



JOHN DONNE: THE LITERARY AND RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

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Abstract

In Donne's poetry, there is always an intellectual analysis of emotion. Every lyric arises out of some emotional situation, and the emotion concerned is analysed threadbare. Like a clever lawyer Donne gives arguments after arguments in support of his point of view. Thus in *Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* he proves that true lovers need not mourn at the time of parting; in the Canonisation he establishes that lovers are saints of love, and in the Blossome he argues against the Petrarchan love tradition. This imparts to his poetry a hard intellectual tone, but it also results in that, "unification of sensibility", for which T.S. Eliot praised the Metaphysical poetry so highly.¹

Keywords: Metaphysical, emotional, intellectual, tradition, sensibility, supercilious, ingenious, fantastic.

Elizabethan poetry in spite of merits and popularity suffered from inherent weaknesses. It was artificial and conventional. The uniform attitude to love, the mechanical sweetness of verses, and the decadence of inspiration were bound to produce reaction. Donne led the revolt against Elizabethan poets. He disliked the petrarchan convention, the tears of lovers, the cruelty of the mistress, and conceits of the Elizabethans. Thus, he may be said to be the founder of a new type of poetry.

The word "metaphysical" has been defined differently by various writers. R.S. Hillyer writes: "Literally, it has to do with the conception of existence, with the living universes and Man's place therein. Loosely, it has taken such meanings as these, difficult, philosophical, obscure, ethereal, involved, supercilious, ingenious, fantastic, and incongruous."² According to Grierson, Donne's poetry is metaphysical, "not only in the sense of being erudite and witty, but in the proper sense of being reflective and philosophical."³ In other words, the learned critic feels that metaphysical poetry is "inspired by a

philosophical conception of the universe and the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence.

Dryden was the first to use the epithet metaphysical poetry to cover the poetic work of Donne, Cowley, Vaughan and his contemporaries. Dr. Johnson revived this epithet and wrote an essay on the metaphysical poets in his life of Cowley. Dr. Johnson attacked the metaphysicals on several grounds for their parade of learning, for their remote and fantastic analogies, and conceits, for their carelessness in diction, for their novelty intended to shock the reader, for their ingenious absurdity, ruggedness and subtlety. He was indifferent to the vein of weighty thought and brooding imagination, the originality and metrical achievement of the metaphysical poets. He had no eye for the nobler and subtler qualities of their genius. A literary dictator as he was, he condemned without reservation what did not appeal to his classical mind.

There is plenty of passion in this kind of poetry, but it is passion combined with intense

intellectual activity. T.S. Eliot thinks that passionate thinking is the chief mark of metaphysical poetry. Thus, even in the Anniversary where Donne given a lofty expression to the love and mutual trust of himself and his wife, his restless mind seeks far-fetched ideas, similitudes and images in order to convey to the reader the exact quality of this love and trust.⁴

The metaphysical lyric lays stress on the fantastic, on the intellectual, on wit, on learned imagery, on conceits based on psychology of flight from the material to the spiritual plane, on obscure and philosophical allusions, on the blending of passion and thought. The metaphysical lyric is blend of passion, imagination and argument. According to A.C. Ward, the metaphysical style is a combination of two elements, the fantastic in form and style and the incongruous in matter and manner.

Metaphysical poetry is inspired by a philosophical conception of universe and the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence. Undoubtedly, its themes are simple human experiences, the joy and sorrow of love, the thrill of adventure and battle, the hustle and excitement of the town and in addition mystic experiences and inner conflicts known to the greatest thinkers and philosophers. Donne is metaphysical by nature of his scholasticism, his knowledge of Plato, Aristotle, the medieval philosophers and the new learning of the Renaissance, his deep reflective interest in his personal experiences, the new psychological curiosity and dissecting genius with which he writes of life, love and religion. But he is often frivolous, tortuous and skeptical. According to T.S. Eliot, the metaphysical desire is the "elaboration of a figure of speech to the furthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it" and the telescoping of images and multiplied associations.⁵

Metaphysical poetry resolves itself into the two broad divisions of amorous and religious verse, the former was written largely by the courtly poets, Carew, Suckling, and Lovelace, and the latter by Herbert, Crashaw and Vaughan, who all dedicated their gifts to the service of their religion. The metaphysical element, it seems, first made its

appearance in love poems, following the example of the Italian writers, whom Donne seems to have adopted as his models. Under this influence, made yet more popular by the practice of Donne, "every metaphor, natural or traditional to the theme of love, was elaborated in abstract and hyperbolic fashion," till it gave rise to indulgence in strange and far-fetched images. From this the practice spread to all kinds of poetical writing, amorous or otherwise. But though it travelled to England through Italy, the metaphysical mode is traceable, in its origins, to the poetry of the Middle Ages, As Prof. H.J. C. Grierson puts it the metaphysical of the seventeenth century combined two things, both soon to pass away, the fantastic dialectics of medieval love-poetry and the simple, and sensuous strain which they caught from the classics-soul and body lightly yoked and glad to run and soar together in the winged chariot of Pegasus.

