

**Literature, Politics and Representation in English Neoclassicism:
The Hobbes-Davenant Exchange**

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Resumo: A teoria literária de Thomas Hobbes é muito menos conhecida do que sua teoria política. O presente artigo centra-se na colaboração de Hobbes com o poeta, dramaturgo e empreendedor teatral William Davenant por volta de 1650. Enquanto que Hobbes estava trabalhando em sua obra prima, **O Leviatã**, ele estava envolvido também numa discussão das funções e usos da literatura e escreveu uma resposta para o elaborado prefácio de Davenant ao seu (inacabado) poema épico **Gondibert**. Essa troca de ideias encontrou poucos admiradores e raramente tem sido estudada, muito embora seja um dos documentos fundadores do Neoclassicismo inglês. Escrito por monarquistas ingleses na França, logo após a execução do Rei Charles I, repercute com as ideias e debates políticos de seu tempo e contém insights muito valiosos sobre a conceptualização funcional de literatura no século XVII. O artigo tenta elucidar esses insights; tenta demonstrar também as sutis, porém profundas, diferenças entre a compreensão maquiavélica de literatura de Davenant e a (surpreendente) abordagem menos abertamente política para o “controle do imaginário”, de Luiz Costa Lima.

Palavras-chave: Neoclassicismo inglês; teoria política; Hobbes, Thomas; Davenant, William.

Abstract: The literary theory of Thomas Hobbes is much less well-known than his political theory. The present article focuses on Hobbes’s collaboration with the poet, playwright and theatrical entrepreneur William Davenant around 1650. While Hobbes was working on his

magnum opus, **Leviathan**, he was also engaged in a discussion of the functions and uses of literature and wrote a response to Davenant's elaborate theoretical preface to his (never completed) epic poem **Gondibert**. This exchange of ideas has found few admirers and has rarely been studied, even though it is one of the foundational documents of English neoclassicism. Written by English royalists in France, shortly after the execution of King Charles I, it resonates with the political ideas and debates of its time and contains highly valuable insights into the functional conceptualization of literature in the 17th century. The article attempts to elucidate these insights; it also seeks to demonstrate the subtle but profound differences between Davenant's Machiavellian understanding of literature and Hobbes's (surprisingly) less overtly political approach to the 'control of the imaginary', by Luiz Costa Lima.

Key-Words: English neoclassicism; political theory; literary theory; Hobbes, Thomas; Davenant, William.

The torso of William Davenant's epic poem *Gondibert*, published in 1651, shares more than the year of publication with Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Davenant, having lived in exile in Paris since 1646, decided to dedicate his work to Hobbes, who was part of the English royalist circle in Paris at the time. He states in his preface that Hobbes accompanied the genesis of the poem in "a daylie examination as it was writing"¹ and supplied many corrections and improvements. In spite of his being in the midst of composing his *magnum opus*, the *Leviathan*, Hobbes obliged by writing an "Answer" to Davenant's preface to be included in the publication.² This brief text has been seen to contain "the clearest exposition of [Hobbes's] theory of the fancy"³ and of his ideas of the function of poetry. Together, the two texts form a sort of manifesto for a materialist understanding of literature around 1650. Surprisingly, it is not Hobbes but Davenant who explicitly discusses the political and ideological functions of poetry, while Hobbes's text seems more reticent and perhaps not always supportive of Davenant's ideas. So far, the collaboration between Hobbes and

¹ William Davenant, "THE AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO HIS MUCH HONOR'D FRIEND, M. Hobbes," *Sir William Davenant's Gondibert*, ed. David F. Gladish (Oxford, 1971), pp. 3-44, p. 3.

² Thomas Hobbes, "THE ANSWER OF Mr. HOBBS TO SIR WILL. D'AVENANT'S PREFACE BEFORE GONDIBERT," *Sir William Davenant's Gondibert*, ed. Gladish, pp. 45-55.

³ Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge, Eng., 1996), p. 333.

Davenant has received surprisingly little, if any, detailed critical attention.⁴ This is even more surprising since the Davenant-Hobbes exchange is one of the foundational documents of English neoclassicism. Written by English royalists in France, shortly after the execution of King Charles I, it resonates with the political ideas and debates of its time and contains highly valuable insights into the functional conceptualization of literature in the 17th century.

The following reading attempts to elucidate these insights and thus to cast some interpretative light on a crucial moment of transit (and connection) in early modern literary theory and political thought. It also seeks to demonstrate the subtle but profound differences between Davenant's Machiavellian understanding of literature and Hobbes's (surprisingly) less overtly political approach to the 'control of the imaginary.'⁵

1.

In Hobbes's diagram of the subjects of knowledge in *Leviathan*, poetry is classified as a branch of natural philosophy, on a par with rhetoric, logic, and jurisprudence.⁶ Poetry is not an autonomous realm of study, but one of the scientific disciplines concerned with language. The distinction between poetry and eloquence appears to be rather fluid, as Hobbes derives the very definition of poetry from rhetorical epideixis ("*Magnifying, Vilifying*"). Poetry communicates opinions that influence the passions, similar to the "colours" of rhetoric.⁸ Poetry uses "Metaphors, and Tropes of speech"⁹ that work on the fancy rather than judgment; in poetry, these inconstant forms of signification have a decorative rather than persuasive function; they are "less dangerous, because they profess their inconstancy."¹⁰ According to

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⁴ For a more detailed investigation, in the wider context of English neoclassicism, see Ingo Berensmeyer, "*Angles of Contingency*": *Literarische Kultur im England des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2007), 151-162.

⁵ See Luiz Costa Lima, *Control of the Imaginary: Reason and Imagination in Modern Times*, trans. Ronald W. Sousa (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988).

⁶ *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge, Eng., 1996), 1.9, p. 61.

⁷ *Leviathan* 1.9, p. 61.

⁸ Cf. Francis Bacon, *Of the Coulers of Good and Evill* in the first edition of the *Essayes* (London, 1597); Hobbes, *A Briefe of the Art of Rhetorique* (London, 1637), modern ed. by John T. Harwood, *The Rhetorics of Thomas Hobbes and Bernard Lamy* (Southern Illinois UP, 1986). On the history of the term "rhetorical colour," see Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, pp. 195-98.

⁹ *Leviathan* 1.4, p. 31.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Hobbes, the ‘danger’ arises when poetic use of speech is confused with the literal, i.e. when the line that separates poetry from persuasive rhetoric is crossed and “reasoning” is based on metaphors instead of definitions – which can only lead to “contention, and sedition.”¹¹ Judgment is therefore needed to keep this line of demarcation stable. In Hobbes’s thought, the boundary between fictional and pragmatic modes of representation is not systematic and clear-cut; like the meaning of words, these modes are context-dependent and use-determined. This is quite clearly stated in *The Elements of Law* (1640):

Another use of speech is INSTIGATION and APPEASING, by which we increase or diminish one another’s passions; it is the same thing with persuasion: the difference not being real. [...] And as in raising an opinion from passion, any premises are good enough to infer the desired conclusion; so, in raising passion from opinion, it is no matter whether the opinion be true or false, or the narration historical or fabulous. For not truth, but image, maketh passion; and a tragedy affecteth no less than a murder if well acted.¹²

Imaginative literature, independent of genre, has an effect upon its readers or its audience because it works upon the passions, and it is this performative character of producing opinions from passions that counts in Hobbes’s theory, rather than formal definitions of genre: “any premises are good enough to infer the desired conclusion.” The psychological effect (arousal or appeasement) depends on the context in which it occurs, on the intention of those who wish to produce it, and on the degree of perfection in the performance: “a tragedy affecteth no less than a murder if well acted.” Apparently, Hobbes is here thinking in terms of larger audiences, crowds in a Greek amphitheatre or an English playhouse. When he imagines an individual reader of fiction, he also emphasizes the production of fictitious *images* in the mind: “So when a man compoundeth the image of his own person, with the image of the actions of an other man; as when a man imagins

¹¹ *Leviathan* 1.5, p. 36.

