

Chapter- III

T. S. ELIOT AND METAPHYSICAL POETRY

The term “metaphysical” means something that pertains to the “metaphysics”, a branch of philosophy that deals with the 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 that lie beyond the purview of natural science.

In the introduction to his anthology, *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century*, Prof. Grierson gives a brief explanation of the phrase “metaphysical poetry.” He says:

METAPHYSICAL POETRY, in the full sense of the term, is a poetry which, like that of the *Divina Commedia*, the *De Natura Rerum*, perhaps Goethe's *Faust*, has been inspired by a philosophical conception of the universe and the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence.¹

However, Grierson makes it clear that the “*metaphysical poetry*” that he discusses in his essay is not “such great metaphysical poetry as that of Lucretius and Dante.”² It, therefore, requires a deeper investigation into how exactly the phrase came into use.

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.³

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 confidently 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.’⁴

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.”⁵ Eliot, in fact, does not rule out the possibility that “the designation may be a complete misnomer.”⁶

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 labeling John Donne and his followers long after the poets to whom it is applied were dead.⁷ Johnson, according to Helen Gardner, was adapting a ‘witty sally’ from Dryden who, in writing about Donne in 1693, said:

He affects the metaphysics, 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, when he should engage their hearts, and entertain them with the softnesses of love. In this ... Mr. Cowley copied him to a fault.⁸

Johnson apparently used the phrase to show his contempt for Donne and his followers for their peculiar style and imageries that were new and seemed to deviate from the traditional poetic conventions.

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, in his *Clark Lectures*, talks about three periods of metaphysical poetry:

I shall therefore treat the period of Dante as one manifestation and the period of Donne as another. And I find a third period, not so clear, much more complex, but representing what seem to me distinctly “metaphysical” manifestations. Its parent is Baudelaire, it existed in France between 1870-1890,

and the important poets for my purpose are Jules Laforgue, Arthur Rimbaud and Tristan Corbiere.⁹

Eliot admits that owing to the nature of the subject, it would not be possible to find a foolproof definition of metaphysical poetry.¹⁰ 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.”¹¹ And Donne, Eliot says, “will take the leading place in any classification of metaphysical poets; Donne is a fixed point.”¹² 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. Eliot succinctly explains the reason why he has chosen the phrase “metaphysical poetry”:

But I shall proceed to use the term “metaphysical poetry” in two senses: as the subject of my definition- because we must assume that every term is susceptible of definition- and as the collective title of the group of poets in question, and whom I shall take for convenience and also because I give the selection my

full assent, to be those poets represented in Professor Grierson's admirable and almost impeccable anthology.¹³

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."

14

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.¹⁵

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, “Not only is it extremely difficult to define metaphysical poetry, but difficult to decide what poets practice it and in which of their verses.”¹⁶ In the introduction to his anthology *Four Metaphysical Poets*, Richard Willmott made the following comment:

There is in fact no single word or definition that can adequately sum up the range of poetry described as metaphysical. Donne was the great innovator, but those who followed had

personalities, as well as minds, of their own and each poet's verse has its own distinctive quality.¹⁷

However, through the painstaking labors of enthusiastic critics and scholars, some distinguishing features and characteristics of metaphysical poetry have been identified. This identification has greatly facilitated in determining whether a particular poet or poetry is in some way metaphysical or not. In this connection Helen Gardner remarks, "I have contented myself with describing some of the characteristics of metaphysical poetry and have not attempted to construct a definition of metaphysical poem."¹⁸ Herbert Grierson made the following observation on the nature of metaphysical poetry and some of its essential characteristics:

It lays stress on the right things- the survival, one might say the reaccentuation, of the metaphysical strain, *the concetti metafisici ed ideali* as Testi calls them in contrast to the simpler imagery of classical poetry, of the mediaeval Italian poetry; the more intellectual, less verbal, character of their wit compared with the conceits of the Elizabethans; the finer psychology of which their conceits are often the expression; their learned imagery; the argumentative, subtle evolution of their lyrics; above all the peculiar blend of passion and thought, feeling and ratiocination

which is their greatest achievement. Passionate thinking is always apt to metaphysical, probing and investigating the experience from which it takes its rise. All these qualities are in the poetry of Donne, and Donne is the great master of English poetry in the seventeenth century.¹⁹

Some of the other distinctive characteristics of metaphysical poetry of the seventeenth century include witticism, concentration; use of conceits, hyperboles, paradox, satire; abrupt openings, complexity, universality, unification of sensibility, obscurity, esotericism, erudition, use of colloquial language, spirituality etc.

