

Patrick O'Flaherty

Oxford University's First Professor of Poetry

Joseph Trapp (1679-1747) is best known among scholars as the probable author of an epigram commemorating George I's gift of the Bishop of Ely's library to Cambridge University:

The King, observing with judicious eyes
The state of both his universities,
To Oxford sent a troop of horse, and why?
That learned body wanted loyalty;
To Cambridge books, as very well discerning
How much that loyal body wanted learning.

Being an eighteenth century Anglican divine with literary tastes, he wrote, of course, a great deal more than that, but the great bulk of his writing is of little interest. His once admired pseudo-Oriental tragedy, *Abra-mule* (1704), may have supplied Dr. Johnson with a few hints for his own bad play, *Irene*, but is of no intrinsic worth. Equally unpromising were Trapp's efforts as a pamphleteer for the Tories. "A scurvy piece," Swift commented to Stella on *The Character and Principles of the Present Set of Whigs* (1711), by one "parson Slap, Scrap, Flap, (what d'ye call him) Trap." His translation of the *Aeneid* into blank verse (2 vols., 1718-20), notorious for its extreme literalness, was ridiculed by Johnson as "the clandestine refuge of school-boys." Lacking Swift's or Johnson's genius, Trapp possessed instead the virtues of a gentleman and a scholar: he was unpretentious, dogged, studious, curious, humane. And, as a writer in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for 1786 indicated, somewhat introverted:

A general abstraction and absence of mind was observable in him. And to such a degree was his attention engrossed thereby, that oftentimes ordinary matters and occurrences passed unheeded before him. During one of these moods of abstraction, it has been told me, that once, through straying from the foot-way in passing along the streets of the

metropolis, he met with an hair breadth escape from between two coaches, by which he was hemmed in so closely that nothing but a divine Providence interposing at that instant could have extricated him therefrom.

Thus favoured by Omnipotence, Trapp, like Parson Adams, became a priest much loved by ordinary people; unlike Adams and Swift both, he easily won preferment in the Church. On his way to fame, in 1708, he was elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford, the Professorship having been established in that year from funds bequeathed to the University by the seventeenth century Latin poet and Fellow of All Souls', Henry Birkhead. He held the post for the maximum period of two five-year terms, vacating it in 1718 to make way for his successor, Thomas Warton the elder. His *Praelectiones Poeticae*, originally published in three volumes in 1711, 1715, and 1719, reappeared in second and third editions in 1722 and 1736. It was eventually translated into English by William Bowyer and William Clarke and was published as *Lectures on Poetry* in 1742. A scholarly reprint of that translation appeared in 1969, and no doubt has found its way into most university libraries.

It is well to bear in mind the academic origin of *Lectures on Poetry* as one reads. Trapp's intention was pedagogic: to provide students at Oxford with an introductory "course" in the art of poetry. If, therefore, we find him affirming known truths about poetry rather than seeking for novel points of view, or considering elementary questions of poetic technique instead of participating in contemporary literary controversy, we should not be disappointed or even surprised.

If we want the atmosphere of a Fleet Street garret, we may go to John Dennis or Charles Gildon; Trapp takes us to the less heady environment of an Oxford lecture hall. Again, we may be slightly bored by what Trapp called "the dry Method of a Teacher," by his rigorous, almost scholastic procedure. "That logical way of sifting and canvassing definitions," one of his translators complained, "is not very pleasant to read." Perhaps not. But Trapp lived in lucky days for professors. He did not have to entertain with anecdote, or divert with feigned eccentricity, in order to be sure of a hearing; he did not think it necessary to conceal his learning, out of fear that his students would suspect their own ignorance. In *Lectures on Poetry* he proceeds in a forthright and manly fashion with the job before him, making no concessions to stupidity. Another feature of his book which may disappoint readers is the preponderance of Latin quotations to illustrate arguments. It is certainly a great pity that he did not comment more

extensively on English poetry, but his failure to do so indicates the classical character of the University curriculum rather than an inordinate predilection for classical literature. Trapp knew and admired Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, "the great Dryden," and Pope, and was conscious of the richness of the English literary tradition. But it would take another two centuries before English literature would be established as a legitimate University discipline.

