

Celestial Verses: A Resurgent Fascination with Metaphysical Poetry in the 20th Century

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Abstract

This investigation explores the enduring interest in metaphysical poetry, focusing on the critical reception of John Donne's works during the interwar period, marked by significant shifts in collective psyche post-World War I. The intentional selection of this timeframe allows for a nuanced exploration of how metaphysical poetry resonated with a society undergoing profound societal and intellectual changes, echoing Donne's challenges in his era.

Using a historical and literary analysis approach, the study probes into critical landscapes, unveiling a consensus among scholars that Donne's poetry epitomized modern thought. His skepticism towards emerging scientific and philosophical paradigms, coupled with his adept synthesis of disparate elements, positioned him as a representative of contemporary intellectual currents. This acknowledgment significantly impacted critical theory, establishing Donne's poetry as a prototype for modern poetic expressions and inspiring subsequent poets.

Despite this prevailing perspective, the essay acknowledges the emergence of historically-oriented critics in the 1940s. This group approached Donne's work with irony, seeking to contextualize him within his intellectual milieu. Their aim was to expose the divergence between Donne's thought and the prevailing ideas of his era, adding complexity to the understanding of his work.

Recounting this dynamic intellectual landscape sheds light on the ongoing discourse surrounding metaphysical poetry. It underscores Donne's lasting influence as a focal critical point of discussion, contributing to the broader

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understanding of the poet and the literary landscape of the interwar period. The legacy of this interwar critical engagement continues to shape contemporary perspectives on Donne and his ongoing impact on poetry.

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1

The term "Metaphysical poets" was introduced by the critic Samuel Johnson to characterize a loose gathering of English poets from the 17th century (Eliot 1975, 59). Their works were notable for their inventive use of conceits and a greater emphasis on spoken expression rather than lyrical qualities. These poets were not formally associated, and only in the 20th century did they receive significant recognition (Johnson, 1780).

Given the absence of a cohesive literary movement and the wide range of styles among these poets, some have proposed referring to them as "Baroque poets" in accordance with the era they lived in (Segel 3–14). However, once the Metaphysical style was established, it occasionally found adoption by other poets, particularly younger ones, to suit specific contexts.

Metaphysical poetry is renowned for its longwinded and occasionally deliberately contrived metaphors and similes, reflecting the complex mental and emotional experiences of the poets. These poets notably John Donne, George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, and Henry Vaughan campaigned the notion of the interconnectedness between the physical and spiritual realms, a concept that ultimately gave rise to the term "metaphysical". The term itself finds its origins in metaphysics, a branch of philosophy that explores the relationship between the physical world and human consciousness (*Etymology Dictionary*.)

In the early twentieth century, a remarkable revival of metaphysical poetry swept through the literary landscape, with John Donne emerging as its chief exponent, captivating a new generation of readers and scholars. This revival, driven by societal, philosophical, and artistic currents, resurrected metaphysical poetry from relative obscurity, infusing it with fresh vitality. The aftermath of World War I brought about profound societal changes, leading to a sense of disillusionment and a questioning of traditional beliefs and values. Metaphysical poetry, with its intellectual complexity and exploration of existential themes, resonated with the prevailing uncertainty and a desire for new perspectives. Concurrently, the early 20th century witnessed significant philosophical shifts, marked by the rise of existentialism and the questioning of established truths. Metaphysical poetry, characterized by its intellectual depth and examination of complex metaphysical concepts, offered a space for contemplation and engagement with these philosophical inquiries. Moreover, modernist movements in art and literature sought to break away from traditional forms and explore innovative, avant-garde expressions, aligning with the unconventional style and bold metaphors of metaphysical poetry. The revival of interest in metaphysical poetry can be seen as part of a broader artistic trend that sought to challenge conventional norms and push the boundaries of creative expression. Scholars and critics, influenced by the ongoing revival of interest in Renaissance literature and intellectual history, turned their attention to the metaphysical poets, adding an intellectual dimension to the revival. The inclusion of metaphysical poetry in educational curricula further contributed to its resurgence as academic institutions recognized its historical and literary importance. Donne's sophisticated metaphysical conceits and philosophical depth became a focal point in literary studies, solidifying the metaphysical revival in the fabric of academic exploration. In essence, the revival of metaphysical poetry in the early twentieth century was a multifaceted phenomenon, encompassing societal,

philosophical, artistic, and intellectual factors that collectively breathed new life into this captivating literary tradition.

This essay explores the resurgence of interest in metaphysical poetry during this era, illuminating the reasons behind its dramatic return. It investigates how John Donne, with his mastery of metaphysical thought and poetic craft, became the foremost figure of this revival. Through careful analysis, I aim to reveal the profound impact of this resurgence on both the literary world and the broader intellectual landscape of the twentieth century and beyond.