Although 'wit' is not the invention of Donne or the metaphysical poets, it happens to be a hallmark of the metaphysical poetry. All the poets belonging to this school of poetry, in one way or the other, employ wit as a device for cementing their poetic structures. On the role played by wit in Donne's poetry Emile Legouis made the following observation:

Thus everything in Donne's early poems is in revolt against the poetic canons of the age. Their wit is indeed by itself no novelty. Wit- and conceits- abound in Sydney and in Shakespeare. But in them they are an ornament, an occasional grace. In Donne, wit is everywhere. It is his very genius, and fashions his

feeling and his thought. He is overweighted with allusions to philosophical doctrines, even scholastic philosophy in which he was expert, and to contemporary science, even of the most abstruse description. 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.’²⁰

Elucidating on a metaphysical characteristic, which she calls ‘concentration’, Helen Gardner writes:

The reader is held to an idea or a line of argument. He is not invited to pause upon a passage, ‘wander with it, and muse upon it, and reflect upon it and bring home to it, and prophesy upon it, and dream upon it’ as starting-post towards all the “two and thirty Palaces” . . . metaphysical poetry demands that we pay attention and read on A metaphysical poem tends to be brief, and is always closely woven.²¹

“*Concentration*” may be viewed either from the reader’s or the poet’s angle. The need for the reader to pay full attention to the line of thought or idea presented in the poem is stressed here. He is not expected to pay attention to a particular passage at the expense of the rest of the poem. This concentration is especially possible as a metaphysical poem is usually

brief. To achieve the purpose of concentration, a metaphysical poet prefers to write in epigrammatic style in which a line of thought, an idea, or an argument is compressed and sustained. Marvell's *The Coronet* is a highly compressed and concentrated poem:

When for the Thorns with which I long, too long,
 With many a piercing wound,
 My Saviours head have crown'd,
 I seek with Garlands to redress that Wrong:
 Through every garden, every Mead,
 I gather flow'rs (my fruits are only flow'rs)
 Dismantling all fragrant Towers
 That once adorn'd my Shepherdess head.²²

The poem is obviously short, compressed and concentrated. Words are well chosen and aptly applied. Each line of the poem is packed with profound but concealed meanings. The reader needs to expand his or her imagination to be able to grasp the full meaning of the poem.

“Concentration and a sinewy strength of style is the mark of Ben Jonson as well as of Donne.”²³ The application of such epithets as ‘strenuous’ and ‘masculine’ for describing Donne’s poetry by his admirers, according to Gardner, is an indication that he too was in some degree a strong lined man. Gardner believes that classical epigram is what lies

behind the poetry of both Donne and Ben Jonson, as behind much of the poetry of their followers, and that ‘there is some truth in saying that a metaphysical poem is an expanded epigram’.²⁴

Closely related with ‘concentration’ is the versification of metaphysical poetry. In this regard, Helen Gardner expressed her view:

The desire for concentration and concision marks also the verse forms characteristic of the seventeenth-century lyric. It appears in the fondness for a line of eight syllables rather than a line of ten, and in the use of stanzas employing lines of varying length into which the sense seems packed, or of stanzas built on very short lines.²⁵

Helen Gardner gives a brief description of the stanza employed by Donne and Herbert:

A stanza of Donne or Herbert is not, like rhyme royal or a Spenserian stanza, an ideal mould, as it were, into which the words have flowed. It is more like a limiting frame in which words and thought are compressed, a ‘box where sweets compacted lie’.²⁶

