

THE FEATURES OF THE METAPHYSICAL SCHOOL OF POETRY

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John Dryden first used the term 'metaphysics' in connection with Donne. He says of him in 'The Progress of Satire' thus "he affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy". In his critique Dr. Johnson stressed "the violent yoking of discordant ideas and images and the straining after novelty particularly intellectual subtlety and recondite learning," though he had found some compensating virtues. Joan Bennett feels that the term 'metaphysical' refers to style rather than the subject matter and the style reflects an attitude towards experience. The metaphysical wrote on common subjects like love, religion and death. It is in their mode of treatment that they differ from others.

As the characteristics of metaphysical poetry, we first take up concentration as one of the features. The poem----- is closely woven and so it is small. It is an expanded epigram. It demands that we pay attention and read on. As examples we have; "A bracelet of bright hair about the bone" and "The phoenix riddle hath more wit By us: we two being one are it". The diversity of poetic experience is found in this verse: In the stanzas of varying length the sense is packed. Donne's stanza is more like a limiting frame in which words and thoughts are compressed. The second feature is metaphysical conceit, which is a kind of comparison whose ingenuity is more striking than its justness. The comparison becomes a conceit when we are made to concede likeness while being strongly conscious of unlikeness. The conceit is used to persuade or define or prove a point. As Helen Gardner says, "the conceits are instruments of definition in an argument or instrument to persuade".

In 'Valediction Forbidding Mourning' a pair of lovers are compared to a pair of compasses. If they be two, they are two so.

"As stiff twin compasses are two
Thy soul the fixt foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the other doe".

The beloved is the centre and is the cause of that perfection in his life which is symbolised by a circle. The lines show the argumentative and persuasive qualities of metaphysical poetry.

Learnedness is the third characteristic of this poetry. All the poets are highly learned and try to be singular and novel in their thoughts. They ransacked nature and art for illustrations, comparisons and allusions. They drew their conceits from “recesses of learning not very much frequented by common readers of poetry.” As Sir Walter Scott said, “they played with thoughts as the Elizabethans had played with words.” Their wide learning had contributed to their poetic sensibility and diverse kinds of experience. Eliot says “their mechanism of sensibility could devour any kind of experience”. His phrase “the unification of sensibility is another feature. Intellect and emotion are inseparably united, they exist in harmony, not in opposition, the integration of feeling is felt in ‘The song’.

“It cannot be that thou lov’st Mee, as thou say’st
If in thine my lie thou waste, That art the best of mee.”

Cynicism is a metaphysical quality that is prominently seen. It is after Petrarch’s idealising the lady and falsifying the poet. Donne wrote love poems in an original and realistic vein. So realistic was he about the nature of women that his poems tend to be cynical. See the example.

“I can love her, and her, and you and you,
I can love any, so she be not true”.

Donne’s elegy also is full of cynicism as in
“Found women, which would’s have thy husband die
And yet compalin’st of his great jealousy”.

Unconventional openings also mark the metaphysical trait. Donne and his followers possessed strong dramatic imagination. Examples abound in

For Godsake hold your tongue and let me love” and
“Busie old foole, unruly sonne’ why dost thou this?”

Added to this we have sometimes the verse full of harshness and staccato. Donne’s harshness cannot be divorced from his experience. Grierson says “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, Metaphysical poetry is close-packed and dense with meaning. It has got to be chewed and digested. Difficulty in certain places arises due to the structure of the verses. 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.

Herbert’s wit is often distinguished as ‘homely’, sometimes as ‘quaint’ and it does at times suggest simply the play of an ingenious fancy. In his best works it has imaginative intensity and the effect of surprise.

“But we are still too young or old; The man is gone
Before we do our wares unfold; So we freeze on
Until the grave increase our cold.”

Richard Crashaw carries to extreme the traditional use of erotic metaphor to convey the ecstasies of adoration and his uncontrolled lyric fervour sometimes collapses into an exclamatory verbal haze. Yet there are passages of eloquent and passionate conviction.