Exploring this renaissance unveils how metaphysical poetry, characterized by sophisticated conceits and an unwavering exploration of the human condition, resonated with modern audiences. Joining this intellectual journey, we witness the revival of metaphysical poetry and John Donne's durable legacy as its quintessential voice.

In *Studies in Metaphysical Poetry*, Theodore Spencer and Mark Van Doren embarked on a significant exploration of this enigmatic genre from 1912 to 1938. They meticulously cataloged 540 titles of books and articles dedicated to metaphysical poetry, highlighting the surge in scholarly interest during the 1920s (1939).

Dedicated to the study of metaphysical poetry, John Roberts, an unwavering scholar, initially compiled a comprehensive record of 1,280 items spanning the years 1912 to 1968 (Roberts, 1973). This initial effort not only showcased Donne's resilient appeal but also highlighted the lasting fascination with the metaphysical themes woven into his works.

Undeterred by the passage of time, Roberts continued his scholarly journey with a second monumental undertaking, documenting 1,044 critical materials from 1968 to 1978 (Roberts, 1982). This subsequent collection emphasized the sustained relevance of Donne's poetry in contemporary literary discourse,

reaffirming his position as a timeless literary figure whose influence transcends temporal boundaries.

The enduring surge of interest in metaphysical poetry, particularly the works of John Donne, has become a continuous thread through time, weaving a rich tapestry of diverse perspectives. Scholars, building upon Roberts' foundational work, have introduced unique concepts and interpretations, creating a multi-layered landscape that enriches our understanding of Donne's profound literary contributions. The comparison between Roberts' two comprehensive compilations underscores not only the constancy of interest in Donne's work but also the evolving nature of scholarly engagement, reflecting the unending and dynamic legacy of metaphysical poetry.

This study narrows its focus to critical material from the interwar period. It highlights that the majority of these writings celebrated Donne's skepticism in the face of emerging science and philosophy. His skill in weaving diverse elements into a harmonious whole was seen as distinctly modern. Donne's poetry profoundly influenced critical theory, serving as a beacon of contemporary excellence, inspiring modern poets to adopt his innovative approach.

Yet, the 1940s witnessed the emergence of historically-oriented critics who employed irony to critique the prevailing modern perspective. They aimed to reposition Donne within his intellectual context, revealing the stark contrast between his ideas and the prevailing currents of his time. This added complexity enriches the ongoing discourse on John Donne's deep impact on poetry and thought.

The discovery and subsequent resurgence of interest in metaphysical poetry during the twentieth century can be attributed to key contributions by notable scholars. Sir Herbert Grierson's remarkable editions in 1921, played a foundational role in this revival. Grierson's painstaking efforts included reviewing numerous manuscript collections, excluding poems falsely attributed to Donne and other metaphysical poets, and addressing the challenges posed by variant readings (Comte, 1965, 232-233; Fiore, 1972, 1-2; Duncan, 1969, 143).

However, it was T.S. Eliot's influential articles on Donne and the metaphysical poets, spanning from 1919 to 1923, that ignited a sudden surge of enthusiasm for this genre. Eliot offered profound praise for Donne's ability to synthesize diverse materials into a cohesive whole through the power of the poet's intellect. He lauded Donne's unwavering commitment to thought and emotion, his direct sensory apprehension of ideas, his transformation of thought into feeling, and his mastery of wit. In Eliot's view, Donne epitomized the modern poet, capable of meeting the demands of a complex civilization by crafting obscure and challenging poetry (Eliot, 1931 60-61).

Eliot's ideas, despite a later shift in his perspective, left an eternal imprint on modern critical theory. Subsequent critics eagerly advocated the idea of Donne as a modern poet, albeit from different angles. Alan Porter and Addleshaw emphasized Donne's originality, while Courthope and Woolf viewed him as a modern rebel. John Bailey celebrated Donne's self-willed individuality, and Edmund Gosse found fascination in Donne's contradictory nature. Collectively, these critics believed that Donne's modernity was characterized by his interests in science, his skepticism, and his psychological realism (Comte, 243; Fiore, 2-3; Duncan, 170-3; Williamson, 1958, 156, 158-9).

Quintessentially, the multidimensional strands of Donne's modernity, as perceived by these scholars, continue to illuminate our understanding of his long lasting impact on the world of poetry and thought. John Donne's profound fascination with the realm of science and the emerging "new philosophy" did not escape the discerning eyes of several esteemed critics. Charles Monroe Coffin, for instance, asserted that Donne possessed a comprehensive understanding of the prominent scientific discoveries and debates of his era, encompassing the works of luminaries such as Kepler, Gilbert, and Galileo. This profound knowledge, Coffin argued, elucidated the persistent allure Donne held for the 20th century (Coffin 1937, vii). In Coffin's view, Donne represented a compelling embodiment of the late Renaissance intellect's endeavor to navigate the evolving landscape of values without compromising the sanctity of both emotion and reason (6).