Richard Willmott also expresses his view on the versatile nature of metaphysical versification:

Neither thought nor feeling could be adequately expressed, however, if it were not for the remarkable adaptability and variety of metaphysical versification. The harshness of 'Satire' and the music of 'Virtue', the apparent disorder of 'The Collar' and the suave smoothness of the couplets in 'To His Coy Mistress' all have this in common: they are carefully calculated to convey both logic and emotion.²⁷

Prof. Grierson is of the view that Donne's verse is harsh and rugged. "It is the outcome", he says "of the same double motive, the desire to startle and the desire to approximate poetic to direct, unconventional, colloquial speech."²⁸

The next very distinctive characteristic of metaphysical poetry is its fondness for and effective employment of conceits for definitive, persuasive, and argumentative purposes. Helen Gardner explains the term, conceit, in the following lines:

A conceit is a comparison whose ingenuity is more striking than its justness, or, at least, is more immediately striking. All comparisons discover likeness in things unlike: a comparison becomes conceit when we are made to concede likeness while being strongly conscious of unlikeness. A brief

comparison can be conceit if two things patently unlike, or which we should never think of together, are shown to be alike in a single point in such a way, or in such a context, that we feel their incongruity.²⁹

Richard Willmott interchangeably uses the words analogy and conceit. He briefly defines it as the exploration of the significant way in which certain objects share similar qualities and circumstances that is crucial to metaphysical style.³⁰ He further observes:

The personal feeling gives urgency to arguments which are often developed by means of striking and extended analogies to a wide range of things, sometimes learned, sometimes homely and often contemporary.³¹

Dr. Johnson, in a passage of his *Life of Cowley*, describes metaphysical conceit in the following words:

a kind of Discordia concors; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. . . . The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together.³²

In fact, conceits play an indispensable role in metaphysical poetry. One very famous metaphysical conceit is that of John Donne's, "A *Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*":

Our two souls therefore, which are one,
 Though I must go, endure not yet
 A breach, but an expansion,
 Like gold to aery thinness beat.

If they be two, they are two so
 As stiffe twin compasses are two,
 Thy soul the fixed foot, makes no show
 To move, but doth, if the other do.

And though it in the centre sit,
 Yet when the other far doth roam,
 It leans and harkens after it,
 And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be, who must
 Like the other foot, obliquely run;
 Thy firmness makes my circle just,
 And makes me end, where I begun.³³

The comparison of the souls of the two lovers to 'aery gold' and to the two legs of twin compasses is, indeed, a far-fetched conceit. It, definitely, fulfills Helen Gardner's description of a conceit, which, she says, is a

comparison characterised by striking ingenuity and the discovery of likeness in things that are completely different. It involves conceding likeness despite being strongly aware of the difference. A comparison, she says, can be conceit if two things obviously unlike or which should never be thought of together are shown to be alike in a single point in such a way that we feel their incongruity.³⁴

The use of hyperboles is another very important feature of metaphysical poetry. A hyperbole is an exaggerated statement that is used to emphasize a point or to make a situation seem bigger than it actually is. Concerning Donne's contribution to the use of conceits and hyperboles, Prof. Grierson made his observation as follows:

Donne was not a conscious reviver of the metaphysics of Dante, but to the game of elaborating fantastic conceits and hyperboles which was the fashion throughout Europe, he brought not only a full-blooded temperament and acute mind, but a vast and growing store of the same scholastic learning, the same Catholic theology, as controlled Dante's thought, jostling already with the new learning of Copernicus and Paracelsus.³⁵

The Sunne Rising contains more than one sterling example of hyperboles:

Thy beames, so reverend, and strong
 Why shouldst thou thinke?
 I could eclipse and cloud them with a winke,
 But that I would not lose her sight so long:
 If her eyes have not blinded thine,
 Looke, and to morrow late, tell mee,
 Whether both the' India's of spice and Myne
 Be where thou leftst them, or lie here with mee.
 Aske for those Kings whom thou saw'st yesterday,
 And thou shalt heare, All here in one bed lay.³⁶

The passage contains startling exaggerations. The poet tells the sun not to think that his beams are so strong and reverend, for he can eclipse and cloud them with a wink. He also implies that his lover's eyes are far brighter than the light of the sun.

