

CHATTERTON LECTURE ON AN ENGLISH POET

JOHN WILMOT, EARL OF ROCHESTER

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IN the second act of Jonson's *Volpone*, the Fox disguised as a mountebank harangues a crowd of Venetians beneath Celia's window. His aim is quite straightforward. By pretending to be Scoto of Mantua, the possessor of a marvellous elixir, he hopes to obtain a glimpse of Corvino's young and jealously guarded wife. Volpone's long speech of self-advertisement, cluttered though it is with medieval jargon and false learning, is basically simple. He recognizes that other mountebanks, the charlatans of the profession, may parade accomplishments superficially like his own.

Indeed, very many have assay'd, like apes, in imitation of that, which is really and essentially in me, to make of this oil; bestow'd great cost in furnaces, stills, alembics, continual fires, and preparation of the ingredients (as indeed there goes to it six hundred several simples, besides some quantity of human fat, for the conglutination, which we buy of the anatomists), but when these practitioners come to the last decoction, blow, blow, puff, puff and all flies in fumo: ha, ha, ha! Poor wretches! I rather pity their folly and indiscretion, than their loss of time and money; for those may be recovered by industry: but to be a fool born is a disease incurable.

Here, and throughout his oration, the Fox insists strenuously that he represents truth as opposed to the specious claims of his rivals. Meanwhile, every word he utters reveals him clearly as an impostor. The rational and intelligent members of his stage audience are not deceived for an instant; only the credulous and the foolish—the Sir Politic Would-Be's of the world—could possibly mistake this arrant counterfeit for the true man he pretends to be.

At some point during the winter of 1675–6 John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, acting not on a stage but in the middle of that Restoration London in which he normally lived, chose to submerge his own extraordinary identity in that of a fictitious

Italian mountebank of his devising. Rochester was constitutionally restless and also insatiably curious; he had recently been banished from the court for irreverence; he had a passion for disguise. These are the generalities of the situation. More precise reasons underlying his impersonation of Alexander Bendo, if indeed they existed, remain obscure. Like Volpone in Jonson's play, Rochester in real life addressed a formal peroration to his potential customers.

However Gentlemen in a world like this, where Virtue is so frequently exactly Counterfeited, and hypocrisie so generally taken notice of, that every one armed with Suspicion stands upon his Guard against it, 'twill be very hard, for a Stranger especially, to escape a Censure: All I shall say for myself on this Score is this, if I appear to anyone like a Counterfeit, even for the sake of that chiefly, ought I to be constru'd a true Man, who is the Counterfeit's example, his Original, and that which he imployes his Industry, and Pains to Imitate, & Copy. Is it, therefore my fault, if y^e Cheat, by his Witts and Endeavours, makes himself so like me, that consequently I cannot avoid resembling him?¹

On Volpone's lips, truth and falsehood had remained fixed counters: traditional opposites. He hoped to persuade his listeners to mistake the one for the other, certainly, but he did not doubt the validity of the distinction. In fact, his mock-righteousness played upon it. The movement of mind described by Rochester's prose, by comparison with Jonson's, is positively dizzying. Not even Shakespeare had gone this far when he allowed Imogen, in the third act of *Cymbeline*, to reflect upon the power of hypocrisy to breed a distrust of the honesty it mimics.

True honest men, being heard like false Aeneas,
Were in his time thought false: and Sinon's weeping
Did scandal many a holy tear, took pity
From most true wretchedness: so thou, Posthumus,
Wilt lay the leaven on all proper men;
Goodly and gallant shall be false and perjurd
From thy great fail.

The reasoning here may seem convoluted; none the less, behind Imogen's speech the values of truth and falsehood stand distanced but inviolate. Honesty may for a time be slandered by its opposite, reality mistaken for appearance, in reversal of the

¹ Thomas Alcock and John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, *The Famous Pathologist or The Noble Mountebank*, edited by Vivian de Sola Pinto (Nottingham University Miscellany No. 1), Nottingham, 1961, p. 33.

more usual Elizabethan error. Fundamentally, however, these qualities are not interchangeable. Like Jonson, Shakespeare maintained a basic conviction of antithesis, a conviction which Rochester as Bendo overthrows.

It is, Dr. Bendo points out, the principal aim of the counterfeit to be taken for a true man, the thing he imitates. He fulfils his nature only in so far as he can promulgate this confusion. The man who appears false, therefore, is by definition unlikely to be engaged in any duplicity. The one who seems true and honest is the candidate for suspicion. What stance, under these circumstances, can the man who is genuinely honest adopt? How can he distinguish himself from his double, the counterfeit? A pose of deliberate dishonesty would seem to be all that is open to him. To embark upon it, however, would be to contradict his very nature as an honest man. At this point, language breaks down. We are in the country of Epimenides's paradox: the statement that 'All Cretans are liars' made by a man who is himself a Cretan. Truth and falsehood, reason itself, begin to run round in circles. Antipodes touch; extremes and contradictions, bewilderingly, coalesce. This tendency to confound antithesis in identity is not, of course, peculiar to Rochester, though I should wish to claim that both as a person and as a poet he was perhaps its most brilliant seventeenth-century exemplar. The Restoration as a period seems to have been drawn to this activity; its comedy in particular regularly annihilates traditional polarities. 'I know no effectual Difference between continued Affectation and Reality', says Mr. Scandal in Congreve's *Love For Love*. The remark is recognizably part of the world of Dr. Bendo.

To compare Rochester with Byron has become a biographical and critical cliché. The common ground is obvious: aristocracy, exceptional physical beauty, sexual licence, scepticism, immense personal charm, an early death. Both of them minimized and underplayed their own poetry; neither could live without it. Between Rochester's despairing remark in a letter to his wife about the 'disproportion 'twixt our desires and what is ordained to content them'¹ and Byron's description of Cain as a man exasperated by 'the inadequacy of his state to his conceptions'² the line runs straight and true. Confirmed empiricists,

¹ *The Collected Works of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, edited by John Hayward (Nonesuch Press), London, 1926, p. 288 (Letter LXX).