Donne has written many 'songs' and 'sonnets' on the subject of love. But he does not follow the petrarchan tradition of love poetry as we find in Spenser and Shakespeare. He does not flatter his beloved or glorify her. On the contrary, in many of his songs show a cynical contempt for women. For example, in 'Song' he makes it clear that man may be able to catch a falling star or say where all the past years are; he may, indeed achieve the impossible, but he will never be able to find a woman true and fair. But Donne is also capable of deep feeling. The poems he wrote to celebrate his wedded love, are full of such feelings. He says to his wife in The Anniversary that all honours and glories, all the princes and their favorites might perish-

Only our love knows no decay.

This no to-morrow hath, nor yesterday.

Running it never runs from us away,

But truly keeps his first, last, everlasting day,

Metaphysical verse is laden with the scholarship of its authors. A whole book of knowledge might be compiled from the scholarly allusions in Donne and Cowley alone. To such learning itself there could, of course, be no objection. It is an enrichment of the poet's mind and part of the equipment for his high vocation.

Injudiciously applied, however, it can only mystify the average person, and it was unfortunate that, as Dr. Johnson noted, the metaphysicians “sometimes drew their conceits from recesses of poetry.” The poet is not made by what he can give at second or third hand, unless his own genius can transmute it. As Johnson also said: No man could be born a metaphysical poet, nor assume that dignity of a writer, by descriptions, copied from descriptions, by imitations borrowed from imitations, by traditional imagery and hereditary similes, by readiness of rhyme, and volubility.

The task of trying to find the verbal equivalent for states of mind and feeling, to quote T.S Eliot, the metaphysicals made themselves difficult to understand. As we have seen, they combined dissimilar ideas without attempting to unite them, and the reader was left to devise what they really had in mind. So far as their later reputation was concerned, this did not serve them well for several generations. Coleridge however, did the school more justice. The style of the metaphysicals, he wrote, is the reverse of that which distinguishes too many of our most recent corrects; the one conveying the most fantastic thoughts in the most correct language, the other in the most fantastic language conveying the most trivial thoughts.

It was T. S. Eliot who made the phrase “unified sensibility” popular. According to Eliot, the two faculties, that of feeling and of thinking came to be dissociated from each other on account of one-sided emphasis placed since the time of Milton on intellect. Thus after the seventeenth century, we have either poetry of thought or poetry of feeling. Such a separation of thought from feeling is called dissociation of sensibility. This had an adverse effect on the history of poetry. But in the early part of seventeenth century feeling and thought were combined, they were one operation of the mind. It was not possible to think without feeling and to feel without thinking. This is called a unified sensibility. Donne and the metaphysicals had a unified sensibility. Their poetry expressed through thinking and the feeling at the same time. Here is a direct apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling. Eliot tells us in the essay metaphysical poets: “The poets of the seventeenth century, the

successors of the sixteenth, possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience.” Thus in the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in. If the metaphysicals are obscure and difficult, it is because their sensibility is unified, and ours dissociated.

Donne had the knack of presenting different objects together. These are objects quite remote though undeniable similarity has been brought about by the poet. He connects the abstract with concrete, the physical with spiritual, the remote with the near and the sublime with the commonplace. This juxtaposition, and sometimes, interfusion of apparently dissimilar or exactly opposite objects often pleasantly thrills us into a new perception of reality.

The metaphysical poetry is full of far-fetched images and allusions and references borrowed from branches of learning- old and new. For example, Donne represents himself in Twickenham Garden as an unhappy lover. He comes to a public garden in order that the sight and sound there might console him. Again, his own mistress is unkind to him because she is chaste. But what a paradox! Among the women she is the only true or chaste woman.