¹² Hobbes, *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic*, ed. J.C.A. Gaskin (Oxford, 1994), 1.13.7, p. 76.

himselfe a *Hercules*, or an *Alexander*, (which happeneth often to them that are much taken with reading of Romants) it is a compound imagination, and properly but a Fiction of the mind.”¹³

The meaning of the word “image” in this passage is complex; if it is related to the phrase “image maketh passion” cited above, it becomes quite clear that “image” cannot only be understood as a visual representation in the mind but as a representation that is coloured by opinion: to imagine oneself a Hercules is to have a magnified opinion of one’s own abilities or one’s own heroic character. An image, in this sense, can never be true but must always have a certain falsifying or beautifying spin to it; Hobbes’ use of the term “image” anticipates some aspects of its modern usage in public relations and advertising.

Evidently, Hobbes does not think about literature in aesthetic terminology. This is not because such terminology would not have been available to him; rather, he deliberately avoids its use for strategic reasons. Instead, he writes about poetry in terms of a psychology of perception. Not for Hobbes the neoplatonic talk of “everlasting beauty” or “inward light.”¹⁴ For the materialist, after all, “[l]ight is a fancy in the minde, caused by motion in the braine, which motion againe is caused by the motion of the parts of such bodies, as we call lucid.”¹⁵

Poetry, like rhetoric, has an ideological and ultimately political function for Hobbes and for many of his contemporaries: its purpose is to modify the ways in which people perceive their conditions of living and those who govern them. Hobbes explicates and radicalizes what is already inherent in Renaissance literary theory: the connection between poetic language and human action. For Sir Philip Sidney, for instance, poetry is famously not defined by formal criteria (“it is not rhyming and versing that maketh a poet”) but by its intentions and effects: what makes a poet “is that feigning notable *images* of virtues, vices, or what else, with that delightful

¹³ *Leviathan* 1.2, p. 16. The dangers of such ‘compounding’ are emphasized in a similar passage in *The Elements of Law*: “the gallant madness of Don Quixote is nothing else but an expression of such height of vain glory as reading of romants may produce in pusillanimous men” (1.10.9, p. 63).

¹⁴ Sir Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry* (1595), in *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan van Dorsten (Oxford, 1973), pp. 73-121, p. 77, 91.

¹⁵ Hobbes, *A Minute or First Draught of the Optiques* (1646), cit. in Jan Prins, “Hobbes on Light and Vision,” *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*, ed. Tom Sorell (Cambridge, Eng., 1996), pp. 129-56, p. 150 n.17.

teaching” that leads to “virtuous action.”¹⁶ Hobbes, who typically thinks in terms of populations rather than individuals, transforms Sidney’s celebration of poetry as “of all sciences [...] the monarch”¹⁷ into a pragmatic admonition to the sovereign concerning the dangers and uses of poetic language. The study of poetry, for Hobbes, is the science of controlling these dangers and converting them into useful instruments of politics.

Hobbes begins by repeating the commonplace Renaissance definition of the role of poets as laid down in Sidney’s *Defence of Poesy*: “by imitating humane life, in delightfull and measur’d lines, to avert men from vice, and encline them to vertuous and honorable actions.”¹⁸ The matrix of poetic genres which he devises to describe “the Nature and differences of Poesy” (p. 45) is a conventional system of correspondences between three major “sorts of Poesy” (heroic, scommatic, pastoral), “regions of the universe” (heaven, air, earth) and “regions of mankind” (court, city, country).¹⁹ These “sorts of Poesy” are further distinguished “in the manner of *Representation*, which sometimes is *Narrative* [...] and sometimes *Dramatique*” (p. 45-46), resulting in six different genres, of which the epic poem – the genre of Davenant’s *Gondibert* – is the highest and noblest, associated with the heroic, with heaven and the court. This matrix typifies the normative, prescriptive style of thought dominant in early modern neoclassical poetics.²⁰

As in his other writings, Hobbes derives his idea of style from the rhetorical tradition: good style is what is appropriate in a given communicative situation, determined by conventional and rational principles. The ability to know what is appropriate in different situations and to act accordingly – which I take to be

¹⁶ Sidney, *Defence*, p. 81, 83; my italics. For Sidney, poetry can teach more effectively than philosophy, which teaches by precept, because it ‘moves’ by example and by creating suspense (84, 91-92; “holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner,” 92). Sidney does not engage in further speculation about physiological details, but derives his concept from classical tradition, especially Horace (*movere, prodesse et delectare*).

¹⁷ Sidney, *Defence*, p. 91.

¹⁸ “ANSWER OF Mr. HOBBS”, p. 45. Further quotations in parentheses.

¹⁹ Cf. Miriam M. Reik, *The Golden Lands of Thomas Hobbes* (Detroit, 1977), p. 139; Richard Nate, *Wissenschaft und Literatur im England der Frühen Neuzeit* (Munich, 2001), p. 187.

²⁰ The “Answer” is a typical representative of neoclassical thought also in its systematic approach, its critique of fancy, its plea for criteria of verisimilitude and probability, and its emphasis on decorum (“perspicuity,” “property” and “decency”). Hobbes provides a similar schematic outline of text types in *Leviathan* 1.8. Continental, especially French influences on Hobbes’s literary theory are probable but there is no solid evidence for their existence; cf. Reik, *Golden Lands* p. 151, 220 n.45 on Minturno; Irène Simon, “Introduction,” *Neo-Classical Criticism 1660-1800*, ed. Simon (London, 1971), pp. 9-35, p. 15.

Hobbes's definition of "wit" (cf. *Leviathan* 1.8) – depends on "judgment" (also called "Discretion," the rational ability to distinguish differences and resemblances) rather than "fancy" (associative imagination).²¹ Judgment is also needed to control fancy by means of necessary restrictions: perspicuity, property, decency. "Judgement begets the strength and structure; and Fancy begets the ornaments of a Poeme" ("Answer" 49). Again, Hobbes anticipates what will become a commonplace in neoclassical literary theory: the need to exert rational control over the "Wild and Lawless" imagination.²²

Yet in the context of Hobbes's thought, this competition between fancy and judgment can be explained as a reflex of his philosophical work on the relation between images and truth, rhetoric and science, which ultimately stems from a concern for the correct and virtuous handling of (performative) language. Judging from Hobbes's use of the term "image," the "copious Imagery discreetly ordered, and perfectly registred in the memory," which forms the "materials" of fancy, is not exclusively visual, but includes rhetorical colours and figures of speech. According to Quentin Skinner, "Hobbes's thesis is [...] that the use of *ornatus* represents the

²¹ In the "Answer to the Preface," the distinction between judgment and fancy is slightly different than in *Leviathan*: Judgment, memory's "severer Sister," "busieth her selfe in grave and rigide examination of all the parts of Nature, and in registering by Letters, their order, causes, uses, differences and resemblances"; fancy, on the other hand, is "swift motion over" the "materials at hand and prepared for use [sc., by judgment]," the high-speed mental processing of "copious Imagery" (49). It has been demonstrated that Hobbes's description of fancy derives from the hermetic tradition, in particular the praise of the imagination in *Poimandres*; see Karl Schuhmann, "Rapidità del pensiero e ascensione al cielo: alcuni motivi eremetici in Hobbes," *Rivista di storia della filosofia* 40.2 (1985), 203-27; see also Horst Bredekamp, *Thomas Hobbes Visuelle Strategien. Der Leviathan: Urbild des modernen Staates. Werkillustrationen und Portraits* (Berlin, 1999), pp. 68-71. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes applies these terms outside of a literary context, in a wider psychological and moral significance; there, he identifies fancy (or "imagination") as the processing of resemblances and judgment as the processing of distinctions (cf. 1.8), places them in a hierarchical order of value, and adds the third term "wit": "Fancy, without the help of Judgement, is not commended as a Vertue: but the later which is Judgement, and Discretion, is commended for it selfe, without the help of Fancy. [...] So that where Wit is wanting, it is not Fancy that is wanting, but Discretion. Judgement therefore without Fancy is Wit, but Fancy without Judgement not" (*Leviathan* 1.8, pp. 51-52). "Discretion" can also be read as tact, the correct behaviour in a communicative social situation, as is shown by Hobbes's example: "An Anatomist, or a Physitian may speak, or write his judgement of unclean things; because it is not to please, but profit: but for another man to write his extravagant, and pleasant fancies of the same, is as if a man, from being tumbled into the dirt, should come and present himselfe before good company" (ibid., p. 52).