² *The Works of Lord Byron . . . Letters and Journals*, edited by R. E. Prothero, v. 470 (to Murray, 3 Nov. 1821).

taking nothing on trust, both Rochester and Byron were committed to a world of fact and sense experience. These were the boundaries of knowledge in which they believed. Unfortunately, because they were the people they were, they persistently asked of sense experience things which were not only in excess of what it could give, but inappropriate to it. They lived intensely; they pushed individual experience as far as it could go, only to find that even in the rarefied air of the extreme it was disappointing. Dedication to a reality which they could not help recognizing as limited, imperfect, and in the proof maddeningly below expectation, left them hankering after intangible absolutes, values fixed beyond sense in a world from which they were debarred by their own rationalism. In the last weeks of his life, Rochester surrendered; he took the leap in the dark into religious faith. Byron, despite his sessions with that earnest Methodist Dr. Kennedy at Missolonghi, did not. On the way to these very different final positions, both men used poetry as a means of coming to terms with a personal quandary that was essentially the same. Neither really believed in poetry in the sense of a man like Keats, yet with both the relationship of life to the art which it generated became so immediate and complex as to call the whole timeworn antithesis into question.

From *Childe Harold* to *Don Juan* Byron systematically mythologized his life in his verse. He came, reluctantly, to depend upon poetry as a means of heightening and transforming a world of objective fact which claimed his allegiance, but which he felt to be basically inadequate. Interestingly enough, Byron was a man who had absolutely no capacity for 'disguise, either in his life or his verse. No matter where he travelled, no matter how exotic or incongruous his adventures, whether he was sitting at the feet of Ali Pasha in Albania or attempting to seduce the wife of a Venetian baker, he remained Milord Byron. His poetry too is always spoken in his own voice. On those infrequent occasions when he did try to conceal his own identity behind that of a fictitious spokesman—as he did briefly in the first canto of *Don Juan*—the pretence invariably failed and had to be discontinued. All of Byron's heroes, Childe Harold, Lara, the Corsair, the narrators of the satires, are over-life-size versions of himself. It was Byron's characteristic way of overcoming the limitations of things as they are.

The mythologizing of Rochester's life and personality, on the other hand, was for the most part accomplished by people other than himself. Dryden's dedication to *Marriage à la Mode*, in

which he claims that 'the best comic writers of our age, will join with me to acknowledge, that they have copied the gallantries of courts, the delicacies of expression, and the decencies of behaviour, from your Lordship' may sound impossibly sycophantic. The fact remains that the drama of the Restoration is filled with Rochester-figures, with (more or less garbled) memories of his conversation, refractions of his wit, attempts to mirror his style. According to John Dennis, all of the town that mattered went away from the first performance of Etherege's *The Man of Mode* in 1676 agreeing that the rake-hero Dorimant was an avatar of Rochester. And Dorimant is the archetype and model for a whole series of later libertines. Nat Lee, baffled by the complexity and contradiction of his former patron's character, introduced him into his strange and brilliant comedy *The Princess of Cleve* (1680) as two separate people: the dead Count Rosidore, whose memory haunts the courtiers who have survived him, and the living Nemours. In the pages of Anthony Hamilton, in a flood of contemporary and posthumous anecdotes, allusions, and lampoons, Rochester achieved semi-legendary stature. His spectacular death-bed conversion added a new dimension to the myth. Even Charlotte Brontë, of all people, seems to have had him in mind when she bestowed his name and a number of his personal characteristics, including the penchant for disguise, upon the hero of *Jane Eyre*.

Only once, however, as far as one knows, did Rochester himself make a literary contribution to his own myth. 'The Earl of Rochester's Conference with a Post Boy' is not a polite poem, but neither is it negligible.

Son of A whore, God damn you can you tell
 A Peerless Peer the Readiest way to Hell?
 Ive out swilld Baccus sworn of my own make
 Oaths wod fright furies, & make Pluto quake
 Ive swived more whores more ways yⁿ Sodoms walls
 Ere knew or the College of Romes Cardinalls
 Witness Heroick scars, Look here neer go
 sere Cloaths & ulcers from y^e top to toe
 frightened at my own mischiefes I have fled
 and bravely left my lifes defender dead
 Broke houses to break chastity & died
 that floor with murder which my lust denyed
 Pox on it why do I speak of these poor things
 I have blasphemed my god & libelld Kings
 the readiest way to Hell come quick!

Boy

Nere stirr

The readiest way my Lords by Rochester

As Mr. David Vieth has pointed out, in his book *Attribution in Restoration Poetry*, this is a better lampoon than any Rochester's enemies were able to compose.¹ As a self-portrait, it is unsparing, worlds away from the kind of romantic self-magnification which Byron practised in his *Oriental Tales*. Rochester's characteristic oaths, the scars and running sores left by the venereal disease which, a few years later, was to kill him, the suggestion not merely of sexual excess but of perversion, the allusion to that gesture of drunken cowardice in the Epsom affair of 1676 which cost the life of his friend Downes, the unlovely propensity to slander: all of these details were based on fact. None are pretty. The efforts of the wretched post boy to escape from the company of this unsavoury and drunken interlocutor are both comic and entirely understandable. Yet, oddly enough, the final effect of the poem is not that of a lampoon, in the sense that it annihilates or even breeds contempt for its subject. The amoral energy, almost daemonism, of the speaker in his deliberate rush to Hell is simply too attractive, and so of course is the intelligence of his self-mockery. The verse employs a hyperbolic style which is persuasive and, at the same time, ironically conscious of its own exaggeration. It manages simultaneously to magnify and deflate *both* its subject and the orthodox values by which that subject is being judged, to invite belief and to undercut it.