Natural grace is often hard to find in metaphysical writing, which abounds in artificiality of thought and hyperbolic expression. The writers probably deemed it a passport to fame to say “something unexpected and surprising.” What they wanted of the sublime, they endeavoured to supply by hyperbole; their amplification had too limits; they left not only reason but fancy behind them and produced combinations of confused magnificence, that not only could be credited, but could not be imagined.

According to Grierson, the metaphysicals had two motives for employing very coarse and rugged expressions in their poetical works. Firstly, they wanted to startle the reader. Secondly, they had the desire to make use of direct, unconventional and colloquial speeches.

Donne could “sing” whenever he liked but often, he seems to be “bending and cracking the metrical pattern to the rhetoric of direct and

vehement utterance." He very often throws all prosodic consideration to the winds and distributes his stresses not according to the metre but according to the sense.

According to Grierson, the hallmark of all metaphysical poetry are passionate feeling and paradoxical ratiocination. The same critic observes that the metaphysicals "exhibited deductive carried to a high pitch". Often Donne states at the beginning of a poem a hopelessly insupportable proposition which he defends later.

About the middle of the seventeenth century a change came over the English poetic temperament. The metaphysical wave had exhausted it-self, and had left literary standards and values confused. The metaphysical had misused the Elizabethan ideal of liberty. It necessitated the growing realization 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 control in their verse.

After the First War metaphysical method again came into vogue. Consciousness of the waste and futility of war, and the desolation and hopelessness resulting from it once more brought God in purview. A sincere quest for positive faith emerged, and we have a marked tendency with the opening of the seventeenth century metaphysical poets. What gave a further impetus to the writing of religious poetry was the popularity of Hopkins after being resurrected by Bridges in 1819. The poetry of Hopkins had qualities which particularly appealed to the postwar; it revealed a sense of spiritual tension and frustration; it combined a powerful intellect with a strong sensuousness; it possessed a bold originality of technique. The poetry of Hopkins is completely on the lines of the old metaphysical, with the same devotion of grace, the same technique of expression and the same use of Donne's breaking up of lines, suddenly indicating a pause. 'The Caged skylark' is a typically metaphysical piece. In the thirties the poetry can be judged from the impact it made upon

poets who did not share the religion which inspired and governed all that Hopkins wrote.

Eliot himself turned him face away from the faithlessness of the 'Waste land' and 'Hollow Men' and in 'Ash Wednesday' sought refuge in the Anglo-catholic doctrines of faith. Since then, religion has become his voice and he has been considered by some as the lost leader. Eliot employed Donne's technique of the juxtaposition of the levity with the seriousness, his method of presenting things by contrast, his use of wit and conceits as well as his free manipulation of metre and rhyme scheme to suit the melody and meaning of the piece. Ash Wednesday and poems composed after it are marked clearly by his Anglo-catholic inclination; Burnt Norton, East Coker, the Dry Salvages, and Little Gidding each of these of Four Quartets reveals symbolically this highest faith and us a finely universalized song of enchantment of the highest entity in the sober and philosophical tone.

We have seen that interest in Donne's Divine Poems was almost non-existent in the earlier period. The ultimate reason voiced indirectly by none less than Johnson was the claim that religious feelings could not be transposed into poetic terms. If religious poetry were discussed, it might impair the sanctity of both the critic's own feelings and the poetry. Thus, Donne's religious poems were only exceptionally touched upon in criticism and as a consequence refused entrance into anthologies. During the first quarter of the century, however, the justification for publishing religious poems was much debated in literary magazines. The result was a widened understanding. Montgomery's *The Christian Poet*, which included two of Donne's Holy Sonnets and part of a Hymn, and Keble's *The Christian Year* furthered the idea of printing religious verse. The general religiosity of the times, culminating in the writings and sermons of the Tractarians, was evidently a fertile soil for the publication of divine poetry.

Holy Sonnets, Alford, in turn, included all of Donne's Divine Poems, except the four 1635 sonnets and "The Lamentations of Jeremy." Both Southey's and Alford's works reached a limited audience, primarily groups of literary enthusiasts and

churchmen. Knowledge of Donne as a writer of holy sonnets was still lacking. It is, however, from this time onward that we witness a gradual awakening of interest in them. This interest was related to the indisputable prestige his sermons were gaining. The two disciples of Coleridge, Willmott and Cattermole, who were instrumental in establishing Donne as a prose writer and moralist, were also great sponsors of Donne's sacred poems. Due to the insight Willmott had demonstrated in various writings, the society for promoting Christian knowledge employed him to write various "lives" of seventeenth-century poets. The result was *Lives of Sacred Poets* (1834). He mainly dealt with Fletcher, Wither (whom he proposed to resurrect), Quarles, George Herbert, and Crashaw. He lamented the neglect of Donne, but was not yet prepared to acknowledge him. He nevertheless included the Sonnet "Death be not proud" (1633/6), which was to be the most anthologized of all of Donne's Divine Poems. By this time the sonnet had already won some recognition, due to its inclusion in Dyce's *Specimens*. Cattermole was also doubtful of Donne's right to be called a sacred poet.