Marjorie Nicolson, on the other hand, contended that Galileo's groundbreaking work, "*Sidereus Nuncius*," (*Starry Messenger*) which marked a crucial juncture in the evolution of thought, had a profound impact on Donne. Nicolson posited that among English poets, Donne exhibited one of the most immediate and profound responses to the transformative discoveries of his time (1935, 428-62). In a separate article, Nicolson even proposed that Donne had encountered a copy of Kepler's "The Somnium" and integrated its ideas into the composition of "Ignatius His Conclave," a work she characterized as "the first modern cosmic voyage in England" (1940, 251).

F.R. Leavis contributed to this discourse by attributing Donne's everlasting significance in modern poetry to his pioneering establishment of a tradition wherein it was presumed that a poet should be a person of profound intelligence, and that a poet should seamlessly infuse the diverse facets of their life into their poetic creations (1931, 346-7).

In the same year, Fausset highlighted the central reason for Donne's modern resurgence, pointing to his unified sensibility. Fausset contended that Donne's poetry possessed a complex fusion of living thought and sensuous experience that strongly resonated with a generation grappling with the need to break free from a mental consciousness that had seemingly led to spiritual stagnation (1931, 341-2).

Edmund Gosse, in his discussion of Donne, acknowledged the poet's scientific curiosity and his familiarity with the works of luminaries such as Galileo, Kepler, Copernicus, and Brahe. Gosse identified Donne's exceptional gift as his "intellectual intensity of expression," which he believed modern poets should aspire to emulate. In Gosse's view, poets ought to approach language with a certain suspicion of mellifluousness when it concealed a lack of depth in thought. Instead, they should be more inclined to search for words, even if they were stumbling or harsh, to authentically convey their emotions, rather than merely glide over the surface of language in conventional sweetness (1923, 311-2).

Roston, while not fully endorsing the notion of Donne as a modern poet, did commend Donne's keen response to the latest scientific innovations of his time. Roston noted that Donne, unlike figures such as Francis Bacon or Kepler, did not seek neat empirical reasoning or adhere to clear-cut rules in his poetry. Instead, he was primarily intrigued by the inner contradictions unveiled by the new scientific investigations, as evidenced in several of his poems (1974, 209-13).

For Donne, science and humanism were not separate realms; he possessed the remarkable ability to transmute thought into feeling and give conceptual form to his emotions, as articulated by T.S. Eliot. Donne's audacious conceits, such as those involving compasses, limbecks, and elliptical orbits to resolve emotional conflicts, are well-documented. This reconciliation between the realms of

science and humanism resonated profoundly with modern readers and writers, as it helped bridge the gap between poetry and life in an era marked by scientific advancement, societal conflicts, tensions, and a crisis of values.

3

In the early decades of the twentieth century, as scientific systemization expanded into various facets of human thought and behavior, writers often found themselves grappling with creative stagnation and a sense of intellectual futility. The collapse of belief in a moral order compounded these challenges (Roston, 1974 3-4). Scholars like Joseph Wood Krutch even foretold the disappearance of love and tragedy from literature as a consequence (Roston, 3-4). Thus, Donne's remarkable success in harmonizing science and humanism captivated the sensibilities of his age, endowing modern readers with a newfound appreciation for the relevance of poetry in their lives.

John Donne's skepticism represents another facet of his modernity. In Satire III, Donne famously advised to "doubt wisely." In "The First Anniversary," he asserted, "And new philosophy calls all in doubt," and in "The Progress of the Soul," he declared,

There is no simply good, nor ill alone;
Of every quality comparison;
The only measure is, and judge opinion.

These statements, among others, were often overemphasized, and the underlying sense of positive hope they conveyed was frequently overlooked. Critics frequently assumed that Donne was a modern skeptic who had undergone a crisis of faith.

Edmund Gosse, for instance, described Donne as cynical, skeptical, and contemptuous, noting his capacity to embody seemingly contradictory qualities

like being a saint and a sinner, a passionate lover, and a cynic simultaneously (Gosse 311-12). Payne took the stance that the young Donne held no religious beliefs, viewing him as a battleground for the conflicting forces of his time, with his poetry serving as a record of this internal struggle (Gosse 14).

Marius Bewley took a more critical view, suggesting that Donne's "Songs and Sonnets" abused religious imagery and distorted scholastic philosophical concepts. He characterized them as steeped in outrageous cynicism and cavalier logic, representing years of Donne's private guerrilla warfare against the disposition of faith (Bewley 1952, 645). Richard Ince proposed that Donne's modernity stemmed from his apparent lack of adherence to any specific codes, while Hiram Hayden highlighted Donne's familiarity with the relativistic thought of his era (Ince 1939, 8-9; Hayden 1950, 163).