²² Cf. John Dryden, epistle dedicatory to *The Rival Ladies* (1664): "Imagination in a Poet is a faculty so Wild and Lawless, that, like an High-ranging Spaniel it must have cloggs tied to it, least it out-run the Judgment" (*Works of John Dryden* vol. 8, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1962, pp. 95-102, p. 101); epistle dedicatory to *Annus Mirabilis* (1666): "the faculty of imagination in the writer [...], like a nimble Spaniel, beats over and ranges through the field of Memory, till it springs the Quarry it hunted after" (*Works* vol. 1, pp. 49-56, p. 53). Even Dryden's spaniel is derived from Hobbes who, in *The Elements of Law*, compares the "quick ranging" of the mind with the "ranging of spaniels" searching for a scent (1.4.3, p. 31). Dryden's description of the operation of judgment and fancy is a precise rendering of Hobbes's empiricist theory: "When the Fancy was yet in its first Work, moving the Sleeping Images of things towards the Light, there to be Distinguish'd, and then either chosen or rejected by the Judgment [...]" (*Works* vol. 8, p. 95).

natural way of expressing the imagery of the mind, a commitment that makes him one of the earliest writers in English to employ the general term ‘imagery’ to refer to the figures and tropes of speech.”²³ Fancy is verbal as well as visual creativity, and its products are potentially deceptive unless they are supplemented and controlled by rational principles of selection, contrasting, and ordering (“judgement”), which are the methodic foundations of science. In this respect, because he insists on a neat separation and opposition between fancy and judgment, the Hobbes of 1640 appears more ‘neoclassical’ than the Hobbes of 1651, who argues (and *Leviathan* is a rhetorical turning point in this respect, in part prepared for by the “Answer to the Preface”) that a case could be made not for maintaining a clear separation between the two opposed faculties or forms of wit, but for establishing an alliance between them: “science” can then legitimately resort to rhetorical techniques of adornment and make a deliberate use of imagery (“similes, metaphors, and other tropes”²⁴) in order to persuade others of the truth of what judgment has distinguished, thereby to produce “very marvellous effects to the benefit of mankind” (“Answer” 49). “For wheresoever there is place for adorning and preferring of Errour, there is much more place for adorning and preferring of Truth, if they have it to adorn.”²⁵

In the “Answer to the Preface,” the argument for a necessary alliance between judgment and fancy is applied to works of literature (“Poesy,” “fiction”, p. 46, 51). This leads to a normative understanding of literary creation and literary theory which parallels the normative definitions and demonstrations of Hobbes’s “moral science.” In politics as well as literary theory, Hobbes is concerned with the limits of liberty, as can be seen in his proposition that “the Resemblance of truth is the utmost limit of Poeticall Liberty” (p. 51). This normative understanding involves the establishing of criteria of probability, of decorum (i.e. the observation of discursive and generic boundaries²⁶), and the emphasis on an intramundane, empirical and rational

²³ Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, p. 365. This observation qualifies Bredekamp’s reading of Hobbesian fancy as a storage device of visual images (“Bildspeicher”), cf. Bredekamp, *Hobbes Visuelle Strategien*, pp. 68-72; this would also conflict with Hobbes’s definition of imagination as “decaying sense” (*Leviathan* 1.2, p. 15, italics original).

²⁴ *Elements of Law* 1.10.4, p. 61.

²⁵ *Leviathan*, Review and Conclusion, p. 484. Cf. Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, pp. 364-66. The proposition that *Leviathan* constitutes a turning point in Hobbes’s attitude towards eloquence is the central argument of Skinner’s book.

²⁶ These are normative distinctions between poetry and history or philosophy (46) and normative distinctions between the various literary “sorts”; cf. the table given above.

foundation of subject matter²⁷ and poetology.²⁸ Hobbes applies to the theory of literature a literal and pragmatic (action-oriented) version of Renaissance poetics and practices of reading. In the process, he transposes reading and interpretation from the level of the individual reader to the level of a larger group, a multitude or an entire population (a theoretical move that is typical of his political writings as well²⁹), so that imaginative literature is viewed in the light of its social functions and political utility. In Renaissance theory, the conventional view of the purpose of “true reading” had been to follow the advice of Plutarch: “to search for Philosophie in the writings of Poets: or rather therein to practise Philosophie, by using to seek profit in pleasure, and to love the same”³⁰ – i.e. to extract, or to import from outside, “the moral philosophy that good authors mixed with their fictions”³¹ and to deduce applicable precepts from literary examples. The individual reader enjoyed a comparatively “wide latitude of response,”³² but it was an early modern commonplace to assume that literary or historical texts were read for the purposes of (mostly moral) applicability, and that every poem contained an argument about some moral or philosophical truth that could be explicated in non-poetic *sententiae*.³³ Hobbes, in the “Answer to the Preface,” effectively turns this idea around, transforming a programme of aesthetic reception into a norm of aesthetic production: his question is not how an utterance could be extracted from a text by the reader, but how the author must construct a text so that it would impart a certain message and produce the

²⁷ “the subject of a Poeme is the manners of men, not naturall causes” (46).

²⁸ In close proximity to his political arguments against enthusiasm, Hobbes mocks those versifiers who “would be thought to speake by a divine spirit” (48) or who – and here Hobbes employs a characteristic satirical technique that is frequent also in *Leviathan*: unmasking a metaphor by reading it literally – profess “to speake by inspiration, like a Bagpipe” (49). Davenant, in his Preface, calls ‘inspiration’ “a dangerous word” (22), making the same connection to enthusiasm as Hobbes.

²⁹ Cf. Richard Tuck, “Hobbes’s Moral Philosophy,” *Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*, pp. 175-207, p. 193.

³⁰ Plutarch, “How a yoong man ought to heare poets, and how he may take profit by reading poemes,” *Plutarch’s Philosophie, commonlie called, the Morals*, trans. Philemon Holland (London, 1603), pp. 19-20. Cit. in John M. Wallace, “‘Examples Are Best Precepts’: Readers and Meanings in Seventeenth-Century Poetry,” *Critical Inquiry* 1 (1974-75), pp. 273-90, p. 278.

³¹ Wallace, “‘Examples Are Best Precepts’” 278.

³² Wallace, “‘Examples Are Best Precepts’” 275.

