

***The Effect Of The 20th Century  
Revival Of Interest In Metaphysical Poetry  
Upon Critical Theory\****

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The rapid increase in Donne's modern prestige became an active partner of critical theory. In reviving the seventeenth-century culture modern critics grew able to admire, understand and measure the imaginative creation of that period and, hence, reinterpret it anew. More important, the recognition of the metaphysicists' accomplishments was funnelled into a search for self-understanding. Soon John Donne entered the mainstream of critical response and was considered, as Roston put it, "the standard of excellence against which other poets were to be measured" (1974, 1). Critical theorists like Grierson, Eliot, Ransom, Brooks, Tate, Read, George Williamson and many others, each motivated by his own discoveries, tried to establish modern principles by which they could approach metaphysical poetry and according to which modern poetry should be measured. In other words, they analysed metaphysical poetry using modern techniques and defined modern poetry in accordance with the standards of the metaphysical. Their approach was considered by Tuve to be a confusion of periods.

Sir Herbert Grierson was the first in our century to give high tribute to metaphysical poetry and to crown Donne king of English poetry in the seventeenth century. In the introduction to his remarkable edition of *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century*, which created a wave of interest in Donne, Grierson listed the qualities of metaphysical poetry with enthusiastic admiration. He wrote that mediaeval poetry laid "stress on all the right things- the survival, one might say the re-accentuation, of the metaphysical strain." Compared with conceits of the Elizabethans the wit of the metaphysical was "more intellectual, less verbal", and their conceits expressed "finer psychology". Additionally, Grierson praised their exploitation of learned imagery, and noticed "the argumentative, subtle evolution of their lyrics". But the greatest achievement of metaphysical poetry, Grierson maintained, was "the peculiar blend of passion and thought, feeling and ratiocination...."

Passionate thinking is always apt to become metaphysical, probing and investigating the experience from which it takes its rise" (Grierson 1921, xv-xvi). Grierson's discoveries had been so interesting and intelligent that they were quoted, repeated and paraphrased in the writings of subsequent critics including Eliot. In effect, they provided fresh topics needed for critics in their approach to metaphysical poetry. Nevertheless, Grierson's remarks were too hypothetical to be employed as practical tools to analyse the structure of a poem or a poetic method: they were "impressionistic" rather than analyses with references to particular poems (Leonard Unger, 1950, 5). To some extent, Unger was right but Grierson had not been studying metaphysical poetry when he wrote down his expressions. Rather, he had been introducing the edition of his book.

Owing to Eliot's essays, "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), "Andrew Marvell" (1921), and "John Donne" (1923), Donne's reputation received an unexpected boost and the criticism on Donne and the metaphysicals swelled to a great crescendo. In those three essays Eliot made two significant contributions to the critical interest in Donne and metaphysical poetry: he redefined older conceptions of metaphysical poetry and approached the metaphysicals as a "movement" digressing "from the main current" ( Frank Kermode, ed., 1975, 59).

In the first essay which was written as a review of Grierson's edition Eliot pushed forward the latter's crude remark about "the blend of passion and thought" and elaborated his mention of conceits and wit. Eliot interpreted Donne as modern for "his heterogeneity of material compelled into unity by the operation of the poet's mind", "fidelity to thought and feeling", and his ability to recreate "thought into feeling" ( 61, 62, 63). Grierson, however, praised him in the context of the seventeenth century. In addition, Eliot gave a definition of the conceit helped by examples from Donne's poetry while Grierson found it sufficient to commend the fine conceits and wit of the metaphysicals. Eliot wrote,

Donne, and often Cowley, employ a device which is sometimes considered characteristically "metaphysical; the elaboration (contrasted with the condensation) of a figure of speech to the furthest style to

which ingenuity can carry it..., a development by rapid association of thought which requires considerable agility on the part of the reader (60).

Additionally, in his essay on "Andrew Marvell" Eliot described the wit of the metaphysical poets as involving "probably, a recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible" (170). In so doing, Eliot provided critics with important devices in approaching the general structure of metaphysical poetry. Eliot, however, was too cautious to regard these devices as characteristics of metaphysical poetry. And in his essay on "John Donne" Eliot again praised Donne's modernity for his fidelity to changing thought and feeling, for his psychological realism and for his "potential actual wit" present everywhere in his poetry.

