



Donne and Eliot: A Study on Metaphysical Poetry

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Abstract:

While on the one hand, John Donne needs no introduction as a metaphysical poet, on the other hand, due recognition was not given to him for a long time. It was only with the endeavours of T. S. Eliot that he got his due recognition some two centuries after his time. Eliot understood and appreciated the various metaphysical elements Donne used in his poetry. Eliot not only described Donne's concept of metaphysical poetry to the literary world but he also used many of these metaphysical elements in his poems. This paper is an attempt to relate Eliot with the metaphysical elements of Donne. It also tries to identify what Eliot perceived in the metaphysical poetry of Donne and how he made a tremendous contribution in reviving and further extending the tradition of the seventeenth century metaphysical poetry.

Key words: Metaphysics, Metaphysical poetry, John Donne, T. S. Eliot.

The term 'Metaphysical' means something that pertains to the 'metaphysics,' a branch of philosophy that deals with the

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nature of existence, truth and knowledge. Metaphysics is a combination of two Greek words, 'meta' and 'physics.' 'Meta' means beyond or after and 'Physics' means natural science. Hence, 'Metaphysical' means something that comes after or is beyond natural science. Viewed in this context, 'Metaphysical poetry' can be assumed to mean a philosophical poetry that deals with subjects which lie beyond the purview of natural science.

Eliot, in his *Clark Lectures* delivered at Trinity College Cambridge in 1926, explains how the term 'Metaphysical' came into use:

This term "metaphysical", used by Dryden, adopted by Johnson, was first used as a convenient term, and as much defined by the material in hand, as defining it. It was used by persons who were not themselves metaphysicians, or of a philosophical cast of mind, and they certainly did not employ the term with any thought of Lucretius or Dante in their heads. (Eliot 1993)

Here, Eliot seems to imply that both Dryden and Johnson did not have proper idea of the exact meaning of the term 'Metaphysical' because they were neither metaphysicians nor philosophers. In this connection, Emile Legouis puts forward the reason for attaching this label to Donne:

His muse loves those sudden flights from the material to the spiritual sphere for which Dryden gave him, and Samuel Johnson confirmed to him, the title of 'metaphysical.' (Legouis 2009)

Eliot again expresses his view that Dryden and Johnson "conceded profundity of thought and learning; and thought and learning dressed in outlandish and difficult imagery, seemed to Johnson metaphysical." (Eliot 1993) Eliot, in fact, does not rule out the possibility that "the designation may be a complete misnomer." (Eliot 1993)

Similarly, Helen Gardner also expresses her view on the origin of the phrase 'metaphysical poets.' In the introduction to

her collection of metaphysical poems, *The Metaphysical Poets*, Gardner says that Samuel Johnson first coined the term 'metaphysical poets' with the intention of labelling John Donne and his followers long after the poets to whom it is applied were dead (Gardner 1985). Originally, the label was given to Donne and his followers for their rather queer poetic style but, apparently, in course of time, it became quite convenient to apply the phrase to others as well whose styles were in some way similar to that of the English metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century.

Eliot admits that owing to the nature of the subject, it would not be possible to find a foolproof definition of metaphysical poetry. (Eliot 1993) Nevertheless, Eliot chose Donne, Crashaw and Cowley, who all belonged to the seventeenth century as the main representatives of the metaphysical poets. He says he has "chosen these three deliberately in order to strain" his "definition to the utmost." (Eliot 1993) And Donne, Eliot says, "will take the leading place in any classification of metaphysical poets; Donne is a fixed point." (Eliot 1993) In this remark, Eliot seems to imply that although there are two other periods of metaphysical poetry besides that of the seventeenth century, he has chosen the latter to represent the metaphysical poetry as a whole. In particular, Eliot has chosen Donne as the point of reference, which can be used for comparing and contrasting different metaphysical poets.