In 'The Post Boy' as a whole, reality and pretence, the counterfeit and the true, take up positions like those they occupy in the vertiginous world of Dr. Bendo. Formally, although not ultimately, the lines belong to the genre of the lampoon. To write a lampoon on oneself is not exactly unique; it is, however, fundamentally paradoxical. The complexity of this situation is only increased by the pretence that the poem represents an actual incident. Professor Pinto prints it in his edition among the other 'Impromptus', alongside the three lines of rueful compliment paid to the Duchess of Cleveland after she had just knocked Rochester down in the street for presuming to steal a kiss. As an immediate response to a real situation, the discomfited epigram addressed to Samuel Pepys's beloved duchess

¹ David M. Vieth, *Attribution in Restoration Poetry*, New Haven and London, 1963, p. 199. I have used the version of 'The Post Boy' printed by Vieth. Otherwise, all quotations from Rochester's poetry come from the edition of Vivian de Sola Pinto (Muses Library), London, 1953.

is conceivable: no man, however witty, produces extempore verse like that of 'The Post Boy'. If a genuine encounter lies behind the poem, it lies a long way behind. The important consideration here is not biographical truth, but the contribution which the anecdotal pose of the dialogue makes to a confusion worked out on a variety of other levels.

Rochester's sins as recorded in 'The Post Boy' have a particularized reality which must have been even more striking to his contemporaries than to us. They are described, however, in terms which force the reader to question the possibility that a monster like this could exist. He becomes a caricature of vice. Lines 11 and 12 in particular ('Broke houses to break chastity & died / that floor with murder which my lust denyed') suggest an allegorical figure of Lechery invented by some canting and overwrought divine. Here, as in the scurrilous reference to Rome's Cardinals and their sexual predilections, satire glances off to targets other than himself. Those orthodox values by which the wicked Earl of Rochester stands self-condemned are themselves mocked. In the act of invoking traditional verities of good and evil, virtue and sin, 'The Post Boy' blurs their identity. It is not at all clear in the end how we are meant to feel about this mythologized Earl of Rochester who asks, so peremptorily, for directions to another world. He repels, but he also attracts. The poem is amusing; it is also horrifying. Even more perplexing: what is the point at which one should separate this dramatic character, the subject of the lampoon, from the witty poet of the same name who stage-managed the incident in the first place and who controls in so complex a fashion the tone and language of his self-presentation?

I suggested earlier that 'The Post Boy' was the only surviving poem of Rochester's in which, like Byron, although with very different results, he mythologized his own life and personality directly. His more characteristic mode was the one which Byron shunned: disguise. Rochester's life is filled with extraordinary impersonations, of which the mountebank Bendo is only one. Hamilton's account of how Rochester exchanged identities with Killigrew in order to deceive two of the Queen's maids of honour reads like a scene from Restoration comedy. He seems also to have transformed himself into a solid merchant, in which role he vanished for a time among the citizens of London, earning their approbation by the vigour with which he railed against the profligacies of the court—particularly those of the wicked Earl of Rochester. (Etherege was perhaps thinking of

this particular caper when he had Dorimant charm Harriet's mother Lady Woodvil in *The Man of Mode* by pretending to be the sober and censorious Mr. Courtage.) Even more daringly, Rochester is said to have lost himself among the beggars and the common whores of London in the guise of a porter. The town of Burford retains the tradition of his sudden appearance there as a tinker, in which unglamorous form he collected pots and pans to mend, and then systematically destroyed them. He was released from the stocks upon the arrival of his own coach and four. The kitchen-ware, magnanimously, was replaced.

In much of this, obviously, there is a quality of Haroun-al-Raschid, the caliph of *The Arabian Nights* who liked to walk the streets of Baghdad incognito, in search of the marvellous and the strange. Other members of the court of Charles II, including the King himself, also resorted occasionally to disguise, as Bishop Burnet testifies in his *History of his Own Time*. No one, however, took it as far as Rochester, used it as inventively, or out of as deep a need. By his own admission, he was drunk for five years on end, without an interval of sobriety: excess, as he himself recognized, was another kind of role-playing, permitting him to assume manners and a *persona* heightened and more extravagant than normal. The famous contradiction between his gallantry in the naval action of 1666 and his supposed cowardice in the duel with Mulgrave a few years later probably explains itself in similar terms. 'He thought it necessary', he told Burnet, 'to begin his life with those Demonstrations of his Courage in an Element and way of fighting, which is acknowledged to be the greatest trial of clear and undoubted Valour'.¹ Having done so to his own satisfaction, he discarded the role. In the Mulgrave affair, he was playing another and more wryly exploratory part, as he was presumably when he tried the odd experiment of having his own wife converted to Catholicism by means of an intermediary hired, secretly, by himself. Over and over again in his short life, Rochester seems to have been impelled to alter his perspective on reality, to seek yet another vantage point, by adopting some form of disguise. If (and there seems no reason to doubt the story) he was in fact the architect of Mrs. Barry's genius—rehearsing her over and over again in the parts she had to play until, from being the worst and most incompetent actress on the Restoration stage, she became

¹ Gilbert Burnet, *Some Passages of the Life and Death of the Right Hon. John Earl of Rochester*, London (1680), p. 11.

its acknowledged queen—his success is in no way surprising. This was a man who understood the actor's art.