The next passage too consists of fantastic hyperboles:

She'is all States, and all Princes, I,
 Nothing else is.
 Princes doe but play us; compar'd to this,
 All honor's mimique; All wealth alchimie.
 Thou sunne art halfe as happy'as wee,
 In that the world's contracted thus;

Thine age askes ease, and since thy duties bee
 To warne the world, that's done in warning us.
 Shine here to us, and thou art every where;
 This bed thy center is, these walls, thy spheare.³⁷

Paradox, according to Richard Willmott, is another aspect of Christian thinking which seems to fit into the metaphysical style.³⁸ M. H. Abrams describes it in the following words:

A paradox is a statement which seems on its face to be self contradictory or absurd, yet turns out to have a valid meaning . . . The paradox is used by almost all poets, but is a central device in metaphysical poetry, both in its religious and secular forms.³⁹

Prof. Grierson is of the view that “the strain of passionate paradoxical reasoning which knits the first line to the last is perhaps a more intimate characteristic than even the far-fetched, fantastic comparisons.”⁴⁰

The first two stanzas of Andrew Marvell’s “*The Definition of Love*” contain good examples of paradox:

My Love is of a birth as rare
 As ‘tis for object strange and high:
 It was begotten by despair

Upon impossibility.

Magnanimous Despair alone
 Could show me so divine a thing,
 Where feeble Hope could ne'r have flown
 But vainly flapt its Tinsel Wing.⁴¹

Donne's poem, *Death Be Not Proud*, also contains fantastic paradoxes:

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
 Mighty and dreadfull, for, thou art not so,
 For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,
 Die not, poore death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
 From rest and sleepe, which but thy pictures bee,
 Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,
 And soonest our best men with thee doe goe,
 Rest of their bones, and soules deliverie.
 Thou art slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate
 men,
 And dost with poison, warre, and sicknesse dwell,
 And poppie, or charmes can make us sleepe as well,
 And better than thy stroake; why swell'st thou then;
 One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,
 And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.⁴²

Satire is another device, which, although not often employed by the metaphysical poets, seems to play a significant role in their poetry. In this connection, Richard Willmott made the following comment:

Satire is not the literary form most frequently used by the metaphysical poets, nor is it often thought of as being metaphysical, but it cannot be ignored.⁴³

Eliot expresses his view that despite the fact that satire represents some kind of unrefined speech, its capacity to contribute to ingenuity comes very close to that of a conceit:

Satire, though it professes blunt plain speech, and repudiates elegance and fine writing, yet lends itself to a crabbedness and ingenuity of wit that portends the conceit.⁴⁴

Gilbert Highet describes the satire employed by Donne and his contemporaries in the 1590s in imitation of Roman satire:

Satire is a continuous piece of verse, or of prose mingled with verse, of considerable size, with great variety of style and subject, but generally characterized by the free use of conversational language, the frequent intrusion of its author's

personality, its predilection for wit, humour, and irony, great vividness and concreteness of description, shocking obscenity in theme and language, and improvisatory tone, topical subjects, and the general intention of improving society by exposing its vices and follies.⁴⁵

John Donne's "*Satyre: Of Religion*", as the title of the poem itself suggests, is a good example of a satirical poem:

Kinde pittie chokes my spleene; brave scorn forbids
 Those teares to issue which swell my eye-lids;
 I must not laugh, nor weepe sinnes, and be wise,
 Can railing then cure these worne maladies?
 Is not our Mistresse faire Religion,
 As worthy of all our Soules devotion,
 As virtue was to the first blinded age?
 Are not heavens joyes as valiant as asswage
 Lusts, as earths honour was to them? Alas,
 As wee do them in meanes, shall they surpass
 Us in the end, and shall thy fathers spirit
 Meet blinde Philosophers in heaven, whose merit
 Of strict life may be imputed faith, and heare
 Thee, whom hee taught so easie wayes and neare
 To follow, damn'd? ⁴⁶