³³ That this was indeed common practice has been documented in research on individual acts of reading and annotation. See Lisa Jardine and Anthony Grafton, “‘Studied for Action’: How Gabriel Harvey Read His Livy,” *Past & Present* 129 (1990), pp. 30-78. Jardine and Grafton propose a “transactional” model of reading, which they understand as a performative activity “intended to give rise to something else” (p. 30, cf. p. 32) and oriented towards an “application to specified goals” (p. 33); such acts of reading are not directed at capturing the ‘meaning’ of individual works but frequently involve the reading of (portions of) several texts, sometimes assisted by machinery like the book-wheel (pp. 45-48, see illustration p. 47), chosen for a particular occasion.

intended effect upon its readers.³⁴ This effect is achieved by a method similar to the optical principle of the prospective glass:

I beleeve (Sir) you have seene a curious kind of perspective, where, he that lookes through a short hollow pipe, upon a picture conteyning diverse figures, sees none of those that are there paynted, but some one person made up of their partes, conveyed to the eye by the artificiall cutting of a glasse. I find in my imagination an effect not unlike it from your Poeme. The vertues you distribute there amongst so many noble Persons, represent (in the reading) the image but of one mans vertue to my fancy, which is your owne; and that so deeply imprinted, as to stay for ever there, and governe all the rest of my thoughts, and affections [...]. (“Answer” 55)

“In the reading,” the reader’s fancy is “imprinted” with an “image” of “vertue,” an image that the text does not contain on the surface, explicitly, but which it communicates to the mind by an optical trick: uniting fragments of an image into an unexpected, new and different image. The image that appears is “some one person made up of their partes,” which exactly corresponds to the Hobbesian principle by which political sovereignty is constructed and which the artist of the *Leviathan* frontispiece presents as a visual composite image: “This is more than Consent, or Concord; it is a reall Unitie of them all, in one and the same Person [...], the Multitude so united in one Person, is called a COMMON-WEALTH, in latine CIVITAS. This is the Generation of that great LEVIATHAN, or rather [...] of that *Mortall God*, to which wee owe under the *Immortal God*, our peace and defence.”³⁵ This ‘imprint’ is “to stay for ever there” in the reader’s imagination “and governe all the rest of [his] thoughts.” The poem has reached its intended goal when it has fulfilled its function of moral teaching.

³⁴ A question that may have had effects on Hobbes’s own writing and add to the explanation of his “rhetorical turn” in *Leviathan*. Hobbes’s grateful acknowledgment of Davenant’s influence on his work (“I have used your Judgment no lesse in many thinges of mine, which comming to light will thereby *appeare the better*,” p. 54; my italics) may have a solid basis in Davenant’s contribution to this change of mind about literary strategies. Cf. Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, p. 366.

³⁵ *Leviathan* 2.17, p. 120.

Hobbes commends Davenant's heroic poem for achieving this ideal goal, but also because the content of its teaching corresponds to Hobbes's own political philosophy: "when I considered that also the actions of men, which singly are inconsiderable, after many conjunctures, grow at last either into one great protecting power, or into two destroying factions, I could not but approve the structure of your Poeme, which ought to be no other then such an imitation of humane life requireth" ("Answer" 50). For "such an imitation of humane life," the aid of metaphysical concepts is no longer required, but such notions can still be reinscribed as a metaphoric illustration of a rational theory; as is the case when Hobbes gives a hermeticist description of the "wonderfull celerity" of the imagination that can "fly from one *Indies* to the other, and from Heaven to Earth [...], into the future, and into her selfe, and all this in a point of time" (p. 49) or when he compares the influence of the stars on human behaviour with the influence of the sovereign: "For there is in Princes, and men of conspicuous power (anciently called *Heroes*) a lustre and influence upon the rest of men, resembling that of the Heavens" (p. 45).³⁶ Davenant's poem is read by Hobbes as a device in which this "influence upon the rest of men" is literally operative: its "motive" is "to adorne vertue, and procure her Lovers" (p. 48), i.e. to persuade readers of the sovereign's "vertue" and to convince the individuals that make up the commonwealth that they have to be lovers of virtue: to form a composite image of their unity, in obedient submission to a sovereign, for the sake of peace and security.

2.

Davenant's own preface, to which Hobbes's text provides an invited and certainly welcome response, is rhetorically much less complex and skilful in concealing its political message underneath and within literary criticism. Hobbes's text is to some extent self-referential, practicing what it preaches: the image which the reader is meant to see needs to be assembled from dispersed fragments and "diverse figures" of the text, in "a curious kind of perspective" (p. 55) that allows him to visualize a

³⁶ Both comparisons also occur in Davenant's Preface: "*Witte* is [...] dexterity of thought; rounding the world, like the Sun, with unimaginable motion; and bringing swiftly home to the memory universall surveys" (p. 18); on astrological influence, cf. p. 13, 38.

different image (a technique that will be visually realized in the *Leviathan* frontispiece only a year later). Davenant, in contrast to Hobbes, is not very interested in concealing his intentions; on the contrary, he announces them in fairly straightforward terms, recommending his poem as an ideological tool for inculcating obedience to the sovereign in “the People” and offering it as a form of political advice to the monarch in the manner of a courtesy book.³⁷ Its political message is a justification of absolute sovereignty in Machiavellian terms, adducing intramundane problems rather than divine causes to its legitimation (p. 30, 36), and consequently, like Hobbes, excluding the preternatural from his concept of epic poetry (p. 6).³⁸ In its historical and social context, Davenant’s preface can be read as a store-house of political and literary clichés, but like Hobbes’s “Answer” it has been influential for the development of English neoclassical criticism.

Written and published at midcentury, the preface to *Gondibert* sums up moral, aesthetic and political discussions of its time. It is an action- and goal-oriented utterance. Its context is the Civil War and the abolition of the monarchy in England: at the time of writing, the execution of Charles I in 1649 is still a recent event; Charles II has made his famous escape from England and is now a twenty-year-old exile without political power. Even absolutist France at this time is shaken by violent outbreaks of civil unrest: in 1649, the Fronde revolt temporarily forces the French royal family to withdraw to Saint Germain. The text’s immediate audience is the English royalist community in Paris, not least Charles II himself, but its background (like that of *Leviathan*) is a more fundamental political conflict between sovereign and parliament that has a continental dimension as well. The text is confidently located by Davenant at the centre of power where the French sovereign has been reinstated: “*From the Louvre in Paris / January 2. 1650*” (i.e. 1651).

Davenant refers to Hobbes in the second person in the style of a letter (“Sir”); he makes use of Hobbes as a philosophical authority, a representative of the ‘new

³⁷ Cf. Gladish’s commentary in *Sir William Davenant’s Gondibert*, ed. Gladish, p. 290: “Davenant wanted the new king to assert himself.”

³⁸ On Davenant as a Machiavellian rather than a Hobbesian, cf. Gladish, “Introduction,” *Sir William Davenant’s Gondibert*, ed. Gladish, pp. ix-xlv, p. xix: “His rather Machiavellian attitude is that, since the worst people are the most ambitious, order must be maintained by violent means. Practically every passage [in *Gondibert*] about man’s bloodthirstiness can be matched with a passage about the necessity of slaughter in a good cause.”

science,’ more precisely (and explicitly) as a “Guide” across the battlefield of learning:

For such is the vast field of Learning, where the Learned (though not numerous enough to be an Army) lye as small Partys, malitiously in Ambush, to destroy all new Men that looke into their Quarters. And from such, you, and those you lead, are secure; because you move not by common Mapps, but have painfully made your owne Prospect; and travaile now like the Sun, not to informe your selfe, but enlighten the World. (24)³⁹

