

METAPHYSICAL POETRY

Credited today as some of the richest gems of English poetry, the metaphysical poems date back to the early seventeenth century. The term 'metaphysical', as applied to poetry, was first used by Dr. Johnson. Johnson borrowed the term from Dryden's 'Discourse of Satire' (1693) where the latter held that 'He (Donne) affects the metaphysics'. Dryden wrote: 'Donne affects the metaphysics not only in his satires but in his amorous verses where nature only should reign. He perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts and entertain them with the softness of love'.

John Donne was the undisputed leader of the metaphysical school of poetry. Some other poets like Crashaw, Cowley, Herbert, and Vaughan also came to be grouped with Donne. But the metaphysical poets themselves did not form a school or start a movement. What is more, most of them did not even know or read each other. Dryden and Johnson held these poets guilty of the habit of being rather arcane and obscure. As such, the term 'metaphysical' was used in a condemnatory and not a commendatory sense. According to Dr. Johnson, the metaphysical poets were men of learning and to show their learning was their 'whole endeavour'. In his view, their poetry appealed to the intellect, rather than the heart. Johnson maintained that in their poetry 'the most heterogeneous ideas' were 'yoked by violence together'.

Leaving aside the sharp critical comments on the metaphysical poets, we can see that the metaphysical tendency in poetry arose from a sense of rebellion against the cloying imagery and hackneyed Petrarchan conventions of the Elizabethan lyric. Reacting against the deliberately smooth and mellifluous tones of the Elizabethan verse, the metaphysical poets adopted a style that was marked by an energetic, uneven, and rigorous style. Donne, for example, wrote in a diction metre that came very close to everyday speech, and often organized his thoughts into impassioned arguments. Thus, the metaphysical poets introduced a new kind of lyric characterized by wit, argument, and what is popularly known as 'metaphysical conceit'. Conceits seem to form the crux of metaphysical poetry.

There is in fact nothing new about the use of conceits in English poetry. Elizabethan poetry also abounds in rich conceits. But, the metaphysical conceits were so startling, so subtle, and so pervasive as to demand the supreme attention in any metaphysical poem. In general, the metaphysical conceit is a shocking, far-fetched metaphor feeding on the erudition of the poet. But, when it works, it reveals an amazing sense of appropriateness that makes us look at something in an entirely new light. A classic example of the metaphysical conceit is Donne's comparison of the union between two lovers to the two pointers of a compass in the poem 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning'.

Metaphysical poetry falls into two broad divisions – amorous or love poems and religious verse. John Donne wrote his poems in both veins with equal passion and earnestness. Poets like Herbert, Crashaw, and Vaughan dedicated their devotional poetry to the service of their religion. Many would have us believe that the metaphysical poets had in common a philosophical worldview. But the term 'metaphysical' fits these diverse poets only if it is used to indicate a common poetic style of organizing the meditative process in their poetry.

Most literary critics down the ages used to censure the metaphysical poets for their obsession with ingenuity and obscurity. However, there was a drastic reevaluation of their poetry following World War I when Donne, together with Herbert and Marvell, came to be elevated high in the pantheon of the English poets. This reversal of approach owes much to H. J. C. Grierson's Introduction to 'Metaphysical Lyrics of the Seventeenth Century'. But, it received the highest impetus in T.S. Eliot's essay 'The Metaphysical Poets', where he eulogizes the metaphysical quest for 'unified sensibility'.