Not unexpectedly, therefore, Rochester's own poetry involves a whole series of impersonations, is spoken in a variety of different voices. He invented the cynical old rake counselling his successors in 'The Maim'd Debauchee', the overblown braggart who addresses his mistress in so insufferable a style in the 'Heroical Epistle in Answer to Ephelia', and the arrogant but misguided author who pens the 'Epistolary Essay from M.G. to O.B. Upon their Mutual Poems'. The extremely indecent but impressive 'Ramble in St. James' Park' represents the point of view of a jaded stallion consumed by sexual hate, a man who speaks out of the ruins of wit and sense. Rochester's 'Dialogue Between Strephon and Daphne' is much better than the usual Restoration pastoral and one of the reasons is the dramatic credibility of this nymph and shepherd: the individuality of their voices. He was an adept at women's parts as well as men's (there is at least the tradition of a transvestite episode in his own life), as witness that somewhat dismaying young lady who showers dubious endearments upon the ancient person of her heart in the poem 'To Her Ancient Lover'.

As a study in feminine character alone, the marvellous 'Letter from Artemesia in the Town to Cloe in the Country' repays attention. Artemesia herself, the woman composing the letter, is a kind of seventeenth-century Elizabeth Bennett. Witty and self-aware, both amused and exasperated, delighted and saddened by the follies she describes, she is the sister of Jane Austen's heroines. What is astonishing about the poem is the fact that that anonymous knight's lady whose affectations and conversation Artemesia reports at such length is not, as she so easily might have been, a mere caricature. She too is a fully realized character of some integrity, and her discourse is filled with telling points as well as with absurdity. Artemesia, the detached observer, watches more in sorrow than in anger while the lady cuddles a pet monkey in the house they are both visiting:

The dirty, chatt'ring Monster she embrac'd;
And made it this fine Tender Speech at last.

Kiss me, thou curious Miniature of Man;
How odd thou art, how pretty, how japan:
Oh! I could live and dye with thee; then on
For half an Hour, in Complements she ran.

I took this Time to think what Nature meant,
 When this mixt thing into the world she sent,
 So very wise, yet so impertinent.
 One that knows ev'rything, that God thought fit
 Shou'd be an Ass through Choice, not want of wit.
 Whose Foppery, without the help of sense,
 Cou'd ne'er have rose to such an excellence. . . .
 An eminent Fool must be a Fool of parts.
 And such a one was she; who had turn'd o're
 As many Books as Men; lov'd much, read more:
 Had discerning Wit; to her was known
 Ev'ry one's Fault, or Merit, but her own.
 All the good qualities that ever blest
 A Woman so distinguished from the rest,
 Except Discretion only, she possest.

The attitudes which the knight's lady strikes are ridiculous; her mind and endowments are not. A generosity which is both Artemesia's and, ultimately, Rochester's allows her, in what is in effect the play within the play of the letter, to relate with real understanding the scarifying story of Corinna, the girl undone by a Wit, who now

unheard of, as a Flie,
 In some dark hole must all the Winter lye;
 And want, and dirt, endure a whole half year,
 That, for one month, she Tawdry may appear.

Disguise, as an aspect of Rochester's verse, governs more than the various *personae* of his poems. There is also the question of literary imitation. In an article published in 1949, 'The Imitation in English Poetry', Dr. Harold Brooks has argued that what was to become with Pope and Johnson the approved method of transmuting a classical or French original appears for the first time in Rochester's satire 'An Allusion to Horace'.¹ The poet presents, consecutively, his own equivalent of a pre-existing text. If the reader is fully to appreciate the new creation, he must constantly measure it against the original from which it departs. Ideally, he himself will know this original so well that reference back and forth with every line becomes virtually automatic. The imitation is a poem in its own right; it can stand alone, if necessary, but it fulfils itself only in terms of its relationship—a relationship involving both resemblance and contrast—to the work of art it shadows. According to Dr.

¹ H. F. Brooks, 'The Imitation in English Poetry', *Review of English Studies*, xxv (1949), 124-40.

Brooks, 'An Allusion to Horace' is the only one of Rochester's poems which exacts this kind of point-by-point comparison with its original. It stands in the true Augustan line, as the more independent arabesques performed against the basic groundwork of Boileau in the 'Satyr Against Reason and Mankind' do not.

I do not mean to question Dr. Brooks's general argument. However, I do think that there is one other poem of Rochester's, not a satire and emphatically not in the Augustan line, which asks to be read in the manner of 'An Allusion to Horace'. On the whole, Rochester's editors have regarded the poem 'To His Mistress' beginning 'Why do'st thou shade thy lovely face?' with a certain amount of nervousness and suspicion.

Why do'st thou shade thy lovely face? O why
Does that Eclipsing hand of thine deny
The Sun-Shine of the Suns enlivening Eye:

Without thy light, what light remains in me
Thou art my Life, my way my Light's in Thee,
I live, I move and by thy beams I see.

Thou art my Life, if thou but turn away
My Life's a thousand Deaths, thou art my way
Without thee (Love) I travel not but Stray.

There is not a line here, or in the rest of the poem, which does not derive immediately from Francis Quarles, from either the seventh or the twelfth poem in the second book of his *Emblems*. Whole stanzas are, in some cases, identical.

To accuse Rochester of plagiarism, as some critics have done, is obviously to miss the point. What in Quarles had been a passionate expression of the sinner's abasement before God becomes, in Rochester, the despairing cry of a lover to his mistress. The whole object of the exercise is to change as little as possible of the original while wresting it in a different direction, transforming it into its opposite. The closeness of the Christian language of spiritual adoration to that describing the raptures of physical love is, of course, a well-known psychological phenomenon. This is a place where antinomies cross: body and soul, finite and infinite, sexuality and a world of the spirit. It is a paradox worked out on one level in the occasionally embarrassing language of the great fourteenth-century mystics, agonizing after what comes to seem a physical union with God. On another, it means that the libertine pursuing sense experience to its extremes is precisely the man most susceptible to

a dramatic religious conversion. A great deal of the poetry of the seventeenth century—one thinks immediately of Donne and Herbert—deliberately avails itself of the language of transcendence in order to celebrate earthly love, and of a fairly straightforward eroticism in speaking of God. The sacred parody, religious poetry strongly influenced by or even based upon a profane model was by no means an uncommon English form.¹ No one, however, as far as I know, conducted an experiment quite like Rochester's in 'To His Mistress'. The poem is an analytic inquiry, an attempt to define the exact point at which opposites merge.

