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The Unified Sensibility and Metaphysical Poetry

A. E. MALLOCH¹

SINCE 1921 very few discussions of metaphysical poetry have been able to avoid mention of the "unified sensibility." The term has been alternately a high tribute to the achievements of Donne, Herbert, Marvell, and Crashaw and an epitome of all that is most cryptic and pretentious in modern criticism. And accompanying this divided reaction has been the uncertainty as to whether the unified sensibility is a technical and descriptive term or whether it belongs to the vocabulary of general aesthetics.² The term "metaphysical" has occasioned a similar uncertainty (and for a longer period of time). There is a sense in which all poetry is metaphysical, but traditionally the word attaches to a school of seventeenth-century poets. Sometimes metaphysical poetry and poetry of the unified sensibility are regarded as one and the same thing, but this identification does not necessarily show the limits of the terms. This paper will try to suggest the limits of each term and to indicate the relation between them.

When Sir Herbert Grierson's anthology appeared in 1921, it was reviewed in the *Times Literary Supplement* by T. S. Eliot, who called attention to the peculiar sensibility of the metaphysical poets.³ This review was largely responsible

¹ Huron College, London, Ontario, Canada.

² For some remarks on the use of the term "sensibility" in twentieth-century criticism see F. W. Bateson, "Contributions to a Dictionary of Critical Terms. II. Dissociation of Sensibility," *Essays in Criticism*, I (1951), 302-12; also Eric Thompson and F. W. Bateson, "Critical Forum," *Essays in Criticism*, II (1952), 207-14.

for popularizing the notion of the "unified sensibility"; but the notion had appeared and had been more fully explained in some of Eliot's earlier essays. A famous passage in the 1917 manifesto, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," describes the unified sensibility in action:

The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality. . . .

There remains to define this process of depersonalization. . . . It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science. I therefore invite you to consider, as a suggestive analogy, the action which takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulfur dioxide. . . . When the two gases . . . are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected: has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.

When the poet as person remains outside the creative process, when the poet's mind is the filament only, then he can boast of a unified sensibility. When the man who suffers (and Eliot uses the word in its technical sense) intrudes in the

³ This paper is not concerned with Eliot's strictures on the sensibility of the later seventeenth-century poets. His particular critical judgments are not necessarily involved in the notion of the "unified sensibility."

creative process, the poem is stained with personality and the poet's sensibility is said to be dissociated. To praise the sensibility of a poet, then, is not to praise his knowledge or his personal sensitivity or the sublimity of the material he handles; it is to praise his mode of working.

The illustration of the catalyst implies a particular understanding of poetic creation, an understanding clearly at odds with any theories of poetry as self-expression. "Poet," as the Elizabethan critics constantly remind us, comes from a Greek verb meaning "to make." The activity of the poet is to make, to bring something into existence. But, since man does not create *ex nihilo*, it follows that the act of making is related to the act of cognition. From what the poet has learned emerges the perception which guides him in his making. Or, to put it another way, the act of cognition is the primary act of imitation. The poet's senses, imagination, and intellect represent (or imitate) those things which impress them: the sound of a typewriter, the smell of cooking, the works of Spinoza.⁴ These cognitive acts are held in the memory, and, when they have afforded the poet a certain vision,⁵ he then sets out to make from his chosen matter (words) what Eliot has called the "objective correlative," the verbal formula for the art emotion. The poet finds this correlative and so makes the poem, by retracing the acts of cognition, not this time to those objects or situations which first initiated them but to something

⁴ Cf. Thomas Aquinas *De anima*, Art. 13: "The human soul in a certain respect is all things by sensing and understanding."