Eliot's most original achievement was to approach metaphysical poetry and the modern theory considering it "as a historian of style and as a professional poet" (Joseph Duncan, 1969, 145). Eliot was the first to dwell upon a theory of a metaphysical sensibility a "mechanism" which enabled the metaphysicals to "devour any kind of experience", and to form vast varieties of experience into "new wholes" (in Kermodé ed., 64). Then, Eliot emphasised that the metaphysicals' capacity to recreate the frontier of experience into poetry was the right state of a mature poet. Furthermore, Eliot employed his remarks, as Duncan claimed, to make a chart of literary history: Donne and the early 17th-century metaphysicals groped for unified sensibility while Dryden, Milton and other poets in the later 17th century suffered from dissociated sensibility (Duncan, 146). Finally, Eliot approved of Donne and the metaphysicals as models for modern poets, for Donne's poetry was a difficult poetry such as our complex civilization demands (Kermodé ed., 65). Within about one decade Eliot's enthusiasm for the metaphysicals was reversed: he would label the metaphysicals among the "smaller, imperfect poets with whom later poets discover an affinity;" and he would declare that "Donne's poetry is a concern of the present and the recent past, rather than of the future" (T. S. Eliot in Theodore Spencer ed., 1939, 5). Despite this sharp shift in Eliot's attitudes, his previous ideas had a decisive influence on many critics.

Herbert Read was also concerned with the thought- feeling relationships in metaphysical poetry. Depending on Eliot's ideas Read explained more precisely his own conception of the merging of experience and thought and of percept and concept. He asserted that in metaphysical poetry there was a tendency towards an intellectualization of experience rather than vice versa, and explained that Donne himself realised "that there was often more poetic value in the thought about an emotion than in the emotion itself". He, thus, found Donne's poetry exceptionally rich in the material of philosophy and concluded that the whole meaning of metaphysical poetry was in an anagogic interpretation (Herbert Read, 1926, 45, 57).

George Williamson's *The Donne Tradition* suggested a certain way of writing poetry, with John Donne being the supreme example of it. Indeed Williamson represented Donne as the founder of metaphysical poetry characterized by wit, surprise and conceits. This seemed to imply that Williamson had gone far from Eliot. Examining the book more closely, one realizes that Eliot's propositions were warmly taken up by George Williamson without achieving a serious advance. As a matter of fact, Williamson discussed in detail what Eliot called the unified sensibility of the earlier seventeenth century relating it to the conceit and wit. According to him, the blend of thought and feeling helped attain the conceit "to high poetic value; the idea and the figure become one..." (Williamson, 1930, 29). Believing that there was a strong connection between the conceit and the sensuous thinking of Donne, Williamson wrote,

The conceit, playing like the shuttle between his mind and the world, wove the fabric of the thought, and gave the pattern in which he united his most disparate knowledge and experience into an image witty or imaginative, novel or compelling, but always rising from a tough reasonableness and often attaining startling insight, with moments of breath- taking beauty (31-32) .

John Crowe Ransom was not different in his evaluation of metaphysical poetry from the previous critics. His description was appreciative, categorical and historical. He regarded metaphysical poetry or "miraculism", to use his term, as a superior kind of imaginative

creation. Unlike Platonic poetry which "is too idealistic", and unlike "physical poetry" which "is too realistic, and realism is tedious and does not mountain interest", metaphysical poetry "is the most original and exciting, and intellectually the most seasoned" in our literature and perhaps in other peoples' literature (John Crowe Ransom, 1938, 135, 142). In his writings, Ransom appeared to be critical of Eliot's conception of the metaphysicals' unified sensibility. He asserted that once the unified sensibility was shattered it became hard to put it together again. Ransom, thus, claimed that metaphysical poetry was mainly ontological since it was concerned with completing science and improving discourse using the psychological device of the miracle (Ransom, 141-142). Obviously, Ransom was referring to the conceit as this device. He maintained that the conceit was an extended metaphor that is identical with the poem as a whole, and that enabled the poet to perpetuate in his poem "an order of existence which is crumbling in real life" (Ransom, 348).

Although Ransom emerged as the leading critic to introduce the notion of the extended conceit, he, nonetheless, was only partly right to consider it the one defining aspect of metaphysical poetry. He simply ignored other devices and qualities characteristic of metaphysical poetry.

The criticism of Allen Tate sprang from Ransom's propositions. There is much in his book concerning the conceit and what Ransom called a single extended metaphor: But Tate did not believe that the conceit was inherent in the subject of the poem; rather, it was an idea "exactly parallel to it, elaborated beyond the usual stretch of metaphor into a supporting structure for a long passage or even an entire poem" (1948, 331). Tate, however, did not limit his conception of metaphysical poetry by insisting upon a single metaphor extended to the whole structure of a poem. He gave greater credit to metaphysical poetry by noticing that in it there was a development of imagery achieved by an explicit logical order. He suggested that a metaphysical poem contained a serious of images that were logically connected to each other. Tate was aware, though, that in metaphysical poetry the "varieties of ambiguity and contradiction possible beneath the logical surface are endless" (80).