Despite the availability of other alternatives that can be used as the label for the group of English poets of the seventeenth century led by John Donne, Eliot has chosen the phrase '*metaphysical poetry*.' Eliot explains the need to retain the title '*metaphysical*' and the reason why we cannot say 'the lyric poets of the seventeenth century' or even the 'psychological poets':

Well! There are good reasons, which I hope to develop in subsequent lectures, why we should not say "psychological" poets – good reasons, that is, while we make use of my

definition (which, as I have explained, is one partly imposed by force upon them); but in short, I intend to maintain exactly that the poets of the trecento in Italy were not psychological poets, and a term which would explicitly exclude the Italians would rob me of one of my points of triangulation. And the reason for calling the seventeenth century still “metaphysical” is that the term is consecrated by use. (Eliot 1993)

This statement strongly suggests that the phrase, ‘*metaphysical poetry*’ is the best of several options, which can be conveniently applied to all the three poetic periods. And again, by ‘consecrated by use’ Eliot obviously means that the term ‘*metaphysical*’ has been so often employed that it has become widely and readily accepted and no question of the rightness or appropriateness of the term arises anymore. In fact, it would rather be more problematic to try to substitute the word with a new one. Notwithstanding the fact that Eliot talks about three different periods of metaphysical poetry and seems to accord them equal importance, he has chosen those poets who have been included in Grierson’s anthology as the convenient representatives of ‘*metaphysical poetry*,’ and again among those poets, Donne has been chosen as the fixed point of reference. (Eliot 1993) Indeed, it would not be possible to give a comprehensive definition of metaphysical poetry or determine the exact number of poets who practice it or belong to this school of poetry. In this regard, Eliot again says that “not only is it extremely difficult to define metaphysical poetry, but difficult to decide what poets practice it and in which of their verses.” (Eliot 1993)

Despite criticisms and remarks of disapproval against its poetic practices especially by its contemporaries, there was a revival of interest in the 17th century metaphysical poetry in the early part of the 20th century. In fact, Donne once again enjoyed fame and popularity as much as or even more than when he was still alive. Prof. Herbert Grierson made an outstanding contribution in this regard. In 1912, he published a

critical edition of Donne's poems in two volumes. Again, in 1921, he published his *Metaphysical Lyrics and poems of the Seventeenth Century* which greatly impressed T. S. Eliot. In the same year, Eliot published his two essays on metaphysical poetry – "The Metaphysical Poets" and "Andrew Marvell." At the outset of "The Metaphysical Poets," Eliot commends Prof. Grierson for his valuable collection and hails it as "a piece of criticism and a provocation of criticism." (Eliot 1972)

F. O. Matthiessen gave his observation on Eliot's contribution to the revival of interest in metaphysical poetry in the first quarter of the 20th Century:

With the generation of readers since the First World War, Donne has assumed the stature of a centrally important figure for the first time since the seventeenth century; and his rise has been directly connected with the fact that Eliot has enabled us to see him with fresh closeness, not only by means of his analysis of the method of metaphysical poetry but also he has renewed that method in the rhythms and imagery of his own verse. (Matthiessen 1976)

Eliot, in his essays and lectures, expressed his profound admiration and fascination for the metaphysical poetry of the seventeenth century. His contribution to the revival of interest in metaphysical poetry is, indeed, remarkable. F. R. Leavis expresses his view that Eliot's "early observations on the Metaphysicals and on Marvell provide currency for university lectures and undergraduate exercises." (Leavis 1969) Eliot, in the introduction to his Clark Lectures, explains the reason why there has been a revival of interest in the metaphysical poetry in the 20th century:

We have seen in the present century and increasingly within the last few years, an awakening of interest in the seventeenth century. However, this arose, it undoubtedly contains besides pure literary appreciation, a consciousness or a belief that this poetry and this age have some peculiar affinity with our own poetry and our own age, a belief that our own mentality and feelings are better expressed by the

seventeenth century than by the nineteenth or even the eighteenth . . . Contemporary poets are by their admirers likened to Donne or to Crashaw; some of them no doubt study these writers deliberately and elect to receive their influence; there are not wanting voices to declare that the present age is a metaphysical age. (Eliot 1993)