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Donne is one of those writers who have shown their reverence of religion with the warmth and sincerity of genuine feeling.⁷ This was, he thought, reason enough for including four of Donne's Holy Sonnets (1633/3, 4, 6; 1635/1).⁸ The same motives governed the Cambridge editor Edward Farr's choices of Donne items. He considered Donne a "true and often a delightful poet" and did not hesitate in including seven of his Holy Sonnets, three "La Corona" sonnets, the Occasional Poems "Upon the Annunciation. . .," and "Goodfriday, (1613).

Yet, he noted in *Gems of Sacred Poetry*: "Without being in the strictest sense of the word a sacred poet, Donne is one of those writers who have shown their reverence of religion with the warmth and sincerity of genuine feeling." This was, he

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Walton had included "A Hymne to God the Father" in the first edition of the *Life* (1640). In 1670 he added some edited lines of "Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse," which in its pruned form was intended to demonstrate Donne's piety. These latter hymns were thus well known even to those who were not directly acquainted with collections of his poetry. All Donne's hymns nevertheless gained a popularity and currency in the nineteenth century that is remarkable.

Donne's divine poems sprung from Catholic inspiration which prevented many Anglican apologists from commending them. Grosart, a "Church-of-England man" as he named himself, recognized Catholic elements in several of Donne's poems. They were, consequently, related to Donne's youth and were considered the products of a young and inexperienced mind, and thus hardly notable. Grosart considered, for instance, "The Crosse" mutilated by so many of his contemporaries unintelligible as a piece of poetry.

He interpreted it as "an apology and reply of a Roman Catholic liable to be persecuted for his belief and practice." Victorian anthologists aimed at educating their readers. Their prefaces often contain humdrum assurances that all possible measures have been taken to select specimens of an elevating and healthy character. The items that found favour with the educators were, in Victorian terms, to "enlarge the mind, exalt and purify the taste, correct

the manners, and soften the temper." Thomas Arnold's (Sr.) educational programme was their model. The poems were selected and arranged to suit such various strata of human conduct and sentiment as "home and country," "sea and sailor," "love and nature," and qualities such as generosity, friendship, piety, etc. The subjects differed according to the intellectual level of the audience they were meant for. Furthermore, the editors were exceedingly anxious about a "proper" diction. Poems were constantly expurgated of "unclean" sentiments and expressions. Anything doubtful or objectionable was shunned. Bellew, the editor of *Poet's Corner* had a "black list" of prohibited writers whose works must be avoided. Another influential anthologist, Aubrey de Vere, suggested that the function of poetry was to "unsensualize the mind." Poetry should, he believed, sustain the reader and he particularly had in mind the young reader by supplying him with definite moral and spiritual examples rather than intoxicate and perplex him.

Donne's poetry scarcely found room in selections that catered primarily to the enlightenment of their earning and their caustic mode of expression. There are in all eleven items illustrating these points, six taken from Donne's poetry. Donne's "medical knowledge" is attested by a quotation from "To the Countesse of Bedford" [I] (21—28), and lines from the fourth tributary letter to the same lady (1—10, although "too scholastick" (sformai, academic), are described by the litotes "not inelegant." The "unintelligibility" of metaphysical poetry, a handy critical cliché, is a concept never used by Johnson, although he blames the poets for having the desire "of being admired [rather] than understood." The emphasis on Donne's ability to use his learning for poetic purposes is stronger than one might infer from Johnson's general recognition of the intellectual effort the reading of metaphysical poetry requires. Johnson does not unlike the coming generation of "Johnsonians" categorically accuse the metaphysical poets of abusing thought by poeticornamentation:

They were in very little care to clothe their notions with elegance of dress, and therefore miss the notice and the praise which are often gained by those who think less, but are more diligent to adorn

their thoughts [my italics]. To demonstrate their attitude towards propriety of expression and thought, he referred to Donne's poetry. For Johnson, the empiricist and moralist, art was embedded in the realities and experiences of life. Thus, he approved of Donne's moral and philosophic poetry, and particularly of the Verse Letters and the Anniversaries. Here he found moral seriousness combined with deep thought and lucid expression. The instances he draws from Donne's poetry in this context clearly exhibit this. The first extract shows the commendable⁷ Including the lines (1—12) he quotes from Donne's "Loves Alchymie," the Donne samples are seventeen.