Numerous critics have contested the portrayal of Donne as a skeptic, with Faussett among the earliest dissenting voices. Faussett believed that while Donne grappled with the inner conflict between his intellect and primal impulses, he represented "the long labor of the man to outgrow the beast and approach the divine" (Faussett 1924, 315). Over time, it became increasingly evident that Donne had been misinterpreted. Despite his vivid imagery of decay, violence, and disease, and his exploration of human wretchedness, Donne was far from nihilistic or empirical in his outlook. His underlying message was one of hope; he allowed readers to journey through depths of agony and despair to foster an appreciation for God's love and mercy towards humanity, thereby preparing them for redemption (Fiore, 7; Roston, 106-7).

Even in his most skeptical phases, Donne was in pursuit of religious truth. He didn't grapple with whether to believe but rather what to believe. In "Satire III," he articulates the notion of doubting wisely and emphasizes that the path to truth is not straightforward:

..., doubt wisely; in strange way
To stand inquiring right, is not to stray
To sleep, or run wrong, is.
On a huge hill, Cragged and steep,
Truth stands, and he that will
Reach her, about must, and about must go,...

Satire III (77-81)

Donne's message is clear: Truth is present and accessible to all, but the path to it is not a straight one. Instead of opting for the simplest route, one must be vigilant and navigate a circuitous journey to attain truth. The poem as a whole conveys the speaker's anxious quest for a firm religious faith and a genuine religion. Skepticism is conspicuously absent, replaced by a relentless search for authentic faith.

In many of Donne's secular poems, a deep sense of religious passion permeates his verses. The soul perpetually yearns for divine fulfillment, seeking to detach itself from earthly desires. John Walton noted that during his youth, Donne dedicated six hours each morning to the study of theology (Roston, 6).

Interestingly, the notion of Donne as a modern skeptic coincided with the perception of him as a modern theologian. Scholars like Itrat Hussain and Helen White emphasized Donne's theological significance in shaping modern thought (Husain, 1938; White, 1956). W.H. Hutton drew a parallel between Donne and renowned theological figures like S. Paul, S. Bernard, and S. Francis, praising Donne as "a priest whose faith in God was as near as that of any man living on earth to sight" (Hutton 1924, 165).

John Sparrow vehemently opposed the idea of Donne as a skeptic, contending that his later religious poetry revealed the "unfolding of certain traits which had always been an important part of his nature" (Sparrow 1931, 146-50).

Henry Newbolt echoed this sentiment, asserting that Donne was not a skeptic and predicting that future religious and great poets would draw inspiration from his style (Newbolt 1926, 268).

4

The third strand which contributed much to Donne's modern fame was his probing self- analysis. Critics notably Carpenter, Massingham, Logan Smith, Addleshaw and others felt that on account of his bewilderment about the new rationalism and skepticism at the time Donne had turned introspective. Massingham pointed out Donne's introspection in his love poems (Massingham 1919, xviii); Logan Smith asserted Donne's subtlety of self-analysis which Smith described as an awareness of the workings of his own mind (Smith 1919, xxxi); Charles Coffin pointed out the influence of the new philosophy on Donne's Soul and Addleshaw stated that "Donne is the most introspective of all writers (1931, xii). Addleshaw claimed that in his best works Donne reveals his own vivid personality, lays bare his own soul and mind, so that we can know him as we know few writer (54). Brooks, Eliot Williamson and others demanded a careful reading of the metaphysical poems which yearned to achieve psychological unity derived from ambiguities, impulses and ironies. But this tendency to bring Donne's introspection into prominence was received with a strong objection by Roseond Tuve, Merritt Hughes and others who preferred to read the metaphysicals in the context of their own times and measured them by the standards of the Renaissance poetics (Tuve, 1947, 283-84; Hughes, 1934, 67, 74).

John Donne's rapid ascent to modern acclaim actively influenced the development of critical theory. As modern critics worked diligently to revive the cultural essence of the seventeenth century, they gained the ability to appreciate, understand, and assess the imaginative creations of that era with renewed perspectives. This, in turn, led to a fresh reinterpretation of Donne's work. Significantly, the recognition of the metaphysical poets' accomplishments sparked a quest for self-discovery. John Donne soon became an integral part of critical discourse and was regarded, echoing Roston's perspective, as the "benchmark of excellence by which other poets should be gauged" (Roston 1974, 1).

Prominent figures in the realm of critical theory, including Grierson, Eliot, Ransom, Brooks, Tate, Read, Williamson, and many others, each driven by their unique insights, embarked on a quest to establish modern principles for the analysis of metaphysical poetry. These principles served as the foundation for evaluating contemporary poetry. Essentially, these critics employed modern techniques to scrutinize metaphysical poetry and employed it as a yardstick to define the standards of modern poetry. This approach, as characterized by Tuve, represented a merging of different historical periods in the pursuit of a deeper understanding of literature.