In fact, Eliot enthusiastically defended metaphysical poetry against contemptuous remarks and accusations. Reacting to Johnson's remark in connection with the metaphysical poets namely Donne, Cleveland, and Cowley that 'the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together,' Eliot expresses his view that "a degree of heterogeneity of material compelled into unity by the operation of the poet's mind is omnipresent in poetry." (Eliot 1972) The fact that Eliot perceives something special about the value of metaphysical poetry becomes quite evident when he makes this incisive observation:

If so shrewd and sensitive (though so limited) a critic as Johnson failed to define metaphysical poetry by its faults, it is worthwhile to inquire whether we may not have more success by adopting the opposite method: by assuming that the poets of the seventeenth century (up to the Revolution) were the direct and normal development of the precedent age; and without prejudicing their case by the adjective 'metaphysical', consider whether their virtue was not something permanently valuable, which subsequently disappeared, but ought not to have disappeared. (Eliot 1972)

Eliot again says, "They are simple, artificial, difficult, or fantastic, as their predecessors were; no less nor more than Dante, Guido Cavalcanti, Guinicelli, or Cino." (Eliot 1972) Eliot's comparison of the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century with some of the greatest poets, which include Dante, unmistakably suggests Eliot's immense admiration for Donne and other metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century.

Indeed, there are close similarities between Eliot and the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century, particularly, Donne. In this connection, F. O. Matthiessen made a succinct and enlightening observation:

Similarities between Eliot's technical devices and those of Donne have been often observed: the conversational tone, the vocabulary at once colloquial and surprisingly strange – both of these a product of Eliot's belief in the relation of poetry to actual speech, and paralleling his use of 'non-poetic' material; the rapid association of ideas which demands alert agility from the reader; the irregular verse and difficult sentence structure as a part of fidelity to thought and feeling; and, especially, the flash of wit which result from the shock of such unexpected contrasts. (Matthiessen 1976)

Eliot's poetry incorporates some of the essential features of the metaphysical poetry of the seventeenth century. The closely interconnected metaphysical characteristics like obscurity, erudition and esotericism are writ large in Eliot's poetry. Obscurity indeed is an important characteristic of Eliot's poetry that brings him into close resemblance with Donne. In this connection, S. K. Sen made the following valuable observation:

The same charge of 'obscurity' was made against Eliot's poetry when he started writing. What Johnson said about the metaphysical – 'To show their learning was their whole endeavour' – was repeated or insinuated. The 'difficulty' of Donne's poetry was due partly to the new manner – the packed style and the disconcerting turns of logic – and partly to the use of obscure allusions and learned conceits. (Sen 1965)

Eliot's employment of mythical method, symbolism, irony etc also contributes much in making his poetry obscure. His poems also contain heavy doses of allusions, references and quotations from varied sources. Eliot was well acquainted with varied literatures and philosophies belonging to Europe, Asia,

Africa and America. Eliot revolutionized the poetry of the early twentieth century and went on to become a dominant poet of the whole century. In this connection, Tony Sharpe presented a highly valuable observation:

Confronted by Eliot's poems, many early reviewers had commented on their difficulty and their 'cleverness', evidenced in the literary allusiveness that practically became his hallmark; and to some degree a sense of Eliot's 'difficulty' continues. The obscurity of his 'meaning', together with the recondite nature of many of his literary allusions, have led some to conclude that this is a game to be played by the intelligentsia alone- with the equal conclusion that, if you can play the game of reading Eliot's poems, then you are entitled to consider yourself a member of that elite. (Sharpe 1991)

D. E. S. Maxwell, in his *The Poetry of T. S. Eliot* succinctly points out the factors that contributed in making Eliot's poetry obscure and esoteric:

The technique and the ideas of Eliot combining the symbolists and Jacobean traditions were a potent factor in abstracting his poetry from the falling romantic tradition. Such poetry demands close reading, extreme concentration, to enable the reader to follow its progression, and the significance of its methods. This was enough to remove it beyond the comprehension of a public nurtured by the soothing escapism of the Georgians, and to subject the poet to a discipline of combining and selecting that had for too long been absent from English poetry. It is mainly this that makes his poetry esoteric and obscure, and yet it is the only method that could satisfactorily contain the expression of what concerned Eliot: the mirroring of a complex and decadent civilization that had abandoned the choice between two moral attitudes – for Good or for Evil – for preoccupation with a soul-killing monotony of meaningless routine. (Maxwell 1969)