Sensuality is inherent in the very rhythms of Quarles's two poems, in the passionate monotony of his reiterated appeals, and Rochester allows it to speak for itself. He is forced to make certain obvious changes: the word 'Lord' becomes 'Love'; 'Great Shepherd' metamorphoses into 'Dear Lover'. On the whole, however, he alters Quarles only where he must, and these alterations, many of them extremely subtle, become a guide to the fragile but genuine distinctions which can be drawn between earthly and heavenly love. Stanza 11 of Quarles's 'Emblem VII' reads as follows:

If that be all, shine forth and draw thee nigher;
Let me behold, and die, for my desire
Is phoenix-like, to perish in that fire.

In Rochester, this becomes:

If that be all Shine forth and draw thou nigher
Let me be bold and Dye for my Desire.
A *Phenix* likes to perish in the Fire.

There are only two verbal substitutions here of any consequence: the witty and almost imperceptible metamorphosis of 'behold' into 'be bold', and the more striking introduction of the word 'likes' in Rochester's version of the third line. Otherwise, the transformation has been effected by means which are not properly linguistic: by end-stopping the second line where Quarles had permitted an enjambment and by a change in punctuation and accentual stress which suddenly throws the erotic connotations of the word 'die' (submerged and unconscious in the original poem) into relief. The lines are the same and not the same; another voice is speaking Quarles's words, from another point of view.

¹ Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation*, New Haven, 1954, pp. 179-93.

Obviously, 'To His Mistress' is a far more extreme and idiosyncratic poem than 'An Allusion to Horace'. If Rochester ever subjected another text to this kind of treatment, no record of the experiment survives. Imitation generally, however, was as essential a principle in his verse as in his life. Seneca, Anacreon, Horace, Ovid, Lucretius, Passerat, and Boileau were only a few of the writers upon whose work he built. In his hands, Fletcher's tragedy *Valentinian* became a different and much more interesting play. Nothing, of course, is unique about this method of composition in itself. The idea that an individual style was best achieved through the study and reproduction of (preferably) classical models is a standard part of seventeenth-century aesthetic. As literary archaeologists, Rochester's contemporaries were as assiduous as he. They also tended to imitate one another. Even without considering the whole vexed issue of whether there really was a clear-cut school of Jonson as opposed to the school of Donne, the minor poetry of the Caroline and Restoration periods displays an extremely high and in a certain sense unhealthy mutual awareness. The writers represented in the three volumes of Saintsbury's *Caroline Poets* seem at times to be involved in a kind of never-ending *New Statesman* competition. Fruition (for and against), honour, chastity, the pastoral life: topics like these became an artificial sports ground on which poets consciously vied with one another. Not surprisingly, the exercise tended to become academic, a mere game of rackets played between one poem and its successor.

Elizabethan handling of conventional subject-matter had been different. When Philip Sidney buried timeworn Petrarchan conceits in the structure of his sonnets, he did so because he needed to work by way of their anonymity towards a particularized and felt emotional statement. A poem like Suckling's 'Out upon it, I have lov'd / Three whole days together', on the other hand, invites only one response. And Sir Tobie Matthews provided it: 'Say, but did you love so long? / In troth I needs must blame you.' An already unconvincing because logically imposed stance has been pushed a degree further in a way that is literary in the worst sense of that term. Where can the conversation possibly go beyond Matthews? For most Restoration poets, there was no answer except graceful restatement of what had been said before. With Rochester, something else happens:

All my past Life is mine no more,
The flying hours are gone:

Like transitory dreams giv'n o'er,
Whose Images are kept in store,
By Memory alone.

The Time that is to come is not,
How can it then be mine?
The present Moment's all my Lot,
And that, as fast as it is got,
Phyllis, is only thine.

Then talk not of Inconstancy,
False hearts, and broken Vows;
If I, by Miracle, can be
This live-long Minute true to thee,
'Tis all that Heav'n allows.

The technique here is not unlike Sidney's: a convention is revealed in the last lines, but it has been arrived at in such a way that it stands transformed. Melodious and elegant, the poem is ultimately terrifying in its denial of the continuum of life, and the consequences of that denial for human relationships. Neither past nor future exists; man is reduced to the needle-point of the immediate present, and even this reality is in motion. Essentially, this is a Heraclitean poem: it also points forward to Kierkegaard's analysis of Mozart's seducer Don Juan in *Either/Or*: 'he does not have existence at all, but he hurries in a perpetual vanishing, precisely like music, about which it is true that it is over as soon as it has ceased to sound, and only comes into being again, when it again sounds'.¹ The defence of inconstancy, that weariest of Restoration clichés, is revitalized in Rochester's lyric. No one but Donne perhaps could have formulated and placed the phrase 'this live-long Minute' with such sureness. The compression is typical of Rochester; so is the essential seriousness of the wit.