“Faith is may force. Faith strength affords
To keep pace with those powerful words:
And words more sure, more sweet than they
Love could not think truth could not say”

Henry Vaughan is a less effective preacher, a far less neat and finished artist than Herbert. His temper is more that of a mystic. The common assertion of Vaughan’s great imaginative power depends chiefly on effects of sudden illumination like the opening of ‘The World’.

“I saw Eternity the other night
Like a great Ring of pure and endless light.”

There is a puritan sobriety in the religious feeling of Andrew Marvell who has his own characteristic blend of Donnean and Jonsonian wit. The Dialogue Between the Resolved Soul and Created Measure can employ sophisticated and urbane epigram to present a morality as ascetic as that of ‘Comus’ A sense of the emblematic a direct sensuous response nor does the pleasure of the senses impede the profounder imaginative insights of the mind in the Garden’s green shade’.

In Abraham Cowley the metaphysical poetry produced its last considerable representative. A careful study of his poetry reveals clearly what was the fate which overtook it. His wit is far less bizarre and extravagant than much in Donne. Less extravagant, his wit is also less passionate and imaginative. The long wrestle between reason and imagination had ended in the victory of reason, good sense. The metaphysical style heightens and liberates personality. It is essentially a style in which individuality is expressed. The test pupils in the school of Donne learnt from their own minds in their own voices.

Metaphysical poetry in the full sense of the term, is a poetry which, like that of ‘Divina commedia’ , the inspired by a philosophical conception of the universe and the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence. It lays stress on the right things the great survival, one might say the reaccentuation of the metaphysical strain in

“the contrast to the simpler imagery of classical poetry of medieval Italian poetry; the more intellectual, less verbal character of their with compared with the conceits of the Elizabethans; the finer psychology of which their concepts are often the expression; their learned imagery’ the argumentative, subtle evolution of their lyrics. Above all, the peculiar blend of passion and thought, feeling and ratiocination which is their greatest achievement.

Passionate thinking is always apt to become metaphysical, probing and investigating the experience from which it takes its rise. All these qualities are in the poetry of Donne who is the greatest master of English poetry in the 17th century, Donne’s genius, temperament and learning gave to his love poems certain qualities which immediately arrested attention and have given them ever since a power at once fascinating and disconcerting despite the faults of phrasing and harmony songs are the expressions, in unconventional witty language of all the mood of a lover that experience and imagination have taught him to understand: fascination and scornful anger inextricably blend.

“All other things their destruction draw,
Only our love hath no decay;
this no tommorrow hath nor yesterday,
Running it never runs form us away.
But truly keeps his first, last everlasting day”

In considering the nature of Donne’s poetic originality, it is common to begin with his development of the metaphysical conceit. The first point likely to strike the reader who comes to Donne from the smooth fluency of the average Elizabethan lyric or sonnet is the surprising directness of the speaking voice.

“For God’s sake hold your tongue and let
me love or chide my palsie or my gout”
Donne’s lyrics have a music of their own
Though immediate effect is on vivid speech rather than song
“Deare love, for nothing less than thee
Would I have broke this happy dreame”.

Donne’s imagery has always impressed readers by its range and verietiy and its avoidance of conventionally ornamental. “The Good Morrow” refers to the familiar process of suckling and weaning, snoring, dreaming and walking, but also to voyages, maps and hemispheres, scholar theories of the nature of pure substance, and general philosophical speculations about our experience of space. ‘The Extasie’ draws on theories of the nature of souls and the way heavenly influence may work on man, on cosmology, on alchemy and chemistry.

Some of Donne's most powerful images are learned and scientific, as when in "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" the idea that the higher nature of the lover's relationship will lead them to avoid outward demonstrations of grief and the harmlessness of the more important irregularities of movement among the heavenly bodies.