In the wake of scientific advancement, rapid industrialization and urbanization, things were getting more sophisticated, complex and problematic. In his essay, 'The

Metaphysical Poets', Eliot explains the necessity for the modern poetry to be difficult and complex, which seems to implicate the two important metaphysical features namely, esotericism and obscurity. He says:

Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning. (Eliot 1972)

In the application of conceits too, there are great similarities between Eliot and Donne. Both of them employ conceits for some special purposes such as depicting a situation, presenting a line of argument or showing similarities between two seemingly contradictory objects or situations. Matthiessen made a concise observation on the similarity between Donne and Eliot:

But it is essential to emphasize that by writing in this way neither Donne nor Eliot is engaging in intellectual stunts or decorating his verse with brilliant but pointless ingenuity. For the conceit exists not just to shock or startle, though that is one of its valuable attributes. It is an integral element of the metaphysical style since it is the most compelling means of making the desired union of emotion and thought by bringing together widely divergent material in a single image. Instead of being ornamental, it is wholly functional: only by its use does the poet feel that he can express the precise curve of his meaning. (Matthiessen 1976)

In the use of conversational tone also, it has been observed that there is similarity between the poetry of Eliot and that of Donne. In this connection, S. K. Sen also made the following observation:

Like Donne he refreshes the language of poetry by bringing it closer to common speech. And his subtle use of speech rhythms relates him to the tradition of Donne. (Sen 1965)

Another interesting similarity that has been observed between Eliot and the metaphysical poets is in their witticism and keen sense of perception. Witticism is one pervading characteristic of Eliot's poetry. In his subtle observations and expressions, wit is always present. His conceits, paradoxes and satires are the testimonies to his sharp wit and incisive sense of perception. In this connection, George Williamson made an enlightening observation:

In the new and the old he finds both antithesis and similitude, often mingled in the paradox of the one and the many, or of time and the timeless. His acute perception of similarity and difference between the same things, his mixed use of the intellectual wits that Hobbes called fancy and judgment, is common in Metaphysical poetry or the poetic wit of the seventeenth century. (Williamson 1965)

In his employment of puns and paradoxes too Eliot closely resembles Donne. In this connection, Ronald Tamplin made yet another valuable observation:

The pun is of course the greatest degree of heterogeneous unity, in that two meanings are located exactly in the same sound. One word has two distinct meanings. In this sense Jesus was the last word in puns, man and God, spirit and flesh. Eliot is simply embracing a long tradition in playing with the Word in *The Rock*, in 'Journey of the Magi' and in *Four Quartets*. The tradition recognizes and responds to a particular kind of Christian awareness. And just as the Metaphysicals could extend out from the example of Christ into ever-widening rings in imagery because paradox is the key to the meaning of experience, so for Eliot paradoxical unities constantly help to give form to his thought. (Tamplin 2003)

The kinship between Eliot and the metaphysical poets especially Donne was of a very unique nature that Ronald Schuchard went to the extent of suggesting that Eliot himself was a metaphysical poet of the twentieth century:

These declarations were yet to be developed, but Eliot had begun to outline a theory based on three metaphysical moments – Dante in Florence in the thirteenth century; Donne in London in the seventeenth century; Laforgue in Paris in the nineteenth century. Implicitly, there was a fourth moment at hand- Eliot in London in the twentieth century. (Eliot 1993)

In light of the above findings, it is quite convenient to conclude that despite the gap of more than two centuries that separated his age and that of Donne and his followers, Eliot perceived in metaphysical poetry something that was of unique and permanent value. Undoubtedly, Eliot made a tremendous contribution in reviving and further extending the tradition of the seventeenth century metaphysical poetry.

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