Cleanth Brooks also regarded metaphysical poetry as the best kind of poetry. Like Ransom, Brooks saw the importance of the single extended metaphor in framing a metaphysical poem. Yet he was convinced that approaching metaphysical poetry should not be dependent only on its structure as a definitive characteristic. He preferred to approach metaphysical poetry in terms of its pervasive qualities and attitudes. In other words, he stressed more the awareness of both the poet and the readers as well as their attitudes. He, thus, considered metaphysical poetry to be essentially witty: "wit is not merely an acute perception of analogues; it is a lively awareness of the fact that the obvious attitude toward a given situation is not the only possible attitude" (1939, 37). It is clear, Brooks did not refer only to structural devices but to general qualities and possible different attitudes of poets and readers. Furthermore, he thought that the witty features of metaphysical poetry resulted from conflicting attitudes and irony. He noticed that in metaphysical poetry "the opposition of the impulses is extreme", and that the poet by his irony expressions "converges his lines from the farthest possible distances", in an attempt to achieve a harmonious whole (42, 43).

It was Leonard Unger that studied Donne's songs and sonnets broadly and comprehensively. He did not classify Donne's poetry according to one aspect of structure nor did he describe it in accordance with a single absolute standard. Having carefully studied the discoveries of many critics he presented a new view on metaphysical poetry. Unger was concerned with the relationships between structural elements and values that appeal to the reader in every poem. In his opinion, the link between the elements present in a particular poem and the structural aspect equally determine its value (86). Of these elements he considered the "complexity of attitudes" to be a distinguishing feature of Donne's "Songs and Sonnets". The complexity of attitudes, a value in itself, reflects the actual differences among individuals in our real life and the conflicts between individuals and society. There are differences among the same individual's various interests. This opposition of attitudes in which the individual is involved emphasizes "the psychology of the individual" which "makes for dramatic quality". In addition to giving a

general account of the value of Donne's poetry, Unger examined some stylistic elements that might be of some importance to the readers in producing the final effect of the whole poem. He considered, for example, the imagery which he found of a distinguishable kind: it is urban, intellectual and realistic. He finally values Donne's "conversational, argumentative and dramatic" tone and his metaphor for producing qualities such as wit, surprise and irony (86-87).

In view of these ideas, it might be said that modern critics' approach to metaphysical poetry was influenced by Eliot's theories. In effect, their discoveries were more or less variations or elaboration of Eliot's ideas. All invited modern poets to study metaphysical poetry and follow its example as being a superior kind of poetry. And many of them wrote poetry using ideas borrowed from them.

The apparent tendency of the critics to hail Donne's modernity had an immense effect upon modern creative response. Influenced by their critical comments, more and more poets wrote metaphysical poetry or invented their own conception of the metaphysical style. Joseph Duncan mentioned that some seventy modern poets may be regarded as metaphysicals (169). Believing that Eliot was the "high priest of the modern metaphysical revival", Duncan devoted a whole chapter to T. S. Eliot. He studied Eliot's critical theory of unified sensibility showing its manifestations in his poetry and discussing how Eliot's changed attitude towards the metaphysicals was paralleled by a change in his own poetry (143). In another chapter, "The Metaphysical Florence", Duncan surveyed the importance of Donne and the metaphysicals on certain modern poets like Wallace Steven's, The Fugitives, Elinor Wylie, Read, Edith Sitwell and Empson (182-202).

The emergence of modern metaphysical poets soon became a subject of interest for a whole group of critics who regarded the imaginative creation of the earlier seventeenth and twentieth centuries as a kin. Their starting point was that the two periods were marked by scientism, religious scepticism and collapse of human values. William O'Conner, for instance, believed that the kinship between modern poets and the metaphysicals centered upon their acceptance of the physical and their cultivation of the anti- poetic. Paralleling Shapiro's "The Fly" and

Donne's "The Flea" he concluded that the "ugly" should be functional in the poetry of the two periods, one an age of discovery, the other an age striving somewhat desperately to rediscover it (1946, 35-44). In her examination of the metaphysical tradition in the work of seven modern American poets, Sona Raiziss wrote that the critical tensions and conflicts of both the seventeenth and twentieth centuries were so parallel that she found in Donne's poetry "the experience and language of contemporary writing" (1952, xiii). Ashley Sampson discussed Donne's consciousness which was similar to that of poets of the 1920's and 1930's (1936, 307-14). In 1962 Mario Praz claimed that the discovery of Donne had been more than a change of perspective in literary criticism. It had "resulted not only in the adoption of certain images, in the cult of certain conceits and imaginative processes: it has rather amounted to the awareness of a similar disposition of spirit, of the same complexity in facing life, of the ironical reaction" (1962, 163). And R. C. Bald pointed out that the qualities of mind revealed in Donne's work were akin to the minds of modern poets (1932, 53).