Like Hobbes, Davenant is concerned with a fundamental communicative problem in the early modern period: how to cope with the precarious relationship between authors and readers in print culture, if communicative intentions are difficult to find out (by the reader) and equally difficult to achieve (by the author). His answer to this problem is radically simple: for Davenant, critics and readers are all “Enemyes” (p. 17) of writers. The author has to conquer or overpower the reader in military fashion. This predicament is not lamented, it is explained by the “imperfect Stomacks” of readers who “either devoure Bookes with over hasty Digestion, or grow to loath them from a Surfet” (p. 25). The cause of readerly indigestion is literary overproduction, which leads to a loss of interest or understanding: “so shy men grow of Bookes” (p. 24). This explains why “commonly Readers are justly Enemyes to Writers” (p. 17). The author must become inventive: he must “court, draw in, and keep [the reader] with artifice” (p. 24), he must “have [...] successe over the Reader (whom the Writer should surprize, and as it were keep prisoner for a time) as he hath on his Enemy’s” (p. 17). Aesthetic strategies are deployed as stratagems: for Davenant, as for Hobbes, the arts of rhetoric are weapons to persuade and win an audience, turning enemies into allies, “incredulity” (p. 11) into belief. Heroic poetry is the most pleasing and therefore “easy” means to “the Conquests of

³⁹ Military tropes abound in Davenant’s Preface: “this short File of Heroick Poets” (6); “like a grave Scowte in ambush for his Enemy” (18); “It being no more shame to get Learning [...] then for a forward Scoute, discovering the Enemy, to save his owne life at a Passe, where he then teaches his Party to escape” (23); “wee must joyne forces to oppose them” (25); “Conscience [...] is after melancholy visions like a fearfull Scout, after he hath ill survayd the Enemy, who then makes incongruous, long, and terrible Tales” (26); “the Gentry [...] lack sufficient defense against [the People], and are hourelly surpris’d in (their common Ambushes) their Shops” (29); “the People no more esteeme able men, whose defects they know [...] then an Enemy values a Strong Army having experience of their Errors” (33); “the Conquests of Vertue be never easy, but where her forces are commanded by Poets” (39).

Vertue” (p. 39). Davenant even develops an early functionalist understanding of literary illusion, what Coleridge would much later call the “willing suspension of disbelief”:

For wee may descend to compare the deceptions in Poesy to those of them that professe dexterity of Hand, which resembles Conjuring, and to such wee come not with the intention of *Lawyers* to examine the evidence of facts, but are content (if wee like the carriage of their feign’d motion) to pay for being well deceiv’d. (p. 11)⁴⁰

I shall think to governe the Reader (who though he be noble, may perhaps judge of supreme power like a very Commoner, and rather approve authority, when it is in many, then in one) [...]. (p. 24)

Davenant’s argument for a pragmatic, goal-oriented and strategic aesthetic communication avoids an overt problematization of the contingencies of communication between authors and their audience. Instead, he opts for straightforward solutions by means of communicative strategies, viz. the effective, manipulative use of literary techniques of suspense and illusion. We can see its influence in Restoration literary theory, e.g. in John Dryden, who cites Davenant’s Machiavellian understanding of the author as an absolute sovereign and the audience as his subjects who must be persuaded and conquered. These are precisely the terms in which Dryden, in the essay “Of Heroique Playes” (1672), argues for the use of realistic theatrical effects:

[...] these warlike Instruments, and, even the representations of fighting on the Stage, are no more than necessary to produce the effects of an Heroick Play; that is, to raise the imagination of the Audience, and to perswade them, for the time, that what they behold on the Theater is really perform’d. The Poet is, then, to endeavour an absolute dominion

⁴⁰ More than half a century later, this phrase will find a satirical echo in Swift’s *Tale of a Tub* (1704): “*Happiness [...] is a perpetuall Possession of being well Deceived.*” Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub To which is added The Battle of the Books and the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*, ed. A. C. Guthkelch and D. Nichol Smith (2nd ed. Oxford, 1958), p. 171.

over the minds of the Spectators: for, though our fancy will contribute to its own deceit, yet a Writer ought to help its operation.⁴¹

Davenant distinguishes the performative character of poetry from the imitative character of history, whose task is “to record the truth of [past] actions” (p. 5). History is concerned with “Truth narrative, and past,” poetry with “truth operative, and by effects continually alive” (p. 11). Literature communicates a “truth in the passions” (p. 5) but does so “in reason” (p. 11). Davenant recommends a rational poetics based on probability and verisimilitude,⁴² “explicable vertue, [...] plaine demonstrative justice” (p. 9); poetry is judged from the perspective of utility rather than intrinsic aesthetic qualities: “how usefull it is to Men” (28). “Poets are of all Moralists the most usefull” (41). Poetry “charm’s the People, with harmonious precepts” (30). It presents versified lessons in morality in a highly stylized rhetorical language, ultimately teaching “a willing and peaceful obedience” (p. 30) to the sovereign monarch and towards “Superiors” in general (p. 30).

But Davenant’s poetics also has a sociological dimension which strictly limits his target audience for poetry. Poetry is not for everyone. From the noble title of the author’s “Enemies,” the lower ranks of society are excluded. This saves Davenant the labour of performing complicated rhetorical manoeuvres around the problem of social cohesion and the possibility of teaching obedience to commoners by rational and linguistic means (a problem that also haunts Milton’s *Areopagitica*). Davenant has no illusions about the usefulness of measured language in ‘conquering’ “the People,” whom he derogates as “the Rabble,” “the meanest of the multitude” (p. 15) and “this wilde Monster” (p. 30). The positive influence of poetry does not reach that far down the social scale. For Davenant, “the People” have a status no higher than

⁴¹ Dryden, “Of Heroique Playes. An Essay” (preface to *The Conquest of Granada, Part I*), *The Works of John Dryden* vol. 11, ed. John Loftis and David Stuart Rhodes (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1978), pp. 8-18, pp. 13-14. In the same essay, Dryden gives Davenant credit for having invented the heroic play. Cf. William S. Clarke, “The Definition of the ‘Heroic Play’ in the Restoration Period,” *Review of English Studies* 8 (1932), pp. 473-44, p. 438. Other elements of Dryden’s criticism are equally similar to Davenant’s, e.g. the poetic idealization of nature (“Nature wrought up to an higher pitch,” *Essay of Dramatick Poesie*, *Works* 17, p. 74; “a Poem is a Picture to be seen at a distance, and therefore ought to be bigger then the life,” “Notes and Observations,” *Works* 17, p. 182).

⁴² “Story, where ever it seemes most likely, growes most pleasant” (3); “leaving such satisfaction of probabilities with the Spectator, as may persuade him that neither Fortune in the fate of the Persons, nor the Writer in the Representment, have been unnaturall or exorbitant” (16).

animals: “They looke upon the outward glory or blaze of Courts, as Wilde beasts in darke nights stare on their Hunters Torches” (p. 12). “The common Crowd (of whom we are hopelesse) we desert;⁴³ being rather to be corrected by lawes (where precept is accompany’d with punishment) then to be taught by Poesy; for few have arriv’d at the skill of Orpheus [...] whom wee may suppose to have met with extraordinary Grecian Beasts, when so successfully he reclaim’d them with his Harpe” (p. 13). The antagonism legible in these comparisons betrays an uncertainty about the stability of the relation between the governors and the governed, understandable perhaps if we consider that a republic had just been established in England: the “Wilde beasts” might turn to attack their hunters at any moment, and no Orpheus would be powerful enough to appease them. Indeed, Davenant’s argument sounds more Machiavellian than Hobbesian: “who can imagine lesse then a necessity of oppressing the people, since they are never willing either to buy their peace or to pay for Warre?” (p. 12).⁴⁴

According to Davenant, each individual imagines himself a sovereign, which accounts for the people’s tendency to disobey and resist: “being themselves a courser sort of Princes, apter to take then to pay” (p. 12). In analogy, divisions within the commonwealth are compared to internal divisions within individuals in a way that is theoretically rather diffuse and undeveloped (an issue that Hobbes prefers not to mention in his Answer). The difficulty arises from the problem of reconciling “publique Interest” and the rights of “Private men” (p. 36). Unlike Hobbes, Davenant sees “the State” and “the People” as an antagonistic opposition analogous to that between reason and passion; his passing reference to “the Law of Nature” as a rational instead of a divine basis of legitimation (according to Davenant, the law of nature makes it our duty to act rationally and to “side with Reason” against passion) is a mere shadow compared to the complexities of current natural law theory:

and so the State and the People are divided, as wee may say a man is divided within him selfe, when reason and passion dispute about

⁴³ Cf. also 8: “for with the usuall pride of Poets, I passe by common crowds, as negligently as Princes move from throngs that are not their owne Subjects” – the comparison may be inspired by Charles II’s situation in Paris, a king without a people.

