

## METAPHYSICAL POETRY-AN INTRODUCTION

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### **Introduction**

English metaphysical poetry is the richest and most widely ranging in the language. "When the style was most vigorous in the seventeenth century, it brought forth the best erotic poetry and the best devotional poetry as well as the finest lyrics, satires, pastorals and visionary meditations of that era perhaps the best of any-era" (Edwin Honig and Oscar Williams).

### **The Term Metaphysical**

According to Grierson, metaphysical poetry, in the full sense of the term, is a poetry which "has been inspired by a philosophical conception of the universe and of the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence". In this sense Dante's *Divine Commedia*, Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* and Goethe's *Faust* are metaphysical poems. So are Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Pope's *Essay on Man* and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. If the expression of philosophical or theological ideas in poetry can enable a poet to be called metaphysical, Milton and Dante can be described metaphysical poets with far more appropriateness than John Donne or any of his followers. The poetry under scrutiny is not metaphysical in this sense. In fact, the term 'metaphysical' is almost a misnomer here.

In his 'Life of Cowley' (1779) Johnson stated that "about the beginning of the seventeenth century there appeared a race of writers that may be termed the metaphysical poets'. In his critique Johnson "stressed the violent yoking of discordant ideas and images and the straining after novelty, particularity, Intellectual subtlety. And recondite learning, though he found some compensating virtues" (Douglas Bush). Johnson's criticism may look sane but then we find that he has focused his attention upon the extravagances of the metaphysical poets and has missed the essentials of the metaphysical genius. Instead of defining them by their virtues Johnson defined them by their faults. 'Modern critical opinion does not wholly endorse Johnson's condemnation of these poets.

Undoubtedly a term was needed to describe the poetry of Donne and his followers from the beginning. Critics put forward a few possibilities. 'Metaphysical', was not the only one. 'Strong-lined' was the term used by the contemporaries of the poets in question and Helen Gardner adopts it. Grierson puts forward 'fantastic' as a possibility. The term 'metaphysical', however unsatisfactory it may be, has come to stay and will hardly be

replaced for questions of literary nomenclature are seldom resolved to everyone's satisfaction.

### Characteristics of Metaphysical Poetry

#### i) Concentration

Concentration is one of the major features of metaphysical poetry. A metaphysical poem tends to be short and is always closely woven and' so there is some truth when it is said a metaphysical poem is an expanded epigram. The reader is held to an idea or a line or argument. He is not allowed to pause and ponder over a passage. Metaphysical poetry demands that we pay attention and read on. The following examples will show how there is a compression of ideas:

1. 'A bracelet of bright hair about the bone'  
("The Relique")
- ii. The phoenix riddle hath more wit  
By us: we two being one are it'.  
("The Canonization")

The desire for concentration and precision marks also the verse forms of the metaphysical poets. They invented verse forms which suited them to express the diversity of their poetic experience. They preferred a line of eight syllables to a line of ten and they employed stanzas of varying length into which the sense was packed. Helen Gardner has aptly summarized this feature in her introduction to *The Metaphysical Poets* thus: "A stanza of Donne or Herbert is not, like rhyme royal or a Spenserian stanza, an ideal mould into which the words have flowed. It is more like a limiting frame in which words and thoughts are compressed. The metaphysical poets favoured either very simple verse forms, octosyllabic couplets, or quatrains, or else stanzas created for the particular poem, in which length of line and rhyme scheme artfully enforced the sense."

#### ii) Metaphysical Conceit

A striking characteristic of metaphysical poetry is its fondness for conceits. A conceit is 'a comparison whose ingenuity is more striking than its justness. "All comparisons discover likeness in things unlike: a comparison becomes a conceit when we are made to concede likeness while being strongly conscious of unlikeness" (Helen Gardner).

Elizabethan poetry teems with conceits. They are used as ornaments. But on the contrary, a metaphysical conceit is not indulged in for its own sake. It is used to persuade, or it is used to define, or to prove a point. In a metaphysical poem "the conceits are instruments of definition in an argument or instruments to persuade" (Helen Gardner).

An excellent example of a conceit is to be found in the poem "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" where a pair of lovers are compared to a pair of compasses. The relevant lines are:

If they be two, they are two so  
     As stiffe twin compasses are two  
 Thy soule the fix foot, makes no show  
     To move, but doth, if the other doe:  
 And though it in the centre sit,  
     Yet when the other far doth rome,  
 It leanes, and hearkens after it,  
     And grows erect, as that comes home  
 Such wilt thou be to mee; who must  
     Like th' other foot, obliquely runne;  
 Thy firmness draws my circle just,  
     And makes me end, where I begunne.

By using the analogy of the compass at the time of his bidding farewell, the poet persuades his wife not to be mournful. We speak of a pair of compasses, yet the pair is one thing. In the same way the two lovers are one. The poet must depart and his beloved must stay back. She controls him, however distant he may be. She is his centre, and is the cause of that perfection in his life which is symbolised by a circle. The lines quoted illustrate the argumentative and persuasive qualities we meet with, in metaphysical poetry.

