‘T’ upbraid the State
Poeticks of this time’:
Making Sense of the Enemy

SATIRE AND CIVIL WAR

‘To P. Rupert’ is only one among a number of poems that Cleveland carved from the engagement of royal authority with its enemies in the 1640s. He is perhaps better known for his lively assaults on ‘Smectymnuus, or the Club Divines’, ‘The Mixt Assembly’ and ‘The Rebel Scot’. Yet although critics have recognised the importance of Cleveland’s work to our understanding of the impact of the war on English poetics, placing it within the identified traditions of cavalier verse has proved more problematic.¹ The ambitious poetics of Cowley and Denham – and the perceived defeat located in the work of the former – have been rather more easily assimilated into the now customary character of that poetic endeavour. The lofty detachment which Denham claims in Coopers Hill, for example, has been understood as ‘typical of the Royalist point of view’ in its distancing of itself from the polemical fray, something of which Cleveland could never be accused.² Critical work on Carew, Herrick and Lovelace has attempted to locate the same virtues at the heart of their writing.³ Cowley’s apparent recoil from the realities of conflict – his abandonment, as it were, of his weapons – also identifies ‘The Civil War’ with the retreat from public militancy often located in the ‘cavalier mode’. As one editor has gone so far as to say, ‘the Cavalier man, the social man, is not a polemicist’.⁴ Cowley’s rejection of the engaged idiom concealed within his attempted epic brings him more clearly into line with such a judgement.

Cleveland’s elaborately dialectical poetics, drawing its dynamic and rationale from the polemical exchanges of the early 1640s, presents a striking contrast with this cavalier norm to modern
eyes. The contrast was also clearly visible to writers of the seventeenth century. David Lloyd included accounts of the lives of both Cowley and Cleveland in his *Memoires* of 1668, and in his discussion of the former he lamented a perceived retreat from polemical engagement:

\[\text{tis pity his three Books of the Civil Wars, reaching as far as the first Battel of Newbury, are lost; and that he laid down his Pen, when his friends did their Armes; that he marched out of the Cause, as they did out of their Garrisons; dismantling the Works and Fortifications of Wit and Reason, in his power to keep, when they did the Forts and Castles not so in theirs.}^5\]

The passage deliberately recalls Cowley’s own words in the preface to his *Poems* of 1656, which similarly addressed the issue of his polemical verse:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Now though in all } &\text{Civill Dissentions, when they break into open hostilities, the War of the Pen is allowed to accompany that of the Sword, and every one is in a maner obliged with his Tongue, as well as Hand, to serve and assist the side which he engages in; yet when the event of battel, and the unaccountable Will of God has determined the controversie, and that we have submitted to the conditions of the Conqueror, we must lay down our Pens as well as Arms, we must march out of our Cause it self, and dismantle that, as well as our Towns and Castles, of all the Works and Fortifications of Wit and Reason by which we defended it.}^6
\end{align*}\]

Cowley seems to offer a clear justification for a committed poetry, involved in ‘the War of the Pen’: such verse is an obligation, Francis Wortley’s ‘good service’ or the simple duty described by Dudley Digges. But other motives are at work. This preface is not only trying to account for its author’s royalist past, but also attempting to bury that past without quite having to repudiate it.\(^7\) It seeks to establish a *modus vivendi* with the Protectorate whilst avoiding a recantation. So the war of the pen is represented as a strangely disappointing affair: rigorously set in parallel with that of the sword, and yet manifestly determined by it, a kind of textual superstructure tied by chains to a grimly determinant base. In his memoir, Lloyd calls this account of the bond between poetry and