This is not to say that Trapp was as committed a "modern" as, say, Dryden. We do not get from him such departures from established critical doctrine as Dryden's defence of English tragicomedy or Johnson's rejection of the unities of time and place. On both issues Trapp's thinking is rather conventional: while he acknowledges that the "whole Compass" of "our Passions, may be represented in Comedy, as well as Tragedy," tragicomedy proper he calls "the greatest Absurdity in Nature;" he not only defends the three unities but also, as if there hadn't been enough fuss on the subject already, adds a fourth, unity of character. Trapp writes in the shadow of Aristotle, Longinus, Horace, and the Renaissance scholars, Scaliger and Vossius. He does not cringe before them; indeed, on occasion he can reject their authority outright and appeal instead to "Reason and Experience." But he cites them often and even when he dissents is respectful of their views. So too he is somewhat awed by the classical poets. While, for example, he is prepared to concede that Chaucer's "Palamon and Arcite" is "truly beautiful indeed, and worthy of praise," he rejects as "monstrous" Dryden's view, expressed in the Preface to *Fables Ancient and Modern*, that the poem is "perhaps not much inferiour to the *Ilias* or the *Aeneis*." Spenser, again, was "born a poet, if any one ever was." But the *Faerie Queene* is too much concerned with "Faeries, Ghosts, Magicians, and Giants," and pursues "not one Action but several:" it cannot be allowed to rank with the great epics of antiquity. Even Milton, whose *Paradise Lost* is "perhaps" equal to the *Iliad* and *Aeneid*, "wrote in a Language much inferior to . . . *Homer's*; and is particularly much less correct than *Virgil*." Now if we remember that about the same time that Trapp was making these remarks at Oxford, Addison was drawing a favourable comparison between passages of the *Aeneid* and "Chevy Chase," then it will be clear that the Oxford Professor of Poetry was by no means the avant-garde critic of his generation. At the same time, he was no acerbic legislator to the poets, advising total submission to the ancient critics and rules, declaring any deviation from ancient models to be an aberration in taste. Indeed, he advises poets *not*

to imitate the ancients. Read them, of course; that is how to form true judgment. Let Virgil, he tells young poets, "be often in your Hand, and never out of your Thoughts." But the greatest praise he gives to Milton is that "He is no slavish Imitator of *Homer* and *Virgil*, he opens a way entirely new, and entirely his own." Modern authors of epics should "imitate *Milton*, by imitating *Homer* and *Virgil* less." Elsewhere we find him disputing Horace's advice to poets to write on well-known themes and recommending instead that the poet, to deserve the name truly, should "create his Materials;" and advising dramatists to ignore classical precedents and permit "Ladies of the first Rank" to speak in comedies, and the heroes of tragedies to perish on stage. This combination of reverence for the classics and respect for originality may seem surprising, but in fact it is a characteristic feature of all the best neo-classical criticism. We find it in particular in Dryden and Johnson.

Trapp often plods, belabouring the obvious. But there is frequently a streak of common sense even in his most pedestrian paragraphs. Take, for example, his definition of poetry: "*An Art of imitating or illustrating in metrical Numbers every Being in Nature, and every Object of the Imagination, for the Delight and Improvement of Mankind.*" That, to put the case mildly, is not a clever definition. What is remarkable about it is its permissiveness, its tendency to include rather than restrict; and, what is more, it is honest. "Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds:" that is Shelley's definition, and it flows more trippingly on the tongue than Trapp's. But it is also obviously more open to utterly damning objections. "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity"—Wordsworth. So it *may* be, but it need not be. If poetry must be defined, then Trapp's words supply a good, workable definition, a definition formulated after the author has seen and acknowledged the inexhaustible variety characteristic of the art. It is perhaps worth adding that in his interpretation of the classical notion that poetry ought to please and instruct Trapp was considerably less rigid than Dr. Johnson, and admitted that in certain kinds of poetry "Pleasure is the chief, or, perhaps, the only *Effect*," and therefore must be considered to be the "chief *End*." He thus avoids the Johnsonian heresy of attacking poems (Gray's "Bard", for example) for failing to provide a suitable moral. Trapp's comments on the kind of moral direction one should find in tragedy will also be found to be exceedingly liberal when compared, say, with Johnson's views on the fifth act of *King Lear*.

Trapp's attempted definition of poetry reveals an empirical, not an authoritarian approach to literature. Trapp tends to observe what poets do rather than tell them what they must do, and this habit, in an age of doctrinaire criticism, is a distinctive and refreshing feature of his book. If a "rule" cannot be seen to agree with the practice of the best poets, he will not insist upon enforcing it. Thus he disapproves of epic similes, but notes that such figures are common in Milton and Homer and "it is not for me to pass Judgment on them." He condemns an excessive use of epithets in poetry, but adds that there is an abundance of them in Homer. In his treatment of metaphor, this empirical approach eventually led Trapp to break new ground in criticism. Vincent Freimarck has pointed out (P.Q., XX-IX, 416) that Trapp, in the notes to his translation of the *Aeneid*, may have been the first critic of poetry to attempt to justify phrases like "cruel altars" and "fragrant shade," thus breaking away from the belief that there must be resemblance between the different parts of a metaphor. Here is Trapp's justification of "fragrant shade:"

Shade has no *smell* in it. But Those must be ill acquainted with the Genius of Poetry, who do not know that one of its greatest Elegancies consists in *transferring Ideas from one Adjunct to another*. The Flowers yielded both *Shade* and *Sweetness*; and tho' the *Shade* was not *perfumed*; the *Air*, *joined with it*, was. (*Aeneid*, vol. I, p. 333.)