⁴⁴ Davenant alludes to the Ship Money controversy which initiated the conflict between King and Parliament in the 1630s. In Hobbes’s construction of the commonwealth, in contrast to Davenant, the multitude are not oppressed but shaped into a protective unity, transcending antagonism and conflict.

consequent actions; and if wee were calld to assist at such intestine warre, wee must side with Reason, according to our duty, by the Law of Nature; and Natures Law, though not written in Stone (as was the Law of Religion) hath taken deep impression in the Heart of Man, which is harder then marble of *Mount-Sinai*. (p. 36)

What remains unclear in this exposition is the precise relation between “Man” as an abstraction (in whose “Heart” is inscribed the law of nature) and “a man,” who is internally divided between reason and passion. The abstraction remains curiously unrelated to the concrete individual who, if he could read the law of nature, would not have to “dispute about consequent actions” but would not hesitate to act with certainty according to rational principles. Hobbes’s *Leviathan* will propose a rational answer to this tricky question, thinking sovereignty and the multitude as a unity rather than an opposition; but Davenant’s tentative searching and muddled thinking on this subject allows us to see how strongly such an answer was desired and sought after in royalist circles in 1650.

The legitimation gap between the “usefulness” of heroic poetry for inculcating obedience to the sovereign in the upper echelons of society and its uselessness for the vulgar multitude remains unbridged in Davenant’s exposition. He attempts to compensate for this by including a social component in his otherwise Aristotelian theory of mimesis. It is enough, Davenant avers, to educate those who can be educated; the others will follow suit because they always imitate their “Superiors”: “to Imitation, Nature [...] perhaps doth needfully encline us, to keepe us from excesses. For though every man be capable of worthinesse and unworthinesse (as they are defin’d by Opinion) yet no man is built strong enough to beare the extremities of either, without unloading himselfe upon others shoulders, even to the wearinesse of many” (8).

Imitation is a human constant (“constant humor,” 9) that checks social excesses “for the safety of mankind [...] by dulling and stopping our progresse,” setting “limits to courage and to learning, to wickedness and to erour” (9). Davenant here describes a social mechanism of self-control that is central to an early modern understanding of individuality: “imitation” is a technique of observing the self as if

this observation came from the outside, from the “Opinion” of others; this technique enforces a moderation of the passions and promotes behaviour conforming to social norms. The heroic poem presents “patternes of human life, that are (perhaps) fit to be follow’d” (12). This ideal is still fully present at the end of the century. In the preface to his translation of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Dryden states that “The shining Quality of an Epick Heroe, his Magnanimity, his Constancy, his Patience, his Piety, or whatever Characteristical Virtue his Poet gives him, raises first our Admiration: We are naturally prone to imitate what we admire: And frequent Acts produce a habit.”⁴⁵ Earlier, in his dedication of *The Conquest of Granada* to the Duke of York, Dryden had defended the loftiness of heroic drama in terms similar to Davenant’s social mimesis: “The feign’d Heroe inflames the true: and the dead vertue animates the living. Since, therefore, the World is govern’d by precept and Example; and both these can onely have influence from those persons who are above us, that kind of Poesy which excites to vertue the greatest men, is of greatest use to humane kind.”⁴⁶

If techniques of social observation and imitation can transcend and outweigh differences of social rank, no levelling of poetry is necessary to achieve its intended trickle-down effect, which, beginning “from those persons who are above us,” will eventually reach even ‘commoners’: “Nor is it needfull that Heroique Poesy should be levell’d to the reach of Common men; for if the examples it presents prevaile upon their Chiefs, the delight of Imitation [...] will rectify by the rules, which those Chiefs establish of their owne lives, the lives of all that behold them.”⁴⁷

Davenant’s preface to *Gondibert* culminates in a eulogy of poetry as an ideological weapon for the benefit of the commonwealth (a term he avoids, preferring the more authoritarian, Machiavellian and modern words “state” or “government”). In a striking image alluding to the contingency of Machiavellian *fortuna*, the state is compared to a ship driven by “uncertaine” winds, while various

⁴⁵ Dryden, “TO THE MOST HONOURABLE John, Lord Marquess of Normanby, EARL of MULGRAVE, &c. [...]” (Dedication of the *Aeneis*, 1697), *The Works of John Dryden* vol. 5, ed. William Frost (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1987), pp. 267-341, p. 271.

⁴⁶ Dryden, “To His ROYAL HIGHNESS The DUKE” (epistle dedicatory to *The Conquest of Granada*, 1672), *The Works of John Dryden* vol. 11, ed. John Loftis and David Stuart Rhodes (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1978), pp. 3-7, p. 3.

⁴⁷ Davenant 13. Echoed by Hobbes: “there is in Princes [...] a lustre and influence upon the rest of men, resembling that of the Heavens” (45); cf. also Davenant 38: the “operations [of poets] are as resistlesse, secret, easy, and subtle, as is the influence of Planetts” (38).

pilots (ecclesiastic, military, executive and legislative powers) cannot agree on the right course to “the Land of Peace and Plenty” (34), a variation on the medieval topos of the ship of fools:

me thinks Goverment [sic] resembles a Ship, where though *Divines, Leaders of Armys, Statesmen, and Judges* are the trusted Pilots; yet it moves by the means of Windes, as uncertaine as the breath of Opinion; and is laden with the People; a Freight much loosser, and more dangerous then any other living stowage; being as troublesome in faire weather, as Horses in a Storme. (34)

After presenting the differing viewpoints and mutual observations of the four “pilots,” culminating in the thesis that every party’s perspective determines its perception of reality, leading them to “an emulous warr among themselves” which weakens their power. To “strengthen” them, Davenant proposes the “collaterall help” of poetry. This time, his earlier qualifications about social restriction have curiously disappeared, because now he does suggest that poetry might serve as an ideological weapon to constrain “the People” – “still making the People our direct object,” i.e. target (p. 37):

wee shall not erre by supposing that this conjunction of Fourefold Power [Religion, Armes, Policy, Law] hath faild in the effects of authority, by a misapplication; for it hath rather endeavord to prevaile upon their bodys, then their mindes; forgetting that the martiall art of constraining is the best; which assaults the weaker part; and the weakest part of the People is their mindes; for want of that which is the Mindes only Strength, *Education*; but their Bodys are strong by continuall labour; for Labour is the Education of the Body. Yet when I mention the misapplication of force, I should have said, they have not only faild by that, but by a maine error; Because the subject on which they should worke is the Minde; and the Minde can never be constrain’d, though it may be gain’d by Persuasion: And since Persuasion is the principall Instrument which can bring to fashion the brittle and misshapen mettall of the Minde, none are so fitt aides to this important worke as Poets: whose art is more then any enabled with a voluntary, and cheerfull assistance of Nature; and whose

operations are as resistlesse, secret, easy, and subtle, as is the influence of Planetts.