Another poem by John Donne, *The Calme*, too contains a superb satire:

Whether a rotten state, and hope of gaine,
 Or to disuse mee from the queasie paine
 Of being belov'd, and loving, or the thirst
 Of honour, or faire death, out pusht mee first,
 I lose my end: for here as well as I
 A desperate may live, and a coward die.⁴⁷

Metaphysical poetry also often employs shock and abrupt openings. “Metaphysical poetry”, according to Helen Gardner, “is famous for its abrupt personal openings in which a man speaks to his mistress, or addresses his God, or sets a scene, or calls us to mark this or see that.”⁴⁸

John Donne’s “*The Canonization*” has startling opening:

For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love,
 Or chide my palsie, or my gout,⁴⁹

Donne’s “*The Sun Rising*” also has a shockingly abrupt opening:

Busy old fool, unruly sun,
 Why dost thou thus,
 Through windows, and through curtains, call on us?⁵⁰

Complexity is another important characteristic of metaphysical poetry. Metaphysical poetry is complex because it is usually a mixture of elements that are used to reflect a complexity of thoughts and situations. With regard to the complexity of Donne's poetry Richard Willmott makes the following observation:

Some of Donne's earliest poetry in the 1590s had been satirical and that too had been typically metaphysical in its dramatic style, blending wit and feeling, and using complexity of expression to mirror complexity of thought.⁵¹

Universality and modernity too are important features of metaphysical poetry. In this regard, Richard Willmott expresses his view:

The skeptical newcomer may object that the oldest of these poets [metaphysical poets] was born over four hundred years ago and that his concerns cannot be ours, but Donne's uncomfortably honest treatment of death mentioned above is typical of his willingness to treat fundamental facts with the very honesty that we like to pride ourselves is particularly modern.⁵²

T. S. Eliot in his essay, "The Metaphysical Poets" discusses a metaphysical characteristic, "Unification of sensibility".⁵³ By 'unification

of sensibility', Eliot means "a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling."⁵⁴ He expresses his view that the seventeenth century poets who were the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth century "possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience".⁵⁵ In Donne, Eliot found a unique poetic quality which was not to be found even in Tennyson and Browning. In this connection, Eliot made the following observation:

Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.⁵⁶

Amalgamation of disparate and fragmentary experiences in the mind of the poet to form new wholes is one interesting aspect of unified sensibility. Eliot again expresses his unhappiness over a negative development, which took place in the seventeenth century:

In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered; and this dissociation, as is natural, was aggravated by the influence of the powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden.⁵⁷

Erudition, esotericism and obscurity too are important and closely interrelated characteristics of metaphysical poetry. Donne, Herbert and Marvell were highly educated and ambitious men who were deeply engaged in the affairs of their time. Interestingly, none of them published volumes of poetry and did not consider themselves as real poets. This could very well be the reason why some of their poetry were very difficult and were meant to be read by a small circle of friends rather than by the public. Vaughan was the only one who did not have any political ambition and who published his own poetry.

In the introduction to his *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems*, Prof. Herbert J. C. Grierson expresses his observation on yet another important characteristic of the seventeenth century metaphysical poets:

“The ‘metaphysicals’ of the seventeenth century combined two things, both soon to pass away, the fantastic dialectics of mediaeval love poetry and the

‘simple, sensuous’ strain which they caught from the classics- soul and body lightly yoked and glad to run and soar together in the winged chariot of Pegasus.⁵⁸

Despite criticisms and remarks of disapproval against its poetic practices especially by its contemporaries, there was a revival of interest in the seventeenth century metaphysical poetry in the early part of the 20th century. In fact, Donne, once again, enjoys 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.”⁵⁹

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.⁶⁰

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".⁶¹

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.⁶²

In fact, Eliot enthusiastically defended metaphysical poetry against contemptuous remarks and accusations. Reacting to Johnson's remark in connection with the metaphysical poets i.e., 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."⁶³ 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.⁶⁴

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".⁶⁵ 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 commented:

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.⁶⁶

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 present in Eliot's poetry. Obscurity, indeed, is an important characteristic of Eliot's poetry that brings it into close resemblance with that of Donne's.

