mankind without a way*" (296). Then, almost as if to illustrate the hazards of authoring, he lets his own text slip into crisis. "Must *all Tradition* then be set aside?" he writes:

> This to affirm were Ignorance, or Pride.
> Are there not many points, some needfull sure
> To saving Faith, that Scripture leaves obscure?
> Which every Sect will wrest a several way
> (For what *one* Sect Interprets, *all* Sects *may*:)
> We hold, and say we prove from Scripture plain,
> That *Christ* is GOD; the bold *Socinian*
> From the *same* Scripture urges he's but MAN.
> Now what Appeal can end th'important Suit?
> *Both* parts *talk* loudly, but the *Rule* is *mute*. (305-15)

Since, taken on their own, these lines challenge the doctrine just proposed by Dryden (that scripture makes plain the way to salvation), readers of the poem confront a confusion resolved for them only by a marginal note that stands beside the text: "*Objection in behalf of Tradition; urg'd by Father Simon.*" Interlocutors other than Simon speak out in the poem, their presence sometimes reinforced by a marginal note (e.g. "*Objection of the Deist*" [line 168]), but in all these instances the text contains an internal note of identification: "The *Deist* thinks he stands on firmer ground" (42), "But stay: the *Deist* here will urge anew" (168), "Oh but says one, *Tradition* set aside,/ Where can we hope for an *unerring Guid*?" (276). Only in this speech of Simon's does the text cast its meaning wholly on information outside itself.

Omission of the marginal note, which happens in respected issues of the poem,[6] debilitates the text even for experienced readers.

A notable case in point occurred in 1970 when two eminent scholars, William Empson and Phillip Harth, published an exchange on *Religio Laici* in *Essays in Criticism*.[7] Largely on the strength of the passage quoted above (especially the last five lines of it), Empson opened the issue by arguing that Dryden, like many another Anglican of his day, felt misgivings about the Incarnation as a doctrine requisite to salvation. In interpreting line 311 ("We hold, and say we prove from Scripture plain"), Empson saw the pronoun "We" to mean "'the national church to which I [Dryden] patriotically adhere'" (174). In Empson's view, then, Dryden implies in his poem that the Incarnation is a questionable doctrine, one obscure in the scriptures but yet held by the church to require "saving Faith" (308). Rather than resolving the question, however, Dryden proceeds in the next paragraph to set the matter aside, to affirm "That many have been sav'd, and many may,/ Who never heard this Question brought in play" (320-21); and so, according to Empson, "As he reaches the climax of his argument he in effect jettisons the Incarnation" (173).

In a vigorous response, Harth drubbed Empson for ignoring the marginal rubric by which readers may know that the antecedent to "We" in line 311 is not Dryden and the membership of the national church but the Roman Catholics as represented by Father Simon. Noticing that the Bible allows opposing theories of Jesus' identity, Father Simon argues in his speech (the one quoted above) that extra-biblical traditions are needed to buttress the Incarnation, a doctrine necessary to salvation. Dryden intends, said Harth, to explode Simon's theory, not to jettison the Incarnation. What had happened to Empson (of all people) was that an ambiguity in Dryden's text had ensnared him. Clarity lay outside the text, in a note disregarded by Empson. In a counter-response, Empson acknowledged (or at least seemed to acknowledge) the ambiguity that had caught him, but he went on to complain that Harth had not addressed the main point of his article, namely, that Dryden mentions in his poem only one of the doctrines supposed necessary to salvation, the Incarnation, and that, in a "crucial passage" (316-21), he "says that one can be saved without believing in the Incarnation" (112). Close readers of this crucial passage, which argues salvation for people "Who never heard this Question brought in play" (321), will conclude, as Harth no doubt did, that it fails to dictate the construction Empson gave it, since the