Uneducated minds are easy prey for rhetorical weapons of mass persuasion. For Davenant, heroic poetry is of “particular strength” in this respect because it “hath a force that overmatches the infancy of such mindes as are not enabled by degrees of Education” (38). In terms recalling Francis Bacon’s celebration of the new science as an attack on nature (imagined as a woman to be “enjoyed;” cf. Davenant 17), Davenant presents the conquering of people’s minds as a “ravishment of Reason” (38). Yet whereas Bacon’s aggressive scientific exploration is meant to produce an increase in scientific knowledge, Davenant’s “delightfull insinuations” are to generate political obedience (38).

Similarly, Davenant’s definition of wit – “dexterity of thought; rounding the world, like the Sun, with unimaginable motion; and bringing swiftly home to the memory universall survays” (18) – implies a panoptic (controlling and hierarchical) observer position, constructing a (geocentric) equivalence between the ‘motion picture’ of imagination and the motion of the Sun.⁴⁸ Flatteringly, Davenant’s praise of Hobbes places the philosopher in this privileged solar position: he travels “like the Sun” to “enlighten the world” (24). As in Aristotelian optics, seeing and emitting light are the same process. Rather than a glimpse of transcendence, Davenant’s poetry is to provide “universall survays” of “the world.” Wit, for Davenant, is the ability to manage or control (visually: *survey*) the volatility and complexity of the world, like a solar sovereign (the image anticipates Louis XIV’s description as *Roi Soleil*), in appropriate and socially convincing ways: “all that finde its strength [...] worship it for the *effects*” (18, my italics). These effects of wit could be specified according to different offices⁴⁹ as perceived qualities of successful social action:

⁴⁸ On panopticism in the *âge classique*, see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1979); Foucault’s analysis claims that “observing hierarchies” (184) in early modernity serve to normalize the value judgments internalized by epistemologically “imprisoned” subjects.

⁴⁹ On the prevalence of a flexible concept of offices (derived from Cicero’s *De officiis*) that emphasize performativity rather than a stable quality of selfhood or presupposition of identity in early modernity, see Conal Condren, “Historicism and the Problem of Renaissance ‘Self-Fashioning,’” *The Touch of the Real. Essays in Early Modern Culture in Honour of Stephen Greenblatt*, ed. Philippa Kelly (Crawley, Australia, 2002), pp. 105-24.

It is in Divines Humility, Exemplarinesse, and Moderation; In Statesmen Gravity, Vigilance, Benigne Complaisancy, Secrecy, Patience, and Dispatch. In Leaders of Armys Valor, Painfulnesse, Temperance, Bounty, Dexterity in Punishing, and rewarding, and a sacred Certitude of promise. It is in Poets a full comprehension of all recited in all these; and an ability to bring those comprehensions [sic] into action [...]. (p. 18-19)

According to Davenant, the function of poetry is to recall “the true measure of what is of greatest consequence to humanity, (which are things righteous, pleasant and usefull)” (19). This function is exclusively inner-worldly and rational: it is to negotiate the different perspectives of the proto-systemic “official” divisions of his time (religious, political, military) in a unified, superordinate perspective (“what is of greatest consequence to *humanity*”); its goal is not to totalize only one of these perspectives but to present a harmony in diversity. What these perspectives have in common is the classical notion of *humanitas* as a virtue that transcends the specifications of office, a residue that nevertheless is reserved “for potential respecification in terms of further official attributes.”⁵⁰

This perspectivism can be linked to the comparison Davenant makes between poetry and painting, particularly the modern genre of landscape painting. Literary texts, like painting, use techniques of illusion to achieve their intended effects. Like the landscape painter who uses the technique of single-point perspective (as developed in Renaissance Italy and codified in Alberti’s *Della pittura*, 1436) – and like the sun, who inhabits God’s birdseye view – the poet, if he has wit, can aspire to be a “considering” observer who visualizes and controls a prospect that he can align along a grid (like the spider in its web⁵¹) and “represent” as “the Worlds

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*Literature,
Politics and
Representation in
English
Neoclassicism:
The Hobbes-
Davenant
Exchange*

Ingo
Berensmeyer

⁵⁰ Condren, “Historicism,” p. 116. Cf. Cicero, *De oratore* 1.8.32: “quid esse potest in otio aut iucundius, aut magis proprium humanitatis, quam sermo facetus ac nulla in re rudis?” The translators of the Loeb edition render *humanitas* as ‘culture’, which is somewhat imprecise and anachronistic but nevertheless telling for the development of a modern concept of culture as leisure activity: “what in hours of ease [i.e. outside of official determinations] can be a pleasanter thing or one more characteristic of culture, than discourse that is graceful and nowhere uninstructed?” Trans. E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass. and London, Eng., 1942), pp. 24-25. In Cicero, *humanitas* is specified as “the cultivation of kindly or philanthropic feelings, and hence the exercise of liberality, generosity, gratitude.” See Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, pp. 77-78; for the conceptual afterlife of *humanitas* in early modern English moralists (Elyot, Robinson, Hall, Blundeville), see *ibid.* pp. 78-81; in Hobbes, pp. 316-19.

⁵¹ Davenant’s ‘spider’ conceit is quite elaborate – and striking in its attribution of intentional behaviour to animals – and deserves to be cited in full: “[Wit] is a Webb consisting of the subtlest threds, and like that of the *Spider* is considerably woven out of our selves; for a *Spider* may be said to consider, not only respecting his solemnnesse,

true image” to the view of other spectators: “Poets (whose businesse should represent the Worlds true image often to our view) are not lesse prudent than Painters, who when they draw Landscaps entertaine not the Eye wholly with even Prospect, and a continu’d Flatte; but (for variety) terminate the sight with lofty Hills, whose obscure heads are sometimes in the Clowdes” (4). Understood in terms of perspective, wit is for poetry what the vanishing point is for painting: it ensures that the representation is configured in such a way that the spectator/reader is made to see “the Worlds true image” just as the painter/poet intended it to be seen.

It should be clear by now that Davenant’s text is of some interest as an early English neoclassical text that praises poetry in rationalist and Baconian terms as “the best Expositor of Nature” (40). It anticipates Dryden’s famous essays by a significant number of years. It is also a highly self-consciously tactical text, using what Davenant perceives as the authority and influence of Hobbes to address the monarch himself, certainly with the purpose of gaining political protection. In 1650, Hobbes, the former mathematics tutor of Charles II, was on his way to becoming an important political advisor to the king in exile; a future destroyed shortly afterwards, most probably at the hands of Edward Hyde, with the publication of *Leviathan*. The extreme density of rhetorical flourishes in the preface to *Gondibert*, together with declarations of servitude to the sovereign, are evidence enough that Davenant intended this text – and doubtless *Gondibert* itself – as a means of self-promotion in the eyes of the monarch: his aim was to assert not only the king’s (and Hobbes’s) but also his own position as chief of court poets and as a political advisor *in poeticis* to the king.