In this connection, S. K. Sen made the following observation:

The same charge of 'obscurity' was made against Eliot's poetry when he started writing. What Johnson said about the metaphysicals- '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.⁶⁷

Eliot's employment of mythical method, symbolism, irony etc also contributes much to making his poetry obscure. His poems also contain heavy dose 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 made the following 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.⁶⁸

D. E. S. Maxwell, in his *The Poetry of T. S. Eliot* succinctly points out the factors that contributed to 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.⁶⁹

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.⁷⁰

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.⁷¹

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 expresses his view in the following words:

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.⁷²

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 the following 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.⁷³

In his employment of puns and paradoxes, too, Eliot closely resembles the metaphysical poets. In this connection, Ronald Tamplin commented in the following words:

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.⁷⁴

The kinship between Eliot and the metaphysical poets was of a very special 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.⁷⁵

In light of the findings that have been made, 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. Eliot made a tremendous contribution in reviving and further extending the tradition of the seventeenth century metaphysical poetry.

Notes

¹ Herbert J. C. Grierson, introduction, *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems of The Seventeenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) xiii.

² Herbert J. C. Grierson, introduction, *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems of The Seventeenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) xiii.

³ T. S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. Ronald Schuchard (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1993) 45.

⁴ Emile Legouis, Louis Cazamian, and Raymond Las Vergnas, *History of English Literature* (New Delhi: Macmillan Publishers India Ltd, 2009) 336.

⁵ T. S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. Ronald Schuchard (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1993) 47

⁶ T. S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. Ronald Schuchard (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1993) 48.

⁷ Helen Gardner, *The Metaphysical Poets* (London: Penguin Group, 1985) 15.

⁸ Helen Gardner, *The Metaphysical Poets* (London: Penguin Group, 1985) 15.

⁹ T. S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. Ronald Schuchard (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1993) 59.

¹⁰ T. S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. Ronald Schuchard (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1993) 60.

¹¹ T. S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. Ronald Schuchard (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1993) 60.

¹² T. S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. Ronald Schuchard (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1993) 60.

¹³ T. S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. Ronald Schuchard (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1993) 61.

¹⁴ T. S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. Ronald Schuchard (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1993) 61.

¹⁵ T. S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. Ronald Schuchard (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1993) 60.

¹⁶ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1972) 281.

¹⁷ Richard Willmott, *Four Metaphysical Poets* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1985) 14.

¹⁸ Helen Gardner, *The Metaphysical Poets* (London: Penguin Group, 1985) 28.

¹⁹ Herbert J. C. Grierson, introduction, *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems of The Seventeenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) xv.

²⁰ Emile Legouis, Louis Cazamian, and Raymond Las Vergnas, *History of English Literature* (New Delhi: Macmillan Publishers India Ltd, 2009) 336.

²¹ Helen Gardner, *The Metaphysical Poets* (London: Penguin Group, 1985) 17.

²² Helen Gardner, *The Metaphysical Poets* (London: Penguin Group, 1985) 241-242.

²³ Helen Gardner, *The Metaphysical Poets* (London: Penguin Group, 1985) 18.

²⁴ Helen Gardner, *The Metaphysical Poets* (London: Penguin Group, 1985) 18.

²⁵ Helen Gardner, *The Metaphysical Poets* (London: Penguin Group, 1985) 18.

²⁶ Helen Gardner, *The Metaphysical Poets* (London: Penguin Group, 1985) 19.

²⁷ Richard Willmott, *Four Metaphysical Poets* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1985) 15.

