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METAPHYSICAL POETRY: THE RHETORIC OF THE CONSCIENCE IN JOHN DONNE

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Abstract:

John Donne is the most outstanding practioner of 'Metaphysical School of poetry'. Metaphysical poetry is that branch of poetry that blends emotions with intellect in a harmonic manner. In the poetry of Donne which Eliot and his generation found so fascinating – there existed the lively play of intellect, the alliance of passion and playfulness and dramatic imagination. Donne's poetic practices started a powerful tradition which affected a large body of poetry in the first half of the 17th century. This paper tries to tease out certain strong charecterstics of metaphysical traditions. It also tries to make a critical analysis of the importance of metaphysical poetry in the literary realm.

KEY WORDS:

Metaphysical, Philosophical, Renaissance, Scholasticism, emotion...

.INTRODUCTION

Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of existence, truth and knowledge. The term 'Metaphysical' in its etymological sense is used for 'what is beyond physical'. In the conventional sense the term 'metaphysical poetry' deals with subjects like nature of the universe, the creation of man and his relationship to the universe and the whole relationship of man to God. The examples of such poetry are Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* and Dante's *Divina Comedia*.

'Marinoisim' (from Marino in Italy), 'Gongorism' (from Gongora in Spain), or 'metaphysicism' in poetry emerged in the seventeenth century. The label "metaphysical" was given much later by Samuel Johnson in his "Life of Cowley". In the modern times, metaphysical poetry "is a direct sensuous apprehension of thought or a recreation of thought into feeling". They had no profound philosophy to expound or any particular view of life. It was their style of writing and treatment of theme that earned them the name metaphysical. Metaphysical or metaphysics in the poetry is the fruit of renaissance tree, becoming over ripe and approaching pure science. R.S.Hillyer writes, "Literally it has to do with the conception of existence with the living universe and man's place therein." It has taken the meaning as difficult, obscure, philosophical, ethereal, ingenious, fantastic and incongruous. Their style was characterized by wit, subtle argumentations, "metaphysical conceits", and unusual simile or metaphor. Grierson depicts metaphysical poetry as —poetry inspired by a philosophical concept of the universe and the role assigned to human spirit in the great drama of existence.

DONNE: ARCHITECT OF METAPHYSICAL POETRY:

The metaphysical poets were opposed to the current sensibility. Metaphysical poetry was a great

revolt against the contemporary fashions of poetry. It intellectualized the prevailing religious spirit, and revolted against the Renaissance softness, smoothness and sweet expression. It reacted against the idealized, Spenserian, Petrarchan, Platonic and Arcadian style. It expressed new thoughts in new way. It reveals a union of mind and soul, of thought and emotion. Its treatment of love is unconventional. To the metaphysicals Dante's love for Beatrice, Petrarch's love for Laura, and gallant adoration of Sidney for Stella were all figments of the mind.

Metaphysical poetry is a mixture of emotions. Metaphysicals are down to earth realists. We find fascination and scornful anger inextricably blended in Donne's *The Apparition*.

"When by thy scorn, O murd'ress, I am dead" (1)

Here if there is love there is hatred also. Latin poet Catullus asks,
"I hate and love / you ask how can that be—I do not know" (1-2)

There is an element of scholasticism in metaphysicals. They have an appeal to the elite. It was necessary to think and read. "Metaphysical poets are men of learning, and to show their learning was their whole endeavor" (Dr. Johnson 5). We find reference to astronomy, alchemy, expanding universe of exploration. No one could be born a metaphysical poet. It is not poetry 'felt in the blood and felt along the heart', but felt in the heart and brewed in the head. Poetry here is analytical, logical and intellectual; refused to deal in smooth melodies, moral parables and in translated passions.

Metaphysical poetry is packed with conceits and far-fetched images. Metaphysical verse has "dissimilar images of discovery occult resemblance in things apparently alike." It is a comparison whose ingenuity is more striking or at least is more immediately striking than its justness. A comparison becomes a conceit when we are made to concede likeness while being strongly conscious of unlikeness. Metaphysical poets startle and surprise by cleverness, boldness and novelty of their images. Dr. Johnson considered it 'Discordia Concors' (agreement in disagreement). "The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together." An often-cited metaphysical conceit is the metaphor from Donne's "The Flea" in which a flea bites both the speaker and his lover becomes a conceit arguing that his lover has no reason to deny him sexuality, when their blood had mingled in the body of flea, which is neither sin or shame. Thus, he uses flea as a metaphor for unmarried sexual union.

Oh stay! Three lives in one flea spare
Where we almost, yea more than married are.
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage-bed and marriage-temple is.

There are extended conceits like the comparison of lovers to a pair of compasses, or like Cowley's comparison of making love to different women to traveling through different lands.

But not all far-fetched images could be called metaphysical. The far-fetched objects juxtaposed in a metaphysical conceit must be bound to each other by a dialectical tension. They must be united and yet remain separate. It cannot be isolated from its context. It is born in a context of high emotional tension to illustrate the relationship of the persons and the ideas.