The assertion of Donne's modernity and the attempt of many critics to draw a parallel between the seventeenth - century poets and the twentieth- century ones created a new wave of criticism against the revival which got started during the 1940's and 1950's varied from a severe assault on the new criticism by historically- oriented critics to a direct attack on metaphysical poetry. Basing themselves on historical scholarship, these critics treated Donne's poetry as significant to the needs and interests of its own time. They approached the problems raised by metaphysical poetry from the stand offered by the literary practices of the seventeenth century.

Rosemond Tuve was probably the chief representative of this trend. In her remarkable book *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery*, she vigorously criticized the attitudes that Donne was a distinct, original and rebellious modern and severely attacked the modern critical attempts to ascribe to the metaphysicals conceptions congenial to contemporary thinking. She accepted neither Brook's thinking of metaphysical poetry in terms of opposed impulses neither did she approve of Eliot's theory of the Donne's unified sensibility. She believed that modern critics imposed



their own ideas on the metaphysicals and suggested that the metaphysicals had no conception of "the modern author's portrayal of his own process of interpreting or feeling", and "of the very important of thought in a living mind". Tuve, therefore, read the metaphysicals in the context of their own times and measured them by their standards namely by the standards of the Renaissance poetics. For one thing, the Renaissance poets were motivated by logic: "The laws of logic were the laws of thought and the poet must know and use them; he will not otherwise be able to approach truth or direct the mind of man toward it". For another thing, the Renaissance poets groped for formal beauty depending on rhetoric, they "thought of the discipline of rhetoric as affording the poet necessary training in this respect" (1947, 44, 283-84, 27). Merritt Hughes also launched a severe attack on modern critics who kidnapped Donne and insisted on his intellectuality which is our conception of his wit and on his scepticism which is our position towards the natural sciences and metaphysics. According to Hughes, wit should not be made " a master key to literary history. The more absolute we make our estimate of Donne's wit in general, the less historically revealing becomes our appreciation of Donne". As for Donne's scepticism, he believed that : "All the evidence shows that from his first literary experiments until he wrote Death's Puell Donne thought of the universe as the Polemic machine pictured by St Thomas and Danti, and that for him time began and ended with creation" (1934, 67, 74). Proceeding to survey baroque "manners" in sculpture, painting, architecture and principally in poetry, Wyle Sypher argued that both Donne and Milton had to be "seen against the authentic movement of the seventeenth century. When thus seen, Milton is the greatest of the baroque poets, the most polyphonic" (1944, 17). Herschel Baker placed Donne within the intellectual framework of his time which shaped man's conception of truth- theological, scientific political and other. Baker maintained that Donne had revealed "a typical seventeenth- century flexibility of mind; and when he is reworking the hallowed formulas of pessimism he stays pretty closely within his ecclesiastical tradition" (1952, 59). Likewise, A.S. Smith has written on Donne from a historical perspective recently. He suggested a study of the Renaissance poetics and its great tradition of wit developed by Ramus for a true explanation

of metaphysical qualities and techniques. The consideration of wit as it was developed in conventional rhetoric would remove the obscurity and enigma from Donne's poetry (1975, 188).

Other critics would give deprecatory remarks about the achievements of metaphysical poets and the interpretations of the new critics. Leah Jonas, for example, noted that Donne had nothing to say directly about the aesthetics of poetry; in his poetry there were scattered comments which illustrated some aspects of his poetic theory. In her opinion, Donne's influence on other poets and the course of English poetry was done by example rather than by precept (1940, 273-79). Van Wyck Brooks associated metaphysical poetry with chess and crossword puzzles (1941, 245) and Robert Hillyer attacked the new critics and linked their criticism with the "new fascism", the "new aestheticism", and with old-fashioned anti-semiticism (1948, 8). And Russell Hope Robbins sharply assailed the new criticism and described Eliot as "a poet of minor achievement, emotionally sterile and with a mind coarsened by snobbery and constricted by bigotry" (1951, 200).

The modern wave of interest in Donne is still ongoing and no single poet was yet occupied his place. However, it must be pointed out that the early enthusiasm for Donne which was fed by a sense of similarities between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries has appeased. Having become increasingly aware of the differences between the two periods, critics now set John Donne against the habits and attitudes of his time. The passage of time and the great effect of familiarity with Donne's poetry helped move Donne from the creative center.

**Notes:**

\*In the previous issue of this journal an attempt was made to give an account of the revival of interest in metaphysical poetry between the two world wars. This article comes to give a complete picture of my discussion.

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