²⁸ Herbert J. C. Grierson, introduction, *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems of The Seventeenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) xxii

²⁹ Helen Gardner, *The Metaphysical Poets* (London: Penguin Group, 1985) 19.

³⁰ Richard Willmott, *Four Metaphysical Poets* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1985) 5.

³¹ Richard Willmott, *Four Metaphysical Poets* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1985) 15.

³² M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (New Delhi: Macmillan India Lmt, 1998) 30.

³³ Richard Willmott, *Four Metaphysical Poets* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1985) 52.

³⁴ Helen Gardner, *The Metaphysical Poets* (London: Penguin Group, 1985) 19.

³⁵ Herbert J. C. Grierson, introduction, *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems of The Seventeenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) xx.

³⁶ Helen Gardner, *The Metaphysical Poets* (London: Penguin Group, 1985) 61.

³⁷ Helen Gardner, *The Metaphysical Poets* (London: Penguin Group, 1985) 61.

³⁸ Richard Willmott, *Four Metaphysical Poets* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1985) 18.

³⁹ M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (New Delhi: Macmillan India Lmt, 1998) 119.

⁴⁰ Herbert J. C. Grierson, introduction, *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems of The Seventeenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) xxxiv.

⁴¹ Helen Gardner, *The Metaphysical Poets* (London: Penguin Group, 1985) 252.

⁴² Herbert J. C. Grierson, *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems of The Seventeenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) 87.

⁴³ Richard Willmott, *Four Metaphysical Poets* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1985) 2.

⁴⁴ T. S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. Ronald Schuchard (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1993) 144.

⁴⁵ Quoted by Richard Willmott in *Four Metaphysical Poets* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1985) 2.

⁴⁶ Helen Gardner, *The Metaphysical Poets* (London: Penguin Group, 1985) 47-48.

⁴⁷ Helen Gardner, *The Metaphysical Poets* (London: Penguin Group, 1985) 56.

⁴⁸ Helen Gardner, *The Metaphysical Poets* (London: Penguin Group, 1985) 22.

⁴⁹ Helen Gardner, *The Metaphysical Poets* (London: Penguin Group, 1985) 61.

⁵⁰ Helen Gardner, *The Metaphysical Poets* (London: Penguin Group, 1985) 60.

⁵¹ Richard Willmott, *Four Metaphysical Poets* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1985) 23.

⁵² Richard Willmott, *Four Metaphysical Poets* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1985) 11.

⁵³ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1972) 288.

⁵⁴ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1972) 286.

⁵⁵ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1972) 287.

⁵⁶ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1972) 287.

⁵⁷ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1972) 288.

⁵⁸ Herbert J. C. Grierson, introduction, *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems of The Seventeenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) xxxviii.

⁵⁹ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1972) 281.

⁶⁰ F. O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot: An Essay on the Nature of Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976) 5.

⁶¹ F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (London: Chatto and Windus Ltd, 1969) 10.

⁶² T. S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. Ronald Schuchard (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1993) 43.

⁶³ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1972) 283.

⁶⁴ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1972) 285.

⁶⁵ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1972) 288.

⁶⁶ F. O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot: An Essay on the Nature of Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976) 15.

⁶⁷ Sunil Kanti Sen, *Metaphysical Tradition and T. S. Eliot* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1965) 92.

⁶⁸ Tony Sharpe, *T. S. Eliot: A Literary Life* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991) 70.

⁶⁹ D. E. S. Maxwell, *The Poetry of T. S. Eliot* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1969) 67.

⁷⁰ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1972) 289.

⁷¹ F. O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot: An Essay on the Nature of Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976) 29.

⁷² Sunil Kanti Sen, *Metaphysical Tradition and T. S. Eliot* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1965) 114.

⁷³ George Williamson, *A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965) 18.

⁷⁴ Ronald Tamplin, *A Preface to T. S. Eliot* (Delhi: Pearson Education, 2003) 52.

⁷⁵ T. S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. Ronald Schuchard (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1993) 3.