A distinctive note of metaphysical poetry is the presence of unified sensibility. It is the blend of passionate feeling and paradoxical ratiocination – a unification of feeling and thinking. It is the wedding bed of the mind and the soul of thought and emotion. According to Dr. Johnson, "Metaphysical poetry is a direct sensual appreciation of thought or a recreation of thought in to feeling." Mr. Read puts it as "the emotional apprehension of thought." They possess a mechanism of sensibility which could favor any kind of experience. Eliot attributed the obscurity in metaphysical poetry to this unification of sensibility.

Metaphysical poem's quintessence is the vivid imaging of a moment of experience out of which the need to argue arises. There is subtle evolution of thought. It has both intellect and passion. These apparently disparate elements make a meaningful pattern. This fusion of personal and passionate feelings and paradoxical arguments is indistinguishable.

Metaphysical poetry is largely lyrical. In subject matter, it is religious. It explores the remote aspects of human consciousness. Their emotions are shaped and expressed by logical reasoning. It is concerned with psychological subtleties and complexities.

Metaphysical poets use contemporary language. Their rhythm is intricate as their thought. They seem to be striving to find a rhythm that will express the passionate fullness of the mind, the fluxes and influxes of the mind. Their poetry shows wit, conceit, euphuism, intellectualism, realism, dramatic element, new language and rhythms, and love of science and philosophy. It has obscurity, oddity, subtlety, and comprehensiveness. It has uneven metrical variety and freedom of powerful and sincere expressions. It

uses harsh tone to approximate the language of poetry to direct, unconventional, colloquial speech. Its intellectual and analytical approach is unconventional. Thus, the word 'metaphysical' "refers to style rather than subject matter." It is the expression of new attitude of mind. It is a blend of thought and experience.

Metaphysical poetry is analytical. They neither copied nature or life. Rapid association of thought, telescoping of images and multiplied association and elaboration of a figure to the farthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it make the poems difficult to read.

They were great wits, for wit is 'a combination of dissimilar images'. It is a good or great mental capacity, intellectual ability, and refers to the ingenuity shown by the unexpected combining or contrasting of unconnected ideas or expressions. "Their thoughts are often new, but seldom natural; they are not obvious, but neither are they just... Their courtship was void of fondness, and their lamentation of sorrow. Their wish was only to say what they hoped had been never said before." (Dr. Johnson 200). Wit is the effect of conceit. If wit is well described by Pope:

"True wit is nature to advantage dressed
What oft was thought but never so well expressed";

then the metaphysicals never attained it, for they endeavored to be singular in their thoughts, and were careless of their diction. They capture the mind and the imaginations and unify and illuminate their understanding of life. They wrote simplest experiences of life, sorrow, joy, love etc. They have the boldest conceptions, profound institutions and most complex statements. These poets "surprise by the boldness and novelty of their images. They indulge in strained metaphors, farfetched similes and the most extravagant hyperbole.....employ their vast 'out-of-the-way' learning without the slightest regard to propriety. As a result they are in general violent, harsh, cold and obscure."

Dr. Johnson observes: "Their attempts were always analytic and they broke every image into fragments...."

John Donne is the classic representative of metaphysical poetry. His instinct compelled him to bring the whole of experience into his verse and to choose the most direct and natural form of expression by his learned and fantastic mind. He is colloquial and rhetorical and erudite in all his poems. Donne is a metaphysical poet because of his inherent sensibility, the ambivalent nature of his experience, and his passionate apprehension of thought.

Dryden said that Donne "affects the metaphysical, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign; and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy...." Dr. Johnson inconsiderately classes him in company with Cowley under the title of Metaphysical Poets – "Metaphysical they were not – Rhetorical would have been a more accurate designation."

If we interpret the term 'metaphysical' in its strict philosophical sense, then Donne cannot be regarded as a true metaphysical sense, then Donne cannot be regarded as a true metaphysical poet. "A metaphysical, philosophical poet, to the degree to which his contemporaries Sir John Dayies or Fulke Greville might be called such, Donne was not." said Grierson. His main concern in his poetry is not thought but feeling. No scheme of thought, no interpretation of life was for him a complete and illuminating experience. The central theme of his poetry was his own intense personal moods, as a lover, a friend, and analyst of his own experiences. His multifarious reading, developed with audacious paradox or more serious intention, presents an illumination of the mood to himself and to his reader. He is not metaphysical in the sense in which Dante, Lucretius, Goethe, Epicurus, St. Thomas are.

But if we use metaphysical as a term to define a specific style, not a philosophy, then Donne is certainly the leader of the Metaphysical School of Poets. When Dryden, Johnson, or Dowden called Donne a metaphysical poet, they referred to the style of Donne; when De Quincey disagreed with them, he toned up Donne's subject-matter. Donne's poetry is metaphysical because of his individualism, his quest for learning, and his ransacking medieval theology and scholasticism. It is witty and obscure. It indulges in far-fetched conceits. It fuses thought and emotion. It is logical, analytical and mystical. He brings together the lofty and the mean, the sublime and the trivial.

Donne's poetry is 'revolutionary'. He opposed current sensibilities. He revolted against the Elizabethan, the Spenserian, the Petrarchan and the Platonic ideals. With a heart full of finer emotions, Donne rescued English poetry from its mellowed music and conventional diction. Erudition and intellect brought about a blend of passion and thought, of the abstract with the concrete, of the remote with the near, and of the sublime with the commonplace.

