

# Metaphysical Poets

T S Eliot

Physical: Material existence

Metaphysical- Non-material existence

- **Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that examines the fundamental nature of reality, including the relationship between mind and matter, between substance and attribute, and between potentiality and actuality.**
- Metaphysics seeks to answer, in an abstract and fully general manner, the questions:
  - What *is there*?
  - What is it *like*?
- Topics of metaphysical investigation include existence, objects and their properties, space and time, cause and effect, and possibility.

- **Sensibility** refers to an acute perception of or responsiveness toward something, such as the emotions of another. This concept emerged in eighteenth-century Britain, and was closely associated with studies of sense perception as the means through which knowledge is gathered. It also became associated with sentimental moral philosophy.
- Should rely on senses to gain knowledge.

# Sensibility (a posteriori)-

- One of the first of such texts would be [John Locke's \*Essay Concerning Human Understanding\*](#) (1690), where he says, "I conceive that Ideas in the Understanding, are coeval with Sensation; which is such an Impression or Motion, made in some part of the body, as makes it be taken notice of in the Understanding". Theorists asserted that individuals who had ultra-sensitive nerves would have keener senses, and thus be more aware of beauty and moral truth. Thus, while it was considered a physical and/or emotional fragility, sensibility was also widely perceived as a virtue.

# Sensibility in Literature

- Originating in philosophical and scientific writings, sensibility became an English-language literary movement, and sentimental novels featured individuals who were prone to sensibility, often weeping, fainting, feeling weak, or having fits in reaction to an emotionally moving experience. If one were especially sensible, one might react this way to scenes or objects that appear insignificant to others. **This reactivity was considered an indication of a sensible person's ability to perceive something intellectually or emotionally stirring in the world around them.** However, the popular sentimental genre soon met with a strong backlash, as anti-sensibility readers and writers contended that such extreme behavior was mere histrionics, and such an emphasis on one's own feelings and reactions a sign of narcissism (pursuit of gratification from vanity or egotistic admiration of one's idealised self image and attributes).

# Objections

- Objections to sensibility emerged on other fronts. For one, some conservative thinkers believed in a priori concepts, that is, knowledge that exists independent of experience, such as innate knowledge believed to be imparted by God. Theorists of the a priori distrusted sensibility because of its over-reliance on experience for knowledge. Also, in the last decades of the eighteenth century, anti-sensibility thinkers often associated the emotional volatility of sensibility with the exuberant violence of the French Revolution, and in response to fears of revolution coming to Britain, **sensible figures were coded as anti-patriotic or even politically subversive**

- In his article “T. S. Eliot’s Theory of Dissociation,” Allen Austin describes dissociation of sensibility as a concept that “involves not only the integration of sensation and idea...but also a special kind of thought—a detached intellectuality combined with passion.” Austin asserts that Eliot defines this term in order to provide a rationale for the combination of wit and emotion. He explains that Eliot sees the dissociation of wit and emotion as not only the separation of intellect and sensibility, but also the separation of the conceptual image from the intellectual idea. Austin claims that Eliot uses dissociation of sensibility to describe more than just the dissociation of thought from feeling; he asserts that Eliot also explains the separation of “Language From Sensibility,” using Eliot’s claim that “while the language became more refined, the feeling became more crude” as evidence. He also cites “The Metaphysical Poets” and the concept of dissociation of sensibility in claiming that Eliot’s appreciation of thought united with emotion is also a method of defending his own poetry, as his writing reflects the metaphysical poets’ style of combining wit and feeling.

- [Henry Louis Gates, Jr.](#), in his essay “Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference It Makes,” uses Eliot’s dissociation of sensibility in reference to the presence of race in literature. Gates claims that race has lost its voice in contemporary literature, and that modern critics do not see race as a factor of more than intrinsic value in literary theory. He writes: “For millions who originated outside Europe, **however, this dissociation of sensibility has its origins in colonialism and human slavery.**” Gates goes on to infer that, in this context, dissociation of sensibility reflects the way in which literature, in this sense analogous to thought, is dissociated from race and otherness (which parallel Eliot’s idea of feeling)
- [Combination of physical \(territory\) and metaphysical \(knowledge, civilization, enlightenment\).](#)



# T.S Eliot's Essay "Metaphysical Poets"

1. the work of a generation more often named than read, and more often read than profitably studied
2. term of abuse or as the label of a quaint (attractively unusual or old-fashioned) and pleasant taste.
3. It is extremely difficult
  - to define metaphysical poetry,
  - to decide what poets practise it and in which of their verses.
  - to find any precise use of metaphor, simile, or other conceit, which is common to all the poets and at the same time important enough as an element of style to isolate these poets as a group

- Johnson, who employed the term “metaphysical poets,” apparently having Donne, Cleveland (English poet, 1613-1658), and Cowley (1618-1667) chiefly in mind, remarks of them that “the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together.” The force of this impeachment () lies in the failure of the conjunction, the fact that often the ideas are yoked but not united; and if we are to judge of styles of poetry by their abuse enough examples may be found in Cleveland to justify Johnson’s condemnation. But a degree of heterogeneity of material compelled into unity by the operation of the poet’s mind is omnipresent in poetry (223-4).

- Johnson has hit, perhaps by accident, on one of their peculiarities, when he observes that “**their attempts were always analytic**”; he would not agree that, after **the disassociation, they put the material together again in a new unity** (226).
- Jacobean poets expresses a degree of **development of sensibility**.
- **Comparison to Chapman’s poetry (1559-1634)**
- In Chapman especially there is a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling, which is exactly what we find in Donne:

- Difference between Donne or Lord Herbert of Cherbury (Edward Herbert, an Anglo-Welsh Poet 1583-1633) and the time of Tennyson (1809 –1892) and Browning (1812-1889); it is the difference between the intellectual poet and the reflective poet.
- 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.

- We may express the difference by the following theory: The poets of the seventeenth century, the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth, possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience. They are simple, artificial, difficult, or fantastic, as their predecessors were; no less nor more than Dante (1265 – 1321), Guido Cavalcanti (1250-1300), Guinizelli (1230–1276), or Cino (1270 – 1337). 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 two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden. Each of these men performed certain poetic functions so magnificently well that the magnitude of the effect concealed the absence of others.

- The poets revolted against the ratiocinative (), the descriptive; they thought and felt by fits, unbalanced; they reflected. (228) (225), (223)
- **The possible interests of a poet**
- **Complexity of language**
- It is interesting to speculate whether it is not a misfortune that two of the greatest masters of diction in our language, Milton and Dryden, triumph with a dazzling disregard of the soul.

- Those who object to the “artificiality” of Milton or Dryden sometimes tell us to “look into our hearts and write.” But that is not looking deep enough; Racine or Donne looked into a good deal more than the heart. One must look into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts (230). (Body)
- On the other hand, we must not reject the criticism of Johnson (a dangerous person to disagree with) without having mastered it, without having assimilated the Johnsonian canons of taste.