Donne's poems may be considered in three main groups: the love poetry, the miscellaneous and occasional poems and verse letters, and the religious poems. The first extends from ecstatic and passionate poems like 'the Sunne Rising'. "The Dreame" or "the Good Morrow". The miscellaneous poems form perhaps the least successful group of the three Donne's fragment of 1601. 'The Progress of the Soule' belongs to this division. The religious poems form the second in general interest of the three main groups. The earliest sonnets hardly show Donne's characteristic power and thought 'The Litanie' is notable for the balanced psychological insight.

'The Anniversarie' shows Donne at his most extravagantly fantastic and also at his most powerfully imaginative. He can rise to the sublimity of

"These hymnes thy issue may increase so long
As till God's great venite change the song"

Donne's religious feelings seem to be devout fits coming and going like a fantastic ague. With 'Holy Sonnets' the note deepens. It is for the most part one of struggle and the style expresses this passionate conflict with dramatic vividness.

T.S. Eliot's considered conclusion that Donne would never sink back to his earlier obscurity and that he would always remain as, a great reformer of the English language, of English verse will be recognized by those familiar with his critical ideas and terminology is by no means faint praise.

In the words of Grierson, Metaphysical poetry "has been inspired by a philosophical conception of the universe and the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence. Drummond referred to poets who use "metaphysical ideas and scholastical quiddities". Dryden employed the term 'metaphysical' in connection with Donne. He did not suggest it as a definitive idea or writing. It was Dr. Johnson who did that ultimately. While writing of Cowley, he stressed the violent yoking of discordant ideas and images and the straining after lovely, particularly intellectual subtlety and recondite learning".

The term was needed to describe the poetry of Donne and his followers. As characteristics of metaphysical school, we can list out the following (1) Concentration, (2) Metaphysical conceit, (3) Learnedness (4) Mechanism of sensibility (5) Unification of Sensibility (6) Cynicism (7) Unconventional opening (8) Metrical harshness (9) Obscurity.

John Donne (1571 - 1631) was the undisputed leader of the metaphysical poets. Helen Gardner says "the metaphysical style heightens and liberates personality". It is

essentially a style in which individuality is expressed. The best pupils in the school of Donne learnt from their master how to speak their own minds through their own voices. "The Anniversary" is one of the well-known poems of Donne. He celebrates the first anniversary of his falling in love with the woman and addresses her in the poem. All things except their love grow older and older and draw towards their destruction. Their love is not subject to death or decay. The lines indicated the same.

"All other things, to their destruction draw
Only our love hath no decay"

'The Good Morrow' celebrates the rapture of mutual love. It is one of the themes handled by Donne. His fame as a love poet rests on the poems he wrote on the happiness of loving and being loved. The man and the woman are equal partners in an exchange of love. The poet insists that as compared with the pleasures of his love for his mistress, all other pleasures are mere fancies, not realities. Donne rises to the eloquence of "if ever any beauty I did see which desired and got it was but a dream of thee"

Donne was greatly fascinated by the discoveries made in his time "the new worlds" of the voyages and "Worlds on world" of the astronomers. The two lovers are one and together they constitute a world of which they are the possessors. The lovers are clasped in each other's arms and they are close enough for the face of each to be reflected in the eyes of the other. The world that each of the explorers of the physical universe can find. The thought of sunset leads Donne to the final theme of immortality of their love. He alludes to a philosophic principle to lend weight to this view.

The poet contrives a stanza consisting of seven lines of varying length. Each of the three stanzas combines two normally incompatible tones. The tone of conversation and the exalted tone of lyrical passion, the first four lines have the run of speech and in the last three there is a flood of rising feeling. This effect is seen in the first two stanzas, but in the last the same effect is not achieved. Donne's imagery has impressed the readers with its range, variety and avoidance of conventionally ornamental. "The Good Morrow" refers to the familiar processes of suckling and meaning, dreaming and walking. The images are drawn from diverse fields, but they are introduced not for the internal appeal, but for their suitability to the immediacy of the poem. His images are learned and scientific as in 'A Valediction: Forbid - cling Mourning'. He combines three sets of images eyes and tears, coining and map making. His use of far - fetched images brought much criticism. Dryden comments that Donne perplexed the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations by the philosophizing of his love verses.