It is I believe fair to say that at the time Rochester was writing, English verse was facing a double crisis: of language and of subject-matter. The problem was most acute in what had been the glory of the preceding age: the poetry of love. Both Cleveland and Cowley seem to me better poets than they are currently given credit for being, but it would be hard to deny that their work reflects a sense that all the words of love have

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, translated by David F. Swenson and Lillian M. Swenson, London, 1944, Part I ('The Immediate Stages of the Erotic'), p. 83.

already been used, and its possible attitudes exhausted. The obvious temptation was to reach out for the extravagant and bizarre, both linguistically and in terms of subject-matter. What has come to be known as 'Clevelandism' is an intelligent dead-end as far as language is concerned, but it is a dead-end all the same. As for subject-matter: not by accident are there so many Caroline and Restoration poems about the love affairs of dwarfs, hermaphrodites, or very young girls married to very old men. It was a way, although a fairly desperate one, of ensuring a certain novelty. The blatant obscenity of much Restoration love poetry can also be explained, in part if not entirely, as a response to this situation. A good deal of Rochester, even after the canon has been purified of the improprieties fathered upon it by other writers, remains extremely obscene. Nor was he above the exploitation of abnormal situations, as witness the 'Young Lady to her Ancient Lover', or the song beginning 'Fair Cloris in a Pig-Stye Lay'. Nevertheless, although the solution he found to the problem was too personal to be of use to other poets, Rochester's love poetry at its best seems to me to cut through the dilemma.

Dr. Johnson thought that Rochester's lyrics had no particular character. 'They tell, like other songs, in smooth and easy language of scorn and kindness, dismissal and desertion, absence and inconstancy, with the common places of artificial courtship. They are commonly smooth and easy; but have little nature, and little sentiment.' With all respect to Dr. Johnson, this is one of his 'Lycidas' judgements. Admittedly, there are Rochester lyrics—'My dear Mistress has a heart / Soft as those kind looks she gave me', or "'Twas a dispute 'twixt Heav'n and Earth'—over which one is not tempted to linger, although even here the formal perfection and beauty of sound make one feel churlish in requiring any more of them. At its best, however, Rochester's love poetry achieves individuality and passion by way of an illusory simplicity and coolness of tone.

It is true that the language of these poems is for the most part clear, almost transparent. The vocabulary employed is not wide. Compressed and economical, they make only a sparing use of images and conceits. It has become a commonplace to talk about the gradual shift during the Restoration from the rich, ambiguous, essentially connotative language of Shakespeare and Donne to a kind of Royal Society plain style in which words and images limit themselves to precise and denotative meanings. At first sight, Rochester may appear to belong to the new school in

most of his poems. Yet behind the deceptively limpid surface lies a complexity of attitude, an air of strain and doubt, that links him with the metaphysicals. It is worked out, however, by means alien to the school of Donne.

Much of the excitement generated by Rochester's best lyrics springs from their character as tentative and immediate explorations of a particular situation or state of mind. They tend to conclude surprisingly, to arrive at a position in the last lines which seems in some way to be a product of the actual writing of the poem, not a preconceived attitude clothed in verse. If it is often difficult to determine how the poet arrived at this conclusion, it is also obligatory. Yet analysis is made difficult by the fact that so much of what happens in Rochester is a matter of tone. The progression is essentially non-linguistic, one of attitude, and you cannot come to grips with it through the relatively available medium of metaphor and conceit as you can with metaphysical poetry. In the end, of course, this method has a complicating effect of its own upon language. Nothing is more characteristic of Rochester than the way a single word, particularly in the final stanza of a poem, will suddenly move into focus and reveal its possession of a variety of warring meanings. This happens with the word 'severe' in the penultimate line of 'The Fall', as it does with the word 'innocent', upon which such a terrible illumination is suddenly cast, in the obscene final stanza of 'Fair Cloris'.

Fundamentally, however, a discussion of the lyrics must involve itself with somewhat intangible considerations. They are characterized in the first place by the fact that in them the sense tends to flow both forwards and back. A single line, a whole stanza, which had one apparent meaning when first encountered will alter in retrospect: from the vantage point of the end of the poem, or even of the next stanza. This technique can be observed at its most straightforward in Rochester's pastoral 'Dialogue Between Strephon and Daphne', at the end of which the forsaken nymph declares abruptly to her inconstant lover that every word she has uttered up to this point was a lie. The volte-face of this particular ending is reminiscent of the plays of Fletcher, and indeed it can be defended in terms very like those employed by Professor Philip Edwards in his article, 'The Danger Not the Death: the Art of John Fletcher.'¹ The poem is not summed

¹ Philip Edwards, 'The Danger Not the Death: the Art of John Fletcher', *Jacobean Theatre* (Stratford-upon-Avon Studies, I), edited by John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris, London, 1960, pp. 159-77.

up and exhausted once the trick conclusion is known, because there is another kind of pleasure to be derived from noticing its effect upon what has gone before, from understanding now the real, below the assumed, meaning of the character's words. With 'Strephon and Daphne', a further complexity—characteristic of the creator of Dr. Bendo—is introduced by a certain doubt as to whether Daphne's final assertion that she has been lying is not in itself a face-saving and despairing lie.

'Strephon and Daphne' is anything but a simple poem, but it is more conventional than most of Rochester's lyrics. The brilliant and horrifying 'Fair Cloris', for instance, turns not upon a shock ending in itself, but upon the opportunity for misreading or at least misintonation in the second stanza. It is a mistake which it is almost impossible not to make every time, no matter how well you know the poem, so cleverly has Rochester constructed the trap.

Fair *Cloris* in a Pig-Stye lay,
Her tender Herd lay by her:
She slept, in murmuring gruntlings they,
Complaining of the scorching Day,
Her slumbers thus inspire.

She dreamt, while she with careful pains
Her Snowy Arms employ'd,
In Ivory Pails, to fill out Grains,
One of her Love-convicted Swains,
Thus hasting to her cry'd.

