

THE METAPHYSICAL SCHOOL OF ENGLISH POETRY

METAPHYSICAL POETRY

It is an interesting thing to note that the term metaphysical, here is used, not in its old denotational sense, but has been consecrated by use for the poetry of Donne and his followers, since Dryden named it and Dr. Johnson confirmed it.

"The word 'metaphysical' refers to style rather than to subject matter," says Mrs. Bennett. Metaphysical poetry is the impression of a new attitude, new mode of application of a theme and art, and an exquisite blend of thinking with experience by the poets. It is an awakening from the stupor caused by the magic of the gaudy and sweet phraseology of the Elizabethans, a breakaway from the hackneyed expression particularly from the conventionalized Italianate lollipop phrasing of the sentiment of love, and lastly a revolt against the Petrarchian tradition the fruit of which had become over-ripe and was approaching putrescence. (1573 - 1631)

Donne — With his mind full of the medieval learning and an interest into the modern psychology, along with a heart, swelling with finer emotions Donne came to rescue the Elizabethan lyric from its mellowed music and its conventional diction. For this, as Dryden says, he "affects metaphysics." His poetry never forsakes emotion, but endeavours to render them with a fresh charm by supplementing them with their intellectual equivalents. Donne ratiocinated the lyric. This is his novel method, his principal technique by the virtue of which he is a 'metaphysical'. Donne's poems always open with the experience of an expression or an emotion but they soon give way to a dialectic which emerges and feeds upon the previous experience but always launches free excursions into the world of thought and reflection.

Donne's is a characteristic technique of expression which becomes a 'God's way' for his imitators. Use of far-fetched analogies, seeking, 'occult resemblances' bathing the whole expression with ingenious shower of wits and conceits, quick and abrupt transitions of thought, his habit of yoking the most heterogeneous ideas together by violence are some of the means he employs to effect a disconcerting and disintegrating sensation. Donne is most subtle. He procures very surprising effects by connecting the trivial with the sublime, the jest with the earnest, and the mean with the lofty. (1593 - 1633)

George Herbert — He was the saint of the Metaphysical school. He follows the logical pattern of his master's poems and like him coins images appealing to the mind. But we find a naïve simplicity, in his poems, which obviously is the result of his less varied and less complex experiences.

Donne had sung of both the love of women and the love of God, but Herbert shuts himself from the love of woman and devotes his art singularly to the enchantment of Divine song. 'Affliction', 'Paradise', 'Dulness', 'Death', all of these and nearly all the rest are inspired by his love for God.

Herbert's poems always ring with emotional notes. His method is not of Donne to divorce them just when they are born and to intellectualise but he simply

plants emotions into the soil of thought. Thought and feeling in him are thus fused together making a homogeneous whole of a singularly ardent nature.

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Vaughan — Nearest to Herbert's influence wrote Henry Vaughan. To Herbert's influence are due the metaphysical conceits as in the image "stars shut up shops" when the poet is describing dawn. Moreover, several of Vaughan's poems, like Herbert's, are devoted to church festivals. Again, he sometimes imitates Herbert's whimsicality and homeliness.

He is at his best when he deals with the themes of childhood, and of communion with nature and with eternity. His 'Retreat' regrets the loss of childhood and anticipates Wordsworth's famous 'Ode on Immortality' —

" Happy those early days when I
Shined in my angle infancy."

Like Wordsworth, too, he feels nature's infinite beauty and sees nature as symbolical of God.

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Richard Crashaw — The last important poet of the sacred metaphysicals is Crashaw. He diverges from Donne's tradition and accepts models from Gongora and Marino. "It is after their fashion rather than Donne's", says Legouis, "that he is metaphysical." Attracted by their glowing qualities, he fell under the spell of colour and melody. Whereas Donne and his imitators tend to elaborate an idea, Crashaw loves to elaborate sensations. Sensationalism is an outstanding characteristic of his poetry. 'On the Wounds of Our Crucified Lord' and 'Hymn to St. Teresa' are characteristic specimens of his habit of mixing physical torture with sensual love.

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Abraham Cowley — In Cowley the metaphysical strain had become feeble. He was learned and ingenious of fancy, but his work suffered from a lack of deep feeling, and in him the use of the metaphysical wit and conceit deteriorated into mere ingenuity and mannerism. His intellectualism linked him also with the neoclassicists. He was on the way to "the age of understanding".

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Andrew Marvel — Marvel's poems have been described as the finest flower of serious and secular metaphysical verse, Marvel's work as the subtlety of wit, the passionate argument and the learned imagery of the metaphysicals, combined with the clarity and control of the classical followers of Jonson and the gracefulness of the cavaliers.

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The metaphysical had misused the Elizabethan ideal of liberty. It necessitated the growing realisation of clarity and control in poetry. Ben Jonson with his prophetic vision had advocated literary order and discipline in place of lawless impulse and unbridled fancy. His example was ignored for a time, but it was effective later when metaphysical method, in its decay began to produce more weeds than flowers. Cowley and Marvel had realised the importance of poise and control in their verse. But Edmund Waller and Sir John Denham were the real pioneers of the new movement. They led the reaction against metaphysical excesses by writing charming verse on the classical model.