Despite his general objections to metaphysical particularization, he nevertheless found a passage in Donne's Second Anniversarie (173—184) which was compatible with his own beliefs. In the poem he found illuminated the philosophical synopsis of the essence of humanity: All that Man has to do is to live and die; the sum of humanity. There are three extracts from Cowley's poetry to vindicate the learning of the metaphysicals and to show their intellectual sharpness. Cowley is thus proportionally poorly represented in this respect, notwithstanding his more overtly didactic aim. Did Johnson find "genuine wit and useful knowledge" in Donne alone? Was Cowley's "knowledge ... buried ... in grossness of expression"? To answer "yes" to these questions would be to stretch the evidence too far. Yet the impression remains that it was Donne's poetry that for Johnson represented the best qualities in metaphysical poetry. The scope of his sympathies with these aspects of Donne is rarely realized even today.

Johnson's definition of metaphysical wit as a kind of "discordia concorsa a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike" occurs in one of the best-known passages in the history of English criticism. His suggestions there have leavened, for good or bad, well-nigh all subsequent attempts to explain the aesthetics of Donne.

As a preliminary, it is important to observe that Johnson was not inimical to "dissimilar images." He demanded only that they be embedded in real

life. Imperfect unions were either metaphorical (unreal) or literal (real). The components of a perfect metaphor must relate to human experience. There must also be harmony between the referents of the metaphor; they should not encroach upon each other. It has been argued that Johnson's dissatisfaction with metaphysical conceits originated from his realization that the vehicle (the literal image) was useless for the tenor (the metaphoric meaning).

C.F. Johnson: "A poetical simile is the discovery of likeness between two actions in their general nature dissimilar ... the mind is impressed with the resemblance of things generally unlike, as unlike as intellect and body ... A simile may be compared to lines converging at a point, and is more excellent as the lines approach from greater distance ,while Johnson "seems habitually to have visualized the referents of concrete language in metaphor and to have expected the resulting image to contribute to the effect of the whole passage or poem." One cannot, however, ignore a note of admiration in Johnson's remark. At the very least, some inventiveness was needed to create such an absurd conceit as the compasses.

Johnson takes great pains to voice his discontent with metaphysical wit. His collection of samples includes twenty-four items, which seem to fall into two groups. The distinction that can be perceived between them springs from the degree of dismay they roused in Johnson. He pours relatively less scorn over the ten specimens that are headed: "thoughts so far-fetched, as to be not only unexpected, but unnatural". We add to this "less unfavourable group" the two extracts, from "Obsequies to the Lord Harrington" (15—25)— which strike the readers if they were asked to compare them with a similar passage in Dryden — and from "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning," Donne is represented by five excerpts, which should be compared with Cowley's six (Cleveland's one). When we moreover compare the respective number of items of this group with the second, which includes "enormous and disgusting hyperboles" and "grossly absurd and indelicate allusions," we are again struck by Johnson's disposition to favour Donne. There are only five overtly negative

quotations from Donne, compared to sixteen from Cowley (one from Cleveland). Studying the first group (mildly negative items), we notice Johnson's cautious, almost conciliatory tone when commenting upon Donne. Donne's "extension" of the metaphors of tears in "A Valediction: of Weeping" (10—18) into the shape of worlds receives the encouraging note: "If the lines are not easily understood, they may be read again." The lines from "Marriage Song on the Lady Elizabeth" ("Here lies a shee Sunne, and a hee Moone here ...," 85—8), whose popularity Johnson initiated, are wittily apostrophized: "Confusion worse confounded." The other conceit by Donne, man translated into a telescope, arouses but an amused attention. Johnson makes it exceedingly clear that Donne and his fellow poets used "conceits" and not "images," the constituents of an image being the familiar and the unfamiliar, the natural and the new, the obvious and the unique. Donne's description of the night in "Obsequies to the Lord Harrington" is obviously disappointing to Johnson, because the comparisons are unrelated and incongruous. But if imagination is not satisfied, at least the powers of reflection and comparison are employed.

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