Verse rhythm, position in the line and sense all persuade the reader to take 'she dreamt' as part of a construction syntactically parallel with that introduced by 'She slept' in the preceding stanza. But the suggestion of symmetry is indeed the trick. Because of it, everything that follows in the poem: the treachery of the swain, the brutal rape of poor Cloris whose honour 'not one God took care to save' looks like a real incident in a waking world clearly distinguished from her interrupted dream of ivory pails. This impression is carefully furthered by the tone of Rochester's description of the rape: deprecating, brutal, matter of fact. Not until the final stanza (unfortunately suppressed in most editions) does the true meaning of the poem become clear: 'Frighted she wakes.' The whole episode was a dream and indeed one inspired appropriately by pigs. Cloris has been the victim, not of an unfeeling rustic, but of her own

lustful imagination, and she proceeds to seek sexual gratification in the only way available to her.

Scepticism about the pastoral pretence was not, of course, original with Rochester. Raleigh and Donne before him had cast a mocking eye upon the innocent pleasures of sheep-folds and bowers. 'Fair Cloris' is in fact part of the whole dialogue initiated by Marlowe's 'Come Live with Me and be my Love' and Raleigh's reply. The poem is not, however, either a simple parody or a hyperbolic extension of a given attitude in the manner of Sir Tobie Matthews's answer to Suckling. Imitation is essential to it; like most Restoration exercises in the pastoral, it presupposes all the pros and cons of earlier poets, speaks largely through a mask. What is remarkable is its ability (admittedly with the assistance of the psychological realism of Hobbes) genuinely to re-create a traditional mode. The ending of 'Fair Cloris' is not pleasant, but neither is it trivial, pornographic, nor ultimately derivative.

Most important of all, perhaps, the basic technique of this poem could be and was applied by Rochester to subjects of a different nature. Syntactical ambiguity marks many of his lyrics, and it is used for a variety of purposes. In general, he seems to have been fond of words or clauses in apposition:

Let the Porter and the Groom,
 Things design'd for dirty Slaves;
 Drudge in fair Aurelia's Womb,
 To get Supplies for Age and Graves.

Here, the dependence of the second line upon the first is relatively straightforward—although in the context of the third ('Drudge in fair Aurelia's Womb') the seemingly innocent phrase 'design'd for' shifts meaning and direction, attacking Aurelia herself and not simply her ignominious lovers. Far more complex is the situation in the final stanza of 'The Fall':

Then, *Cloris*, while I Duty pay,
 The Nobler Tribute of my Heart,
 Be not You so severe to say,
 You love me for a frailer Part.

In this instance, the appositive second line transforms the first from which it apparently derives, underscoring the whole body/soul paradox of the poem. Over and over again in Rochester, constructions of this kind jolt the reader into attention. They force a decision as to the real equivalence of the

two halves of a parallel. Does the second part consolidate the meaning of the first, or does it subtly annihilate it?

Syntactical ambiguity of another kind ensures, in the second stanza of that beautiful poem 'An Age in her Embraces Past', that the conventional dependence of the lover's soul upon the eyes of his mistress should be a grammatical fact, built in to the structure of the lyric, and not simply an imposed conceit:

But, oh! how slowly Minutes rowl,
When absent from her Eyes;
That feed my Love, which is my Soul,
It languishes and dyes.

What seems at first to be the subject of this poem—the relativity of love's time—is a seventeenth-century commonplace. Cowley, one of the English poets Rochester most admired, has two poems on the subject in his collection *The Mistress*, neither of them negligible, both dependent upon metaphysical imagery and style: 'Love and Life' and 'The Long Life'. Rochester begins, apparently, in their manner:

An Age, in her Embraces past,
Would seem a Winters Day;
Where Life and Light, with envious hast,
Are torn and snatch'd away.

This great celebratory opening, a statement in the grand manner, is oddly disturbing, although only the reader already well acquainted with the poem will be able to articulate, at this point, precisely why. In fact, the positive image at the centre is being contradicted by the tone and balance of the stanza as a whole. A sense of deprivation, of violence and negation, threatens to overbear the fragile felicity it is ostensibly there to magnify. The meaning of the words is clear and straightforward: an eternity spent in the lady's arms would seem too short. Cowley had thought so too. The emotional stress of Rochester's stanza, on the other hand, running counter to its intellectual content, falls upon the winter's day and its tragic abridgement. Why it should do so it is the business of the rest of the poem, with its exploration of what Professor George Williamson has rightly called Rochester's 'ethic of pain',¹ to make clear:

Fantastick Fancies fondly move;
And in frail Joys believe;

¹ George Williamson, *The Proper Wit of Poetry*, London, 1961, pp. 125–6.

Taking false Pleasure for true Love;
But Pain can ne're deceive.

Kind Jealous Doubts, tormenting Fears,
And Anxious Cares, when past,
Prove our Hearts Treasure fixt and dear,
And make us blest at last.

The great poem 'Upon Nothing' also both invokes and passes beyond the metaphysical style. The basic joke, the paradoxical idea of writing Something in praise of Nothing had been explored by at least two continental poets before Rochester, as he must have known. His own poem is an inversion of the First Chapter of the Book of Genesis and also, in a more limited sense, of Cowley's 'Hymn to Light'. Most immediately of all, it wanders in the country of the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides, playing with concepts of Being and non-Being in a way designed to call the structure of language itself into question. After all, how is it possible to articulate an adoration of primal Chaos without sacrilege: without repeating poetically precisely what Rochester castigates as the primal rape of Nothingness by Creation? The poet is a maker, and the act of writing bestows shape and order perforce upon what had previously been formless. Simply by being at all, Rochester's poem perpetuates that contamination of the abstract by the concrete, of Nothing by Something, which it is out to deplore. 'Upon Nothing' is an even more dizzying poetic equivalent of Dr. Bendo's bill. This is, with a vengeance, the place where fundamental opposites meet and relinquish their identities, and they do not do so simply in terms of witty images like 'thy fruitful emptiness's hand'. Man's efforts to conceptualize, language itself, is under attack in this poem and verbal analysis can go only so far. Oddly enough, Henry Vaughan can help.