Sir Herbert Grierson was a trailblazer of the twentieth century in his profound admiration for metaphysical poetry and his crowning of John Donne as the monarch of seventeenth-century English poetry. In the introduction to his influential edition, "Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century," which ignited a resurgence of interest in Donne, Grierson enumerated the qualities of metaphysical poetry with fervent admiration. He extolled

medieval poetry for emphasizing "the survival, one might say the re-accentuation, of the metaphysical strain."

In contrast to the Elizabethans, Grierson observed that metaphysical poets possessed wit that was "more intellectual, less verbal," and their conceits examined "finer psychology." He commended their adept utilization of learned imagery and noted the "argumentative, subtle evolution of their lyrics." Grierson contended that the paramount achievement of metaphysical poetry 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 insights were so captivating and intelligent that subsequent critics, including Eliot, frequently quoted, reiterated, and paraphrased them in their own works. These insights provided fresh avenues for critics to approach metaphysical poetry. However, it is worth noting that Grierson's remarks, while profound, were more impressionistic than analytical, lacking specific references to individual poems (Leonard Unger, 1950, 5). To some extent, Unger's critique holds true, but it is essential to remember that Grierson's expressions were not intended as a systematic study of metaphysical poetry; rather, they served as an introduction to his edition of the works, offering valuable thematic insights.

6

Eliot's essays, including "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), "Andrew Marvell" (1921), and "John Donne" (1923), played a fundamental role in elevating Donne's reputation and fueling a surge in criticism on Donne and the metaphysical poets. In these essays, Eliot made two substantial contributions to the critical exploration of Donne and metaphysical poetry: he redefined prevailing notions of metaphysical poetry and approached the metaphysical

poets as a distinct "movement" diverging "from the main current" (Frank Kermode, ed., 1975, 59).

In the first essay, originally written as a review of Grierson's edition, Eliot expanded upon Grierson's comment regarding the "blend of passion and thought" and explored the concepts of conceits and wit. Eliot interpreted Donne as modern due to "his heterogeneity of material compelled into unity by the operation of the poet's mind," his "fidelity to thought and feeling," and his skill in transforming "thought into feeling" (61, 62, 63). Grierson, on the other hand, primarily praised Donne in the context of the seventeenth century. Eliot also provided a definition of conceit, supported by examples from Donne's poetry, whereas Grierson had merely commended the fine conceits and wit of the metaphysical poets. 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 extent to which ingenuity can carry it... a development by rapid association of thought which requires considerable agility on the part of the reader. (60)

Furthermore, 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). These insights provided critical tools for understanding the structural elements of metaphysical poetry. Eliot, however, refrained from categorizing these devices as exclusive characteristics of metaphysical poetry. In his essay on "John Donne," Eliot once again celebrated Donne's modernity, emphasizing his fidelity to evolving thought and feeling, his psychological realism, and his "potential actual wit" present throughout his poetry.

Eliot's most pioneering achievement lay in his approach to metaphysical poetry and modern theory, viewing them through the dual lenses of a style historian and a seasoned poet (Joseph Duncan 1969, 145). Eliot introduced the concept of a metaphysical sensibility, a "mechanism" enabling the metaphysical poets to assimilate a wide array of experiences and fashion them into "new wholes" (in Kermode ed., 64). He underscored that the metaphysical poets' ability to transmute the frontiers of experience into poetry represented the hallmark of a mature poet.

Furthermore, Eliot utilized his observations, as articulated by Duncan, to construct a framework for literary history: Donne and the early seventeenth-century metaphysical poets were characterized by their quest for a unified sensibility, whereas poets like Dryden and Milton in the later seventeenth century grappled with dissociated sensibility (Duncan, 146). Eliot also lauded Donne and the metaphysical poets as exemplars for modern poets, citing Donne's intricate poetry as a reflection of the demands of our complex civilization (Kermode ed., 65).

Although Eliot's enthusiasm for the metaphysical poets took a sharp turn within a decade, with him later categorizing them among the "smaller, imperfect poets with whom later poets discover an affinity," and asserting 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), his earlier ideas had a profound impact on many critics.

Herbert Read also studied the demanding relationship between thought and feeling in metaphysical poetry, aligning his views more precisely with Eliot's concepts of merging experience and thought, as well as percept and concept. He posited that metaphysical poetry exhibited a tendency toward intellectualizing experience, emphasizing that Donne himself recognized the greater poetic value often lay in the contemplation of an emotion rather than the emotion itself.

Consequently, Read found Donne's poetry exceptionally rich in philosophical material and concluded that the essence of metaphysical poetry resided in an anagogic interpretation (Read 1926, 45, 57).