"Question" referred to might as readily denote the theological disputes about the Incarnation as the doctrine itself. Whether or not Empson was right in this instance, however, he encountered yet another ambiguity that must trouble any reader of *Religio Laici*, one resulting from Dryden's refusal to answer Simon's reservations. From the same scripture, says Simon, Christians and Socinians derive opposing impressions of the divinity of Christ, but the bible fails to resolve the dispute: "*Both* parts *talk* loudly, but the *Rule* is *mute*"(315). Dryden has seemed to accept the Incarnation earlier in the poem (107), but his failure to reaffirm it here brings tentativeness to his presiding position that the scriptures are clear in all things necessary to salvation. In declining to challenge Simon, he seems to make no distinction between the Incarnation, a saving doctrine, and other doctrines left obscure by the scriptures, and he seems therefore to look upon the Incarnation as a question not worth arguing, one that has no effect upon people's salvation. Perhaps, by going outside the poem, scholars can reconcile it to received doctrinal positions, as several have done;[8] but, as Empson's experience demonstrates, the poem itself generates ambiguities that blur its most basic premises. At a crucial moment in its own development it exemplifies, if not its author's real doctrinal ambivalences, at least his reasons for deep anxieties about the authorial enterprise. The medium becomes the message.

In closing sections of the poem, Dryden reiterates concerns expressed in his preface about the hazards of interpretation. First greedy Roman Catholic priests twist the biblical text to their own interests (356-89); then fanatic sectaries taint it with their zeal (398-422). Like any other text it finds itself defenseless against corrupt purposes. Its fortunes rest with the characters of its readers.

Theoretically, suggests Dryden, these readers should correct offenses against it by embracing the *scriptura sola* conviction: "Faith is not built on disquisitions vain;/ The things we must believe, are *few* and *plain*"(431-32). To read *Religio Laici*, however, is to find no comfort in this admonition, for people are always "itching to *expound*" (410), and they are likely to perceive that even saving doctrines, such as the Incarnation, are immersed in ambiguity. Since, in the words of the poem, "*Common quiet* is *Mankind's concern*" (450), the only antidote to interpretation is silence, and it is toward silence that the presentation of the poem, if not its discursive argument, reaches.

This implied testimonial for silence finds significant reinforcement in the impish final lines of the poem:

> And this unpolish'd, rugged Verse, I chose;
> As fittest for Discourse, and nearest Prose:
> For, while from *Sacred Truth* I do not swerve,
> *Tom Sternhold's*, or Tom *Sha 11's Rhimes* will serve. (451-56)

What is immediately striking about these lines is that they give the lie to declarations made about the poem at the end of the preface. For the most part, preface and poem repeat and reinforce one another, but here they diverge markedly, and this divergence impels the reader to reckon yet again with the generic character of the poem.

Preoccupations with genre begin for the reader at the close of the preface when, as noted above, the speaker abandons the tentativeness of his earlier discourse and declares absolutely for the poem as an Horatian epistle. The problem with this declaration, however, is that it lists for Horace's epistles poetic attributes not comfortable to informed readers of Horace. Perhaps "Plain and Natural" will do, but not "Majestick," and not "Legislative," and not "a Poem, design'd purely for Instruction."[9] Despite the contentious and absolutist claims made for the poem in the preface (perhaps even because of them), readers must still ask, with K. W. Gransden, "What Kind of Poem Is *Religio Laici*"? Persius, Juvenal, Lucretius, Plutarch, Seneca, and Cicero may suggest themselves as providing models and standards for the poem, but Horace makes at best a tentative claim.[10]

Yet more perplexing to the reader is the refusal of the poem to conform to the specifications so forcefully set out for it in the preface. Highly tentative in rhetorical posture, it is not "Legislative" in attitude. Transparently persuasive in purport (despite this tentativeness), it is not "design'd purely for Instruction." Excluding figure from its decorums, it is highly figurative throughout (especially in the richly imaged opening). Intended to see its readers "reason'd into Truth," it favors resources other than reason (mostly imagery and tone) in projecting its case.[11] Any gesture that it might make toward the "Majestick" it ultimately subverts (or tries to) in its own closing lines, when it calls itself "unpolish'd" and "rugged" and "nearest prose."