This interpretation can be corroborated by Davenant’s own comments. In the preface, he not only reveals his utilitarian attitude towards poetry but also towards his own motivations for writing it. He frankly confesses “that the desire of Fame made me a Writer” (26). Davenant was very conscious of the observation of others

and tacite posture (like a grave Scowte in ambush for his Enemy) but because all things done, are either from consideration, or chance; and the workes of chance are accomplishments of an instant, having commonly a dissimilitude; but hers are the works of time, and have their contextures alike” (18). The passage is omitted in Davenant’s *Works* of 1673. The spider’s web and the draughtsman’s grid share the aspect of perspectival control (“survey”) of a prospect; their intent is to ‘capture’ something of reality beyond the grid (“the Worlds true image”). The (not only metaphorical but quite real) implications of the grid for the relation between control (“consideration”) and contingency (“chance”) in early modernity are explored with much virtuosity in Peter Greenaway’s film *The Draughtsman’s Contract*.

and thus of the presence or absence of royal favour, approval and esteem. After the first books of *Gondibert* proved a critical failure, Davenant did not see any point in continuing it but returned to a form that was more compatible with his gifts – the theatre. He became a successful theatrical entrepreneur who knew how to ingratiate himself in a good cause: his own. His talents would make him not only the father of English neoclassicism, but of Restoration drama as well: in 1660, when monarchy had returned to England, Charles II authorized Thomas Killigrew and Sir William Davenant to run the only two officially licensed theatres in London, the King’s and the Duke’s. The text of the royal warrant had been drafted by Davenant himself.⁵²

Davenant’s great epic may have been an even greater failure; so, for a while, was Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, which did not find approval at court and was banned after the Restoration. And yet some of Hobbes’s ideas, even individual phrases, were to resurface in the liberal political theory of Locke in the 1680s; and Davenant’s preface was to enjoy an afterlife at least in English neoclassical poetics, which he can be said to have invented. As David F. Gladish observes, literary history has celebrated Milton, but literary practice has followed Davenant;⁵³ and in a sense, the rational and realist ‘modernism’ (*sit venia verbo*) of Davenant brings down the curtain on the English Renaissance.

3.

If Hobbes’s claim that Davenant had contributed ideas to the writing of *Leviathan* is true, some possible points of inspiration can be found in the preface to *Gondibert*. They concern Hobbes’s specialty: optical metaphors and perspectives. In Davenant’s text, the leaders of armies observe politicians “with the Eye of Envy (which enlarges objects like a multiplying-glasse [...]) and think them immense as *Whales*” (35).⁵⁴ In *Leviathan*, this image is applied to “all men” and generalized to a definition of egoism: “For all men are by nature provided of notable multiplying glasses, (that is

⁵² Public Record Office, London, manuscript SP29/8/1.

⁵³ Gladish, “Introduction,” p. xxiii.

⁵⁴ The whale also appears in a previous passage in Davenant’s text, where it is said that “the Mindes of Men are more monstrous [...] then the Bodies of Whales” (31). It should not be forgotten that *Leviathan* is the name of a biblical sea-monster, often identified with a whale (cf. Job 40-41). Hobbes’s theory uses this monstrosity as a motivation (fear) for resolving it, by transposing it to the higher order of the ‘body politic,’ which appears monstrous only on the outside, not to those who inhabit it and are protected by it.

their Passions and Selfe-love,) through which, every little payment appeareth a great grievance.”⁵⁵ Davenant also makes a comment on “the generality of men” using the image of an inverted telescope: “who think the best objects of their owne country so little to the size of those abroad, as if they were shew’d them by the wrong end of a Prospective” (11). Other optical figures of speech in Davenant include the topical mirror of mimesis: “in a perfect glasse of Nature [the Heroick Poem] gives us a familiar and easy view of our selves” (3), and “Poets [...] should represent the Worlds true image often to our view” (4). Hobbes appears to agree with both: “Poets are Paynters: I would faine see another Painter draw so true perfect and natural a Love to the Life, and make use of nothing but pure lines [...]” (50), and yet he inserts a characteristic qualification that distances himself from Davenant’s self-congratulatory statements and conventional allusions: “For *in him that professes the imitation of Nature*, (as all Poets do) what greater fault can there be, then to bewray an ignorance of nature in his Poeme” (51-52, my italics). Hobbes appears less interested in Davenant’s “perfect glasse” than, as we have seen, in glasses that are “artificially cut” (cf. 55) and that do not simply reproduce an image but generate a new and different image by technical means. Whether this disagreement, slight though it may appear, can be attributed to a more deep-seated divergence between Hobbes and Davenant is a question that can only be answered very tentatively. Hobbes responds to Davenant’s optics of reflection with an optics of analysis and recomposition. Does Hobbes’s “Answer to the Preface” contain a hidden rebuke against Davenant that is only visible if fragments of the text are reassembled – as if read through a special lens or “artificial glass”?

The two texts were meant to be read side by side, most probably conceived by Davenant as a strategic intervention in the literary and political culture of 1651, especially the local court culture of the Paris exiles. But there is a curious anomaly in this duality. In his text, by commending the poem, Hobbes goes to some lengths to avoid direct comments on the preface; his text is less an answer to Davenant’s *preface* than a response to his *poem*. Is Hobbes concealing his disapproval of Davenant’s absolutist political ideas, or a number of them, or the rhetorical manner

⁵⁵ *Leviathan* 2.18, p. 129.

in which these ideas are proposed? This is probably impossible to determine. Yet does the lack of disapproval or even of discussion imply that Hobbes agrees wholeheartedly with all of Davenant's arguments? I think the point can be made that this need not be the case. Firstly, he may have been careful to observe the rules of decorum, which would not have allowed him to utter overt criticism in such a text. It is astonishing enough that Hobbes *does* utter some explicit criticism of Davenant's preface, if only concerning a minor point about age.⁵⁶ Secondly, it would have been politically unwise to slight a poet who enjoyed royal favour. Thirdly: if in answer to a theoretical text introducing a poem, Hobbes concentrates on the poem instead of the theoretical text, adding his own theoretical elaborations without touching those he is supposed to answer, does this not come close enough to disqualifying Davenant as a theorist? Perhaps Hobbes's reference to the perspective glass can also be read as a veiled hint at his predicament of being forced to use techniques of camouflage and dissimulation in order to conceal his actual opinion of Davenant's ideas. He has indeed, in Davenant's words, "painfully made [his] owne Prospect" (24). Read in this way, significant ruptures become visible in what would otherwise appear as a strategic alignment between literature, politics and representation at midcentury. The Hobbes-Davenant exchange would thus offer a glimpse of how Hobbes in 1650, forced to respond to the Machiavellian absolutists among his royalist co-exiles, signals his reluctance by making covert gestures of resistance and retreat – not drowning, perhaps, but definitely waving.

⁵⁶ If we accept a 'covert' interpretation of Hobbes's "Answer" (reading it as the condemnation of Davenant's preface that Hobbes could not possibly have written, but which he might have preferred to write), the phrases he uses when he does utter some critique become very telling: "And now, whilst I thinke on't, give me leave with a short discord to sweeten the Harmony of the approaching close" (read: displaying awareness of decorum = Hobbes knows that he is in a communicative situation where he has to be careful of what he writes; there is some strain in the mixed metaphor and the contextually inappropriate verb in the phrase "to sweeten the Harmony" = Hobbes knows he has to 'sweeten' his discourse, so he uses this verb instead of one denoting bitterness). "I have nothing to object against your Poeme" (but note the previous disclaimer: "Incompetent, because I am not a Poet" 45); "but dissent onely from something in your Preface, sounding to the prejudice of Age. Tis commonly sayd, that old Age is a returne to childhood. Which me thinkes you insist on so long, as if you desired it should be beleevd. That's the note I meane to shake a litle" (54). Hobbes suggests a way out of his dilemma: irony. Davenant writes "as if [he] desired it should be beleevd" (but does not); Hobbes perhaps takes himself by his word and responds with irony, overtly praising and covertly criticizing Davenant. The outcome of Hobbes's double bind would then have been that, because he could not praise the preface nor utter serious critique, he was condemned to praise *Gondibert* instead – even though he may not really have liked the poem. But this is speculation that is impossible to corroborate by any solid evidence. The 'birth' of English neoclassicism could have been the result of a misunderstanding, a misreading of Hobbes's "Answer to the Preface" – a joke that the satirist in Hobbes might have tacitly relished.

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