### iii) Learnedness

The metaphysical poets were men of learning and their poems are laden with scholarship. Being learned, they tried to be singular and novel in their thoughts. As Johnson rightly commented, they wanted "to say what they hoped had been never said before". That is why they ransacked nature and art for illustrations, comparisons and allusions. Dr. Johnson noted that the metaphysical poets sometimes drew their conceits from "recesses of learning not very much frequented by common readers of poetry". They did not follow the trodden path. They had their own thoughts and they worked out a new way to give expression to their thoughts. As Sir Walter Scott said, "they played with thoughts as the Elizabethans had played with words."

### iv) Mechanism of Sensibility

The wide learning of the metaphysical poets had become a part of poetic sensibility and it proved itself to be of utmost value to them in discovering analogy in the midst of the most diverse kinds of experience. T.S. Eliot in his essay "The Metaphysical Poets" writes: "When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, and fragmentary.

The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the type- writer or the smell of cooking in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes. "Eliot goes on to say that the poets of the seventeenth century possessed a "mechanism of sensibility. Which could devour any kind of experience"?

#### v) Unification of Sensibility

The most striking characteristic of the metaphysical poets is their possession of what T.S. Eliot calls "unification of sensibility". The phrase denotes the fusion of thought and emotion. Grierson rightly points out that the "peculiar blend of passion and thought, feeling and ratiocination, is the greatest achievement of the metaphysical poets".

The metaphysical poets felt their thought. In these poets there is a "direct sensuous apprehension of thought or a recreation of thought into feeling". As James Reeves says "Intellect and emotion are inseparably united, they exist in harmony, not in opposition", in these poets. But on the contrary, in the poems of Wordsworth, Shelley, or other romantic poets, there is tension between the two, viz., thought and feeling, rarely union. We cannot imagine Donne sighing, as Keats did "for a life of sensations rather than of thoughts".

Donne's poem "Song" is a clear illustration of unified sensibility. The poem begins thus:

Sweetest love, I do not goe  
     For wearinesse of thee  
 Nor in hope the world can show  
     A fitter Love for mee;  
 But since that I  
     Must die at last, 'tis best,  
 To use my selfe in jest,  
     Thus by fain'd deaths to dye;

The poem has for its theme valediction. And in the above lines the poet by passionate arguments consoles his wife. The poet is not leaving his beloved because he wants to but death will part them in the end. His absence from her will therefore be a rehearsal of death.

The poet goes on arguing passionately and the following lines from the same poem denote the integration of thought and feelings:

When thou sigh'st thou sigh'st not winde,  
     But sigh'st my soule away,  
 When thou weep'st unkindly kinde,  
     My lifes blood doth decay,  
 It cannot be



### viii) Metrical Harshness

Compared with the mellifluous poetry of the Elizabethans, the verse of the metaphysical appears to be harsh and staccato. Donne himself averred, "I sing not, siren like, to tempt." It has been correctly pointed out that Donne's harshness cannot be divorced from his poetic experience. Harshness is an integral part of the poetry of the metaphysicals, Grierson has observed that Donne's harshness is not a sign of his carelessness or indifference to his art. In this connection Grierson writes of Donne thus: "He writes as one, who will say what he has to say without regard to conventions of poetic diction or smooth verse, but what he has to say is subtle and surprising, and so are the metrical effects with which it is presented."

### The Charge of Obscurity Examined

One of the charges against metaphysical poetry is its obscurity. Very often Ben Jonson's statement is quoted in support of it. But in reality the charge of obscurity cannot be sustained. Metaphysical poetry may be difficult but then difficulty is not obscurity. Metaphysical poetry makes demands upon the reader and challenges him to make it out. It does not attempt to attract the lazy.

Metaphysical poetry is close-packed and dense with meaning. It has got to be "chewed and digested." Difficulty in certain places may arise due to the structure of the verse but as Eliot points out this is not a vice: it is fidelity to thought and feeling. Recondite imagery and juxtapositions of the remote with the near, the concrete with the abstract, and the sublime with the commonplace may also render a poem difficult.

The following lines from the poem "The Canonization" may be difficult but not obscure.

"Call her one, mee another fly.  
We are Tapers too, and at out owne cost die,  
And we in us finde the 'Eagle and the Dove'  
The Phoenix riddle hath more wit  
By us, we two being one are it."

We can conclude by quoting Helen Gardner: "Difficulty is indeed-the main demerit in this way of writing for those who dislike it. It is one of its merits for those who approve it."

### Conclusion

The revival of interest in the poetry of Donne and his followers has been regarded as one of the most significant features of modern English poetry. This revival of interest is not the result of a shifting literary taste but a deep-rooted similarity between the age of Donne and of our own age. R.G. Cox writes relevantly, "The interest shown by our age in

the period from Donne to Marvell and especially in the poetry of Metaphysical wit amounts almost to a discovery. The experience of flux and transition in the present century seems to have given us an understanding denied to the eighteenth century, to the Victorians, and even to the Romantics, To those poets of our times who have struggled to bring poetry back into relation with the widest possible range of experience, and to fuse thought and feeling in one act of imaginative apprehension, Donne and his followers have seemed to be particularly relevant."

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