In thus giving the lie to the preface, the closing lines do their part toward confusing the reader's sense of the poem. In his criticism, Dryden applies the terms "unpolished" and "rugged" to the lines of Chaucer and Donne and to Saturnian verse, which he considers "without feet or measure" (Watson 2.106). These terms have no serious application to *Religio Laici*. Nor does the phrase "nearest prose," a distinction usually reserved by Dryden for blank

verse, the "*Prose Mesuree*; into which the *English* Tongue so naturally Slides, that in writing Prose 'tis hardly to be avoided" (8.99). Perhaps in labeling his metric "fittest for Discourse and nearest Prose" he wishes again to evoke Horatian associations, for in a late essay he remarks that Horace "himself professes" that his satires and epistles "are *sermoni propiora*, nearer prose than verse";[12] but the closely crafted verses of *Religio Laici*, which include such dazzling metrical *tours de force* as "Free from corruption, or intire, or clear, / Are uncorrupt, sufficient, clear, intire" (298-99), cannot suggest the style of Horace's *sermones*, "a poetic style that wants to go unnoticed."[13] Neither early nor late is the poem accurately described by Dryden; nor is it entirely true to its generic pretensions.

After taking great pains to generate these pretensions, Dryden cancels them glibly at the end of the poem by saying that the issue of genre does not matter anyway: "For, while from *Sacred* Truth I do not swerve,/ *Tom Sternhold's*, or *Tom Sha 11's Rhimes* will serve" (455-56). For all that these lines might offer at a kind of sardonic humor, a last oblique Horatian gesture, they carry little comic force to the reader, who, having seen Truth falter under Dryden's own selfconscious poetic effort, can have little hope for it at the hands of Sternhold or Shadwell. Nor can Dryden take real delight in the joke, which confronts the authorial plight on its gravest level. One of his most cherished theoretic positions is that poetry depends upon "a propriety of thoughts and words" (Ker 1.270). An author whose "thoughts are improper to his Subject, or his Expressions unworthy of his Thoughts, or the turn of both is unharmonious" cannot serve the Truth. His purposes are suspect, and his character is to some degree "vicious and corrupt" (3.5). Against these convictions, Dryden evokes in the final two lines of his poem (whatever comedy they affect) a sense of profound authorial frustration; for, in dismissing the generic integrity of *Religio Laici* and in surrendering his poem to the doggerel of two witless poetasters, he acknowledges in effect that the best ideals of literary effort cannot be fully realized and that Truth cannot ultimately be served in literature, not through language or form. Again, silence, the "*Common quiet*" that is "*Mankind's Concern*," suggests itself as the safer alternative.

To read *Religio Laici*, then, is to encounter much more than an elaborate doctrinal exposition; it is to confront the rigors, frustrations, self-doubts, and misgivings of the authorial experience itself. Into it (preface and poem) flow for Dryden the authorial anxieties of two decades, anxieties aggravated by the basic uncertainties of authoring and rubbed to rawness by partisan animosi-

ties that corrupt the purposes and resources of literature. In selecting poetic subjects, Dryden rarely takes his reader far from the profession of letters—its demands upon the minds, characters, and spirits of its practitioners—but to read *Religio Laici* is to sense with extraordinary acuteness the inner exigencies of the writer's calling and to assent (with apt qualifications) to David Vieth's remark of twenty years ago that "the fascination of *Religio Laici* is that it is less a poem about religion than a poem *about itself*" (204). A poem about religion it certainly is; but it is also a poem about itself and about the professional mind of its creator. In more than doctrinal ways it reflects the desire "for inner peace and external quiet" that, as Louis I. Bredvold long ago suggested, might well have drawn Dryden toward the promised serenity of Roman Catholic fideism.[14]

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Notes

[1] "Concept As Metaphor: Dryden's Attempted Stylistic Revolution." *Language and Style* 3 (1970): 204.

[2] *The Works of John Dryden*, ed. H. T. Swedenberg, Jr. and others (Berkeley: U of California P, 1956 -) 1.56. Except where otherwise noted, parenthetical references to the works of Dryden indicate appropriate volumes and pages of this edition.