In "The Donne Tradition," the delineation of a particular approach to poetry writing, exemplified by John Donne as the preeminent figure, appears to distance itself from Eliot's ideas at first glance. Yet, upon closer inspection, it becomes evident that this work not only incorporates Eliot's propositions but does so without significant advancement. The meticulous discussion revolves around Eliot's concept of the unified sensibility of the early seventeenth century, drawing parallels to the notions of conceit and wit. According to the text, the fusion of thought and feeling proves instrumental in elevating conceit to "high poetic value; the idea and the figure become one..." (Williamson, 1930, 29). He believed that there existed a profound connection between conceit and Donne's sensuous thinking, stating,

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's evaluation of metaphysical poetry closely aligned with the perspectives of previous critics, characterized by appreciation, definitiveness, and historical context. He esteemed metaphysical poetry, or "miraculism" in his terminology, as a superior form of imaginative creation. In contrast to Platonic poetry, which he deemed "too idealistic," and "physical poetry," seen as "too realistic and thus tedious and lacking intrigue," Ransom asserted that metaphysical poetry was the most original, exciting, and

intellectually mature form of literary expression in our own literature and, perhaps, in the literature of other cultures (Ransom, 1938, 135, 142).

In his writings, Ransom appeared to challenge Eliot's notion of the metaphysical poets' unified sensibility. He contended that once this unified sensibility was fractured, reassembling it became a formidable task. Consequently, Ransom posited that metaphysical poetry was primarily ontological, focused on advancing the discourse of science and utilizing the psychological mechanism of the miracle, with the conceit serving as this device (Ransom, 141-142). Clearly, Ransom referred to the conceit as this device and emphasized that it was an extended metaphor congruent with the entire poem. It allowed the poet to perpetuate "an order of existence which is crumbling in real life" within the confines of the poem (Ransom, 348).

While John Crowe Ransom's introduction of the extended conceit was a significant contribution to the understanding of metaphysical poetry, it's essential to acknowledge that it only partially defines this genre. Ransom's focus on the extended conceit overlooks other distinctive devices and qualities inherent to metaphysical poetry.

Allen Tate's criticism was influenced by Ransom's ideas, particularly regarding the conceit and the concept of a single extended metaphor. However, Tate diverged from Ransom by asserting that the conceit was not an inherent aspect of the poem's subject but rather an idea that ran parallel to it. This idea was elaborated to an extent beyond the typical boundaries of metaphor, often forming the structural backbone of an entire poem (Tate 1948, 331).

Tate, however, didn't limit his understanding of metaphysical poetry solely to the notion of a single metaphor extended throughout a poem. He recognized the richness of metaphysical poetry in its development of imagery through an explicit logical order. According to Tate, metaphysical poems featured a series

of interconnected images with a logical connection between them. Tate was also mindful of the extensive possibilities for ambiguity and contradiction beneath the poem's logical surface (Tate 80).

Like Ransom, Cleanth Brooks held metaphysical poetry in high regard, recognizing its unique qualities. While he acknowledged the importance of the single extended metaphor in structuring metaphysical poems, Brooks believed that understanding this genre should encompass more than just its structural elements. Instead, he emphasized the pervasive qualities and attitudes present in metaphysical poetry, highlighting the awareness of both poets and readers and their respective attitudes.

For Brooks, the essence of metaphysical poetry rested in its wit, which he perceived not solely as a keen perception of analogies but as a vibrant awareness that allowed for multiple possible attitudes toward a given situation (Brooks 1939, 37). This perspective extended beyond structural devices, encompassing the broader qualities and potential varied attitudes of both poets and readers. Brooks further identified the witty elements of metaphysical poetry as emerging from conflicting attitudes and irony. He noted that within this poetic genre, the opposition between impulses was exceptionally pronounced. Through the adept use of irony, poets could bring together seemingly distant elements, striving to achieve a harmonious whole (Brooks 42, 43). This interconnected understanding posited by Brooks underscores the dynamic nature of wit in metaphysical poetry, where it serves not only as a perceptive tool but as a means to navigate and reconcile the tensions inherent in conflicting attitudes and paradoxical elements.

Leonard Unger conducted a comprehensive study of John Donne's songs and sonnets, taking a holistic approach that didn't pigeonhole Donne's poetry into a single structural aspect or rely on a singular absolute standard. Instead, drawing insights from various critics, he offered a fresh perspective on metaphysical poetry. Unger focused on the tricky interplay between structural elements and

the values that resonate with readers in each poem. According to him, the relationship between these elements and the poem's structure jointly determined its worth (Unger 1950, 86).

One distinguishing feature Unger identified in Donne's "Songs and Sonnets" was the "complexity of attitudes." He regarded this complexity as a valuable aspect, mirroring the real-life differences between individuals and the conflicts that arise between individuals and society. Unger noted that even within the same individual, various interests could give rise to differing attitudes. This interplay of attitudes, with its focus on individual psychology, contributed to the poems' dramatic quality (Unger 86).

Furthermore, Unger studied stylistic elements that played a role in shaping the overall impact of Donne's poetry. He highlighted the unique character of the imagery, which he described as urban, intellectual, and realistic. Unger also valued Donne's conversational, argumentative, and dramatic tone, as well as his use of metaphor to convey qualities like wit, surprise, and irony (Unger 86-87).