Elsewhere in his translation we find metaphors like "liquid Air," "boiling Tides," and "sluggish Carcasses;" he is even tempted to allow "thundering Sword" but ultimately decides against it. This surprisingly modern stand on metaphor (we should remember Johnson's vigorous attack on Gray for using "honed Spring") had not been fully thought out by Trapp when he lectured at Oxford, but we still see indications of a liberal approach to the subject in *Lectures on Poetry*. He defends "joyful Herbs," for example, although the epithet is "much farther off" than usual from the "general Nature" of the substantive. But he will not approve "blushing Sword," and seems determined throughout the book not to tempt his students towards the excesses of the Metaphysicals. Students of eighteenth century literature will find Trapp's lectures on the style of poetry to be intensely interesting. Of particular note is the emphasis he places on "agreeable Variety of Particulars" in poetic style. On the threshold of an age in which a quality of style frequently praised would be "grandeur of generality," it was prophetic of Trapp to state that "Generals, being always the same, grow cold and lifeless, by their too frequent Repetition."

We can also see in Trapp's *Lectures* an emphasis upon psychology strong enough to be called unusual in the criticism of his day. This emphasis becomes pronounced when he inquires into the effects of comedy and tragedy upon audiences. Why, for example, do audiences like looking at satiric comedy, when they themselves are satirized in it? Vanity, says Trapp: "Every Body is so civil to himself, as to suppose he is not the Person aim'd at." Moreover, many "are apt to think their own Characters rais'd, by the Ruin of others." (It is only fair to add, however, that Swift's similar comment on satire, that it "is a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own," was made in 1704 in the Preface to *The Battle of the Books*.) Even more acute are Trapp's remarks on the pleasurable effects of tragedy. Why does the sight of suffering please us? It teaches us prudence, of course, but that has nothing to do with pleasure. Again Trapp turns to the principle of self-love. Seeing another man's miseries, he says, makes us more conscious of our own well-being and reconciles us to our private suffering. In addition, when we feel pity we are secretly pleased with ourselves for feeling it. The mind "contemplates that generous and humane Disposition, which inclines it towards others, and is conscious that this Com-miseration does, in some Measure, arise from it." So too the pleasure of terror is caused by our realization, as we sit in the theatre, that "this is all imaginary, and that there is no Danger." Trapp also devotes much space to consideration of Aristotle's theory of catharsis, and his comments on that tortured subject have been thought deserving of praise by one modern critic. (*M.L.N.*, XLI, 158.)

The reputation of Trapp's *Lectures on Poetry* in the eighteenth century was like that of Brooks' and Warren's *Understanding Poetry* in our own day. Many critics knew it and were doubtless influenced by it, but few were willing to confess an obligation to what appeared to be an elementary textbook. Dr. Johnson, for example, refers to Trapp's book three times in all his numerous writings: once, in passing, in the "Life of Dryden;" once in his Preface to Dodsley's *Preceptor* (1748), where he recommends the *Lectures* to students as a good introduction to poetry; and also in a private memorandum on January 1, 1767. With such slight evidence, we cannot say with certainty that Trapp exerted any influence whatever on Johnson's criticism. But Johnson must have heard of Trapp at least as early as 1728, when he enrolled at Oxford, and it is highly probable that he read the *Praelectiones* during his stay at the University. Moreover, there is such a close resemblance between the two critics' ideas that we are justified

in suspecting that Trapp's influence on Johnson was by no means miniscule. Johnson despised modern pastorals; so did Trapp, who exclaimed that "They are all cast in the same Mould; read one, you read all." Johnson objected to the lawlessness of the so-called Pindaric odes; so did Trapp. *Rambler* No. 156 seems to have been directly inspired by Trapp's Lecture XIX, "*Of the Drama in General.*" Both critics condemned slavish imitation, both defined wit as consisting as much in strength of thought as in cleverness of language. It is possible to see, in Trapp's statement that "A Breast struggling with Anger, Grief, or Desire, is little solicitous to express its Anguish in fine wrought Turns of Wit," the source of Johnson's adverse criticism of "Lycidas." We can go on and on. Once we have read Trapp's *Lectures* we will understand better why Johnson could exclaim, when asked his opinion of Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759), that he "was surprised to find Young receive as novelties, what he thought very common maxims." For despite the claims of historians of "pre-romanticism," there is really very little in Young's book which Trapp did not say, more temperately, fifty years earlier. Let scholars now give him belated praise.