[3] *Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays*, ed. George Watson, Everyman's Library (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1962).

[4] *The Faith of John Dryden: Change and Continuity* (Lexington UP of Kentucky, 1980) 90.

[5] For discussions of imagery in *Religio Laici* see Anne Barbeau Gardiner, "*Religio Laici* and the Principle of Legal Continuity," *PLL* 20 (1984): 29-46, an intricate examination of legal language and imagery in the poem, Arthur W. Hoffman, *John Dryden's Imagery* (Gainesville: U of Florida P, 1962): 55-71, and Frances Mayhew Rippy, "Imagery, John Dryden, and 'The Poetry of Statement,'" *Ball State Teachers College Forum* 1.2 (1960-61): 13-20.

[6] For example, such respected anthologies as Ronald Crane's *A Collection of English Poems, 1660-1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1932), Bonamy Dobree's *John Dryden: Poems*, Everyman's Library (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1954), William Frost's *Dryden: Selected Works* (San Francisco: Rinehart Press, 1971), and Wylie Sypher's *Enlightened England* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962) omit the marginal rubric.

[7] Empson, "Dryden's Apparent Scepticism" 20 (1970): 172-81; 21 (1971):

111-15. Harth, "Empson's Interpretation of *Religio Laici*" 20 (1970): 446-50. Adding yet another dimension to the issue, Oscar Kenshur, in "Scriptural Deism and the Politics of Dryden's *Religio Laici*" (*ELH*, 54 [Winter 1987]: 869-92) cites the passage disputed by Empson and Harth (lines 305-15) as an instance of Dryden's "doctrinal minimalism," a means chosen by Dryden to minimize the importance of any doctrine subject to disputed interpretation, even one considered by the Church to be necessary for salvation (881-82). The doctrines of this scriptural minimalism, writes Kenshur, "like those of deism, are accessible independently of all Scriptural interpretation" (882); hence, Dryden adopts a "Scriptural deism" in arguing for political calm.

[8] Chiefly, Atkins, *The Faith of John Dryden*, Louis I. Bredvold, *The Intellectual Milieu of John Dryden* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1938), Sanford Budick, *Dryden and the Abyss of Light* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1970), Elias J. Chiasson, "Dryden's Apparent Scepticism in *Religio Laici*" *Harvard Theological Review*, 54 (1961): 207-21, Thomas H. Fujimura, "Dryden's *Religio Laici*: An Anglican Poem," *PMLA* 76 (1961): 205-17, and Phillip Harth, *Contexts of Dryden's Thought* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1968).

[9] See James C. La Driere, "*Sermoni Proprivs*: A Study of the Horatian Theory of the Epistle and of Dryden's Allusion to It in the Preface to *Religio Laici*" (Ph. D. Thesis, U of Michigan, 1938).

[10] In addition to Gransden, *SEL* 17 (1977): 397-406, see James William Johnson, "The Classics and John Bull, 1660-1714," in *England in the Restoration and Early Eighteenth Century: Essays on Culture and Society*, ed. H. T. Swedenberg, Jr. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1972) 1-26.

[11] In *Reading Deconstruction: Deconstructive Reading* (UP of Kentucky, 1983) 91-104, G. Douglas Atkins argues that in writing *Religio Laici* Dryden desired "to avoid the emotional intensity and the falsifying of figurative language" but found it impossible to do so. Commentators who argue that logical reason is not Dryden's main means of communication in *Religio Laici* include Jerome McGann, "The Argument of Dryden's *Religio Laici*," *Thoth* 3 (1962): 78-99 (an insightful graduate essay by a now eminent scholar-critic), Donald J. Greene, "'Logical Structure' in Eighteenth-Century Poetry," *PQ* 31 (1952): 315-36, and Harth, 96.

[12] *Essays of John Dryden*, ed. W. P. Ker (New York: Russell & Russell, 1961) 2.214-15.

[13] So Steven Shankman describes the Horatian epistolary style in *Pope's Iliad* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983) 59.

[14] *The Intellectual Milieu of John Dryden* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1938) 128.