I saw Eternity the other night
Like a great *Ring* of pure and endless light,
All calm, as it was bright,
And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years,
Driv'n by the spheres
Like a vast shadow mov'd, In which the world
And all her train were hurl'd;
The dotting Lover in his quaintest strain
Did their Complain.

After a staggering opening, Vaughan's poem collapses into triviality. The dotting lover and his quaint strain are simply

not compatible with the ring of endless light, as innumerable critics have pointed out. But this incompatibility is, of course, the whole point. The abrupt downward movement is deliberate, a demonstration of the gap between Heaven and Earth, between great abstractions and a finite world of small fact. Rochester's 'Upon Nothing' does something similar, in pursuit of another end. Within fifty-one lines, the poem moves from the noble abstractions of Nothingness, through Creation, to the debased minutiae of a contemporary reality: 'King's Promises, Whores Vows . . . Dutch Prowess, British Policy.' The very form of the poem is a demonstration of its basic premiss, that Nothing is best. Increasingly satirical as it becomes more detailed and concrete, its construction is a silent witness to the ignominy of Being.

Let me end with what seems to me the best of Rochester's lyrics.

Absent from thee I languish still,
 Then ask me not, when I return?
 The straying Fool t'will plainly kill,
 To wish all Day, all Night to Mourn.

Dear; from thine Arms then let me flie,
 That my Fantastick Mind may prove
 The Torments it deserves to try,
 That tears my fixt Heart from my Love.

When wearied with a world of Woe
 To thy safe Bosom I retire,
 Where Love, and Peace, and Truth does flow,
 May I contented there expire.

Lest once more wand'ring from that Heav'n,
 I fall on some base heart unblest;
 Faithless to thee, False, unforgiv'n,
 And lose my Everlasting rest.

Here once again is an opening contradicted by what follows. The first line, 'Absent from thee I languish still', seems to introduce a conventional lament in absence. The impression is immediately corrected. This lover has not yet left his lady's arms, nor is he compelled to do so by either the world or time. It is his own fantastic mind which is about to impose a separation which his heart regrets. In the moment of leavetaking, he foresees clearly the pain and loathsomeness of his self-imposed

exile; he also foresees his return 'wearied with a world of woe' to a place he should never have left. A man asks leave to be faithless, knowing it will disgust him, predicting his renunciation of what he already recognizes as folly. This would seem a sufficient burden of meaning for any sixteen-line lyric to carry, but Rochester goes further. His narrator can see, beyond this initial separation and return, still another betrayal, a wanton repetition of the whole process. This clear-sightedness is terrifying in itself. Even worse is his recognition that this next absence but one may end in a commitment to 'some base heart unblest', a permanent exile from the true heaven which claims his devotion, but which he can neither live with nor without. Appalled at the possibilities of the future, he asks for death in his lady's arms—not, significantly, now, but at the stage of his first return.

Rochester's conversations with Bishop Burnet provide the real gloss on this poem. It both is and it is not a secular love song. I have not touched in this lecture upon Rochester's 'Satyre Against Reason and Mankind'. This is his best-known poem, and it has always been able, unlike the lyrics, to speak for itself. I would, however, remind you of its poise between a firm conviction of the empirical limits of man's mind and an underlying agony that he should in fact be bounded by sense experience. The theme of limitation is everywhere in Rochester and never, not even in poems where it seems most straightforwardly a physical matter: 'The Fall' or that wry grafting of Donne's 'Extasie' on to Ovid, 'The Imperfect Enjoyment', is it without its transcendental shadow. Jeremy Collier once pointed out irately that the association of one's mistress with Heaven had become a blasphemous Restoration commonplace. In 'Absent from Thee', it is far more than this. The poem embodies the state of mind in which Burnet found Rochester before his final illness and mystical experience: desirous but at the same time despairing of commitment, haunted by the idea of a position of rest and stasis involving more than mere sexual fidelity, but unable to encompass it.

Rochester's death-bed conversion caused rejoicing among the godly, but also a good deal of perplexity to his old friends. The temptation then, as indeed now, was to regard it as yet another of his roles, the last part assumed. There are certain indications that Rochester himself feared for its permanence. He wished to die before there could be any risk of his mind's alteration. Nat Lee, in *The Princess of Cleve*, could not resist

a sneer at the man his play otherwise mourns so movingly.
Nemours points out acidly in the last lines that

He well Repents that will not Sin, yet can,
But Death-bed Sorrow rarely shews the Man.

Rochester's old companion and fellow-reveller Fanshaw fled from the obsessive pieties of the death-bed at Woodstock convinced that his friend had gone mad. He hadn't, but he had effectively ceased to be Rochester. The very anonymity of the last letters, and of the recantation and apology for his past life which he dictated and signed on 19 June 1680 is startling. They could have been written by anyone. A whole personality has collapsed simultaneously with the doubts and contradictions at its centre. Rochester told Robert Parsons, his mother's chaplain, that he intended to turn to the composition of religious poetry if he lived. What it might have been like is an interesting speculation, considering that by his conversion the whole former basis of his art—doubt, rationalism, the confusion of good and evil, sensuality, the assumption of false faces—had been swept away. In a sense, the final scene of his life was inevitable from the beginning. Looking at the poetry, at the letters, the biography, and at that strange portrait in Warwick Castle in which he is depicted crowning an ape with the laurels of poetry, it is hard not to think of Rochester as the archetypal Man of Herbert's 'The Pulley'. Endowed by God with beauty, strength, wisdom, honour, and pleasure, he had everything but peace of mind. And that, in the end, was the point of this sinister compact.

Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlessness;
Let him be rich and wearie, that at least,
If goodnesse leade him not, yet wearinesse
May tosse him to my breast.