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(Dr. Samuel Johnson) As a critic

Dr. Johnson's critical writings are living literature as Dryden's for instance are not. Johnson's criticism belongs with the living classics. As a critic, Dr. Johnson was well equipped. He had a tremendous mental vigour as well as clarity of perception. His acute acuteness of observation was combined with a wonderful candour of judgement and expression. He has some central points of view which he defended with all his bullish strength. Dr. Johnson has two important works of criticism -

(a) Preface to Shakespeare (b) Lives of Poets

Dr. Johnson's "Preface to Shakespeare" appended to his edition of Shakespeare. It is according to David Daiches "one of the noblest monuments of English neo-classic criticism". No modern editor of Shakespeare can ignore what Dr. Johnson has to say about Shakespeare. The "Preface" represents effectively all the good and bad qualities of Johnson as a critic. It is certainly the most masterly piece of literary criticism. All Johnson's gifts are seen at their best in it - lucidity, the virile energy and the individuality of style. He believes that Shakespeare is the supreme expression not only of the English race but of the whole world.

Johnson is, however, not a strict-jacketed neo-classicist. He admits of occasional departure even from his pet principles. "The end of writing", Johnson says, "is to instruct, the end of

poetry is to instruct by pleasing". Thus, one of the reasons why praise Shakespeare is treated by Johnson as his "defect". He supports the happy ending of "King Lear" as narrated by Tate and others. Dr. Johnson's most mature and sustained critical work is "The Lives of the Poets". It was intended to be a series of introductions to the works of the English poets from Cowley and Milton down to fifty-two poets. It is a characteristic of the work that it deals with only the poets of the neo-classical tradition. We may not accept "The Lives of the Poets" as a guide, but it is a good companion. He passes a clear verdict on every poet. He defined, in his dictionary a critic as "A man able to distinguish the faults and beauties of writing".

Some strong personal prejudices also have a free play in his criticism. Johnson's contempt for Milton's sonnets is due to his dislike of the sonnets as a poetic form. He is harsh to Swift as he somewhat suspects his religious sincerity. He condemned Cowley and the entire metaphysical poetry's appreciation is built mainly on the neo-classical premises. Dr. Johnson's disapproval of Gray and Collins is not due to his disapproval of all romantic tendencies but due to his disapproval of all artificial and extravagant language.

The business of criticism in Dr. Johnson's words is to free literary judgement from "The Anarchy of Ignorance, the Caprices of Fancy and tyranny of Prescriptions and to assign values on rational ground."