In retrospect, it becomes evident that modern critics' approach to metaphysical poetry was significantly shaped by the theories put forth by T.S. Eliot. Their subsequent findings can be seen as extensions or elaborations of Eliot's original ideas, with many of them inviting contemporary poets to study metaphysical poetry as a model for superior poetic expression. Notably, a considerable number of poets were inspired by these critical perspectives and incorporated metaphysical elements into their own work.

The critics' celebration of John Donne's modernity profoundly shaped contemporary creative responses, leading to an increasing number of poets composing metaphysical poetry or developing unique interpretations of the metaphysical style. Joseph Duncan, recognizing T.S. Eliot as the "high priest of the modern metaphysical revival," dedicated a chapter to him, exploring Eliot's

critical theory of unified sensibility and demonstrating its manifestation in his poetry. This chapter also researched how Eliot's evolving attitude toward the metaphysical poets reflected shifts in his own poetic style (Duncan 143). In another chapter titled "The Metaphysical Florence," Duncan extended his examination to the influence of Donne and the metaphysical poets on various modern poets, including Wallace Stevens, The Fugitives, Elinor Wylie, Herbert Read, Edith Sitwell, and William Empson (Duncan 182-202).

The emergence of modern metaphysical poets became a topic of interest for a group of critics who identified parallels between the imaginative creations of the early seventeenth and twentieth centuries. They noted that both periods were characterized by scientism, religious skepticism, and a sense of collapsing human values. William O'Conner, for example, argued that the connection between modern poets and the metaphysicals lay in their embrace of the physical world and their cultivation of the anti-poetic. Drawing parallels between poems like Shapiro's "The Fly" and Donne's "The Flea," he concluded that the "ugly" had a functional role in the poetry of both eras, one marked by discovery and the other by a somewhat desperate quest for rediscovery (O'Conner 1946, 35-44).

Sona Raiziss, in her examination of the metaphysical tradition in the works of seven modern American poets, asserted that the critical tensions and conflicts of the seventeenth and twentieth centuries were so strikingly similar that she found in Donne's poetry "the experience and language of contemporary writing" (Raiziss 1952, xiii). Ashley Sampson examined Donne's consciousness, drawing parallels with poets of the 1920s and 1930s (Sampson 1936, 307-14).

In 1962, Mario Praz emphasized that the discovery of Donne had brought about a profound shift in literary criticism. It was not just the adoption of certain images and conceits; rather, it signaled an awareness of a shared disposition of spirit, a similar complexity in facing life, and an ironic reaction (Praz 1962, 163).

R. C. Bald also pointed out that the qualities of mind revealed in Donne's work resonated with the minds of modern poets (Bald 1932, 53).

The assertion of Donne's modernity and the attempts by many critics to draw parallels between seventeenth-century and twentieth-century poets sparked a new wave of criticism that emerged during the 1940s and 1950s. This wave of criticism ranged from a harsh critique of New Criticism by historically-oriented critics to direct attacks on metaphysical poetry itself. These critics, drawing on historical scholarship, examined Donne's poetry in the context of its own time and approached the issues raised by metaphysical poetry based on the literary practices of the seventeenth century.

Rosemond Tuve emerged as a prominent representative of this trend. In her influential book, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery*, she vehemently criticized the notion that Donne was a distinctly original and rebellious modern poet. She challenged modern critical attempts to impose contemporary conceptions onto the metaphysical poets. Tuve argued that the metaphysical poets did not possess the same ideas about the portrayal of a poet's thought process or the importance of thought in a living mind as modern critics did. She advocated for reading the metaphysical poets within the context of their own times and evaluating them by the standards of Renaissance poetics. According to Tuve, Renaissance poets were motivated by logic, viewing it as essential for approaching truth and shaping the mind of man. They also valued formal beauty and saw the discipline of rhetoric as crucial for a poet's training (Tuve 1947, 44, 283-84, 27).

While Merritt Hughes criticized modern critics for their exclusive focus on Donne's intellectuality and skepticism, arguing that such interpretations lacked historical depth, Wylie Sypher and Herschel Baker offered alternative perspectives that sought to contextualize Donne within the broader framework of the seventeenth century. Hughes cautioned against reducing Donne's work

solely to wit, emphasizing that an overemphasis on this aspect might obscure a more comprehensive understanding of the poet (Hughes 1934, 67, 74). In contrast, Wylie Sypher's exploration of baroque "manners" across various art forms positioned Donne and Milton as integral figures within the authentic movement of the seventeenth century, with Sypher highlighting Milton's polyphonic qualities as particularly noteworthy (Sypher 1944, 17). Similarly, Herschel Baker placed Donne within the intellectual currents of his time, asserting that Donne's conception of truth—be it theological, scientific, or political—was shaped by the prevailing ideas of the seventeenth century. Baker underscored Donne's adaptability within his ecclesiastical tradition, emphasizing the flexibility of Donne's mind (Baker 1952, 59). Collectively, these perspectives offer a multilateral understanding of Donne's work, urging a nuanced exploration that goes beyond a singular focus on wit or skepticism.