Donne's poetry is harsh, obscure and puzzling. Saintsbury calls him a 'very great and very puzzling poet'. Donne was in the true sense of the word, a metaphysician, a logician. His poetry has strength and roughness. Donne is one of the few poets whose conversational passages ring with the authority of time and whose rhetoric is lively with the feeling of immediacy. With the kindling of imagination, passion and

thought, there is the expression of the passionately apprehended realities of life, often in a turbid, tumultuous manner.

As a poet of love, too, Donne is metaphysical. In the last stanza of *The Relique* he says:

“First we lov'd well and faithfully,
Yet knew not what we lov'd, nor why,
Difference of sex no more wee knew,
Than our Guardian angels doe:
Coming and going wee
Perchance might kisse.”

Love for him is eternal and not a thing of mere sensual enjoyment. It is not physical, but spiritual. It is not love at first sight. The lover has begun to make love to his beloved even before he saw her face:

“Twice or thrice I loved thee
Before I knew thy face or name.”

Donne's love-experience is not a physical passion, masquerading as a spiritual feeling. It knows the real joy of love.

One of the chief characteristics of Donne's poetry is his exhibition of learning and scholasticism. He sets forth in his poetry no ordered system of the universe. Donne was alive to the effect on the imagination of that disintegration, scientific advancement and skepticism. He derived inspiration from the new philosophy and scholasticism. He says:

“And new Philosophy calls all in doubt
The element of fire is quite put out;
The sun is lost, and th'earth, and no man's wit
Can well direct him where to look for it.”
(*The First Anniversary*)

Donne's conceits are far-fetched; his imagery is obscure. He introduced a highly intellectual imagery into his poems to illustrate feelings. He did it with deliberate audacity; bringing opposed objects and proving their likeness in a surprising way. The conceits are to illustrate, amplify and communicate the predominant feeling of the poem. Donne is an immortal image maker. While offering far-fetched conceits, he produces effective and provocative images. It is present everywhere in his poetry. A few striking, startling images of Donne are:

“My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
And true plaine hearts doe in the faces rest,
Where can we finde to better hemispheres
Without Sharpe North, without declining West—”
(*The Good-Morrow*)

“Call us what you will, we are made such by love;
Call her one, me another flye,
We are Tapers too, and at our owne cost die,
And wee in us finde the 'Eagle and the Dove'.
The Phoenix riddle hath more wit
By us, we two being one, are it.”
(*The Canonization*)

What makes Donne unique is the manner in which his unified sensibility serves his poetry. This manner is argumentative, dialectical ratiocinative. He seeks to prove a proposition or persuade others to his viewpoint. Donne elaborates the constituent elements leading ultimately to the enrichment of initial proposition. In *The Good-Morrow* the initial proposition is that the world of lovers is as good as the physical world, and the conclusion is that it is, in fact, better in that it is immortal. Once parallelism is made, Donne pursues it to the end, collects facts from science and scholastic philosophy, and proves his initial

point. The quest is not for the objective, logical truth, but the truth of the subjective experience which has a validity. Donne's concern is the poetic truth, the truth of a feeling.

Donne's conception of poetry and his technique are dramatic. His poems may be harsh in tone, but they have the immediate effect of a vivid speech, and not of a song. Donne has subtle, soaring, reverberating harmonies. The rhetorical emphasis of Donne removes his lyrics from the sphere of pure song.

In his poetry, wit is everywhere. It fashions his feelings and thought. Passion, sentiment, and sensuality are subordinated to wit. Leishman rightly considers him "the monarch of wit". Carew says in his elegy on Donne:

"Here lies a king, that rul'd as he thought fit
The universal monarchy of wit....."

His wit is deliberately outrageous, impudent, often breath-taking and ingenious in the discovery of comparisons and analogies. The wit of Donne is characterized by the intensesness, vigor, wonder and peculiarity of thought; exercised on subjects unexpectedly. Donne's wit is realistic. It is fused with humor and irony. Dryden confessed that he and his contemporaries fell below Donne in wit. Wit is the sweet child of Donne's darling intellectual imagination. Some illustrations are:

"No Spring, nor Summer Beauty hath such grace
As I have seen in one Autumnall face
Young Beauties force our love, and that's Rape..."
(The Autumn)

CONCLUSION:

Donne's genius was metaphysical. His metrical roughness, his obscurity, his bewildering allusiveness, his ardent imagination, his taste for metaphysics and his unexpected divergence into sweet and delightful music, all these show the characteristics of the metaphysical poets. Donne is a metaphysical poet because he riveted against Spenser and against the Elizabethan matter and manner; because of his erudition and intellectual substance; because of the fusion of passion and thought, of the sublime and the commonplace; because of his logic analysis, mysticism and scholasticism; because of his obscurity complexity; because of the harshness of bone: because of the grotesque style in a simple language; and because of the metaphysical wit and far-fetched conceits. Thus, Donne was most outstanding of the English Metaphysical Poets.

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