Building upon the exploration of John Donne's work, A.S. Smith presents a contemporary perspective by delving into the historical context and advocating for a nuanced examination of Renaissance poetics. Smith's approach emphasizes the study of wit within the tradition of Renaissance poetics, particularly as developed by Ramus, to offer a richer explanation of the metaphysical qualities and techniques present in Donne's poetry (Smith 1975, 188). So, in contrast to the prevailing focus on Donne's intellectuality and skepticism, Smith's proposal suggests that understanding wit in the context of conventional rhetoric can demystify Donne's intricate poetic expressions. By anchoring Donne's work within the broader historical tradition of Renaissance poetics, Smith invites scholars and readers to appreciate the intricacies of wit as a rhetorical device, shedding light on how Donne's poetry engages with and expands upon established literary conventions. Smith's emphasis on Renaissance poetics prompts a reconsideration of the factors influencing Donne's craft, challenging conventional interpretations that may oversimplify the complexities of his work.

This historical perspective encourages a more comprehensive exploration of the cultural and intellectual milieu that shaped Donne's poetic sensibilities, fostering a deeper appreciation for the richness and depth of his contributions to the metaphysical tradition. As scholars continue to engage with diverse perspectives, the manifold nature of Donne's poetry emerges, inviting a continual reevaluation of the critical frameworks applied to his body of work.

Certain critics, however, offered less flattering assessments of the achievements of metaphysical poets and the interpretations put forth by the new critics. For instance, Leah Jonas contended that John Donne's poetry lacked direct commentary on the aesthetics of poetry, with only scattered comments offering glimpses into his poetic theory. In her view, Donne's influence on subsequent poets and the trajectory of English poetry were more a result of his poetic example rather than explicit teachings (Jonas 1940, 273-79).

Van Wyck Brooks, on the other hand, whimsically associated metaphysical poetry with intellectual puzzles like chess and crossword puzzles (Brooks 1941, 245). Robert Hillyer launched a critique against the new critics, connecting their critical approaches with what he saw as problematic contemporary trends such as "new fascism," "new aestheticism," and even old-fashioned anti-Semitism (Hillyer 1948, 8). Russell Hope Robbins took an even sharper stance against the new criticism, characterizing T.S. Eliot as a poet of minor achievement, emotionally sterile, and tainted by snobbery and bigotry (Robbins 1951, 200).

Although the modern resurgence of interest in John Donne and metaphysical poetry continues, no single poet has yet occupied Donne's central position. It's essential to note that the initial enthusiasm for Donne, fueled by perceived similarities between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, has waned over time. Critics have grown increasingly attuned to the differences between these two historical periods, prompting them to examine John Donne within the context of his own era. The passage of time, coupled with a deeper

familiarity with Donne's poetry, has led to a reevaluation of his significance, gradually shifting him away from the creative center of modern literary discourse.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the resurgence of interest in metaphysical poetry, with John Donne at its forefront, has been a dynamic and evolving journey in the realm of literary criticism. This intellectual odyssey has seen the pendulum swing between moments of enthusiastic celebration and critical reevaluation. The manifold nature of metaphysical poetry, marked by its complicated conceits, profound exploration of human existence, and its adaptability to changing intellectual currents, has captivated generations of scholars and readers.

From Theodore and Mark van Doren Spencer's early cataloging of metaphysical literature to John Roberts' tireless dedication to the study of John Donne, the scholarly engagement with metaphysical poetry has been relentless. These efforts have highlighted the strong resonance of Donne's works and their ability to provoke intellectual discourse across the ages.

As the twentieth century unfolded, the interpretation of metaphysical poetry took on various shades. T.S. Eliot's seminal essays, which celebrated the poets as modern in their own right, influenced a generation of critics. Yet, as time passed, historical perspectives emerged, and the metaphysical poets found themselves reexamined within the context of their own era.

Critics like Rosemond Tuve and Merritt Hughes argued that modern interpretations had superimposed contemporary ideals onto the metaphysicals, urging a return to the Renaissance poetics that informed their work. This shift signaled a growing awareness of the stark differences between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, prompting a nuanced understanding of John Donne's place in literary history.

In the end, the journey through the revival of metaphysical poetry illustrates the dynamic nature of literary criticism itself. It reflects the ever-evolving relationship between past and present, as scholars continue to explore the lasting legacy of poets who, despite the passage of time, continue to inspire and provoke thought. John Donne and the metaphysicals, with their refined verses and thought-provoking themes, remain a testament to the power of poetry and the perpetual quest for understanding the human condition.

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