⁵ For Eliot the succession of cognitive acts requires a continual reordering (analogous to the reordering of the tradition of literature, which he describes in "Tradition and the Individual Talent"). The experiences of the poet "are always forming new wholes"; hence Donne is said to be altogether present in every thought and feeling.

analogous to those objects and situations. It is in this process of retracing that the intellect comes to be immediately at the tips of the senses, and it is in the search for the analogous object that the poet exercises his talent for perceiving the similarity between dissimilar things, that talent which Aristotle regarded as the poet's most important. The working of the unified sensibility, then, is distinguished chiefly by the exact correspondence between the processes of learning and making. The poet slays the minotaur of appetite and volition and finds his way back through the cognitive labyrinth. Hence, when Eliot impugns the sensibility of Massinger, the specific point he makes is that Massinger's style of writing does not correspond to his mode of "perceiving, registering, and digesting impressions." The insistence on this correspondence is not peculiar to the criticism of Eliot. Arthur Hallam, in writing about the "poets of sensation," said:

We are therefore decidedly of opinion that the heights and depths of art are most within the reach of those who have received from nature the "fearful and wonderful" constitution which we have described, whose poetry is a sort of magic, producing a number of impressions, too multiplied, too minute, and too diversified to allow of your tracing them to their causes, because just such was the effect, even so boundless and bewildering, produced on their imaginations by the real appearance of Nature.⁶

And James Joyce wrote: "The artist, he imagined, standing in the position of mediator between the world of his experience and the world of his dreams—a mediator, consequently gifted with twin faculties, a selective and a reproductive faculty. To equate these faculties was the secret of artistic success."⁷

⁶ T. H. Vail Motter (ed.), *The Writings of Arthur Hallam* (New York, 1943), p. 187.

⁷ *Stephen Hero* (London, 1944), p. 65. This insight, like so many of Joyce's, can be found in the

This understanding of the poetic process carries with it a view of artistic creation in general. Art imitates nature not by copying faithfully certain objects which the world of nature presents to the artist but by working in the way that nature works. The impersonal artist is an instrument in a natural process of creation, a free, conscious instrument but an instrument nonetheless. In a recent essay Eliot has emphasized this point and indicated its relevance to the problem of meaning. He is discussing the difference between the "permanent and the ephemeral in imaginative writing":

In the latter the author can know exactly what he meant, and if the audience does not get the thing that he was aware of or meaning to say, his attempt has failed. And because he had a definite purpose, a thesis to demonstrate, what he has written will cease to interest and excite as soon as the circumstances, in which he formulated that thesis, have changed. But in really creative writing, the author is making something which he does not understand himself. Only God understands the creature; in human creation humanity is only an instrument.⁸

All this and much more is involved in the notion of the "unified sensibility," a notion which belongs in the understanding of the poetic process, whether it is the process of a Chaucer, a Donne, a Wordsworth, or a Tennyson. Eliot, however, chose to notice the unified sensibility of a particular group of poets, and he chose for the reason that underlies all his critical interests, the bearing of those poets on contemporary poetic practice. In the metaphysicals he found a mechanism of

works of "old Aquinas." See a passage in *De anima*, Art. 13, where Aquinas states that the agent intellect is related to the phantasms illuminated by it as an artificer is to the things made by his art. See also Sergei Eisenstein's remarks on the correspondence between cognition and creation in *The Film Sense*, trans. Jay Leyda (New York, 1947), pp. 18, 30 ff.

⁸ "The Chief Aims of Poetic Drama," *Adam International Review*, XVII, No. 200 (November, 1949), 16.

sensibility which could devour an enormous range of experience, a range as enormous as that which the twentieth-century poet must devour if he is to write at all. (He does not, however, say that the poet of today does or will use the same techniques as Donne or Crashaw.) A great many poets from all ages may be granted the praise of a unified sensibility; the distinctions among them are made according to the techniques they employed in constructing their poems. The term "unified sensibility" can bracket Donne and Spenser; the term "metaphysical," on the other hand, can differentiate them.

Johnson was the first to use the phrase "metaphysical poets"; but there are at least two earlier texts in which "metaphysics" or "metaphysical" is associated with a particular kind of poetry. Around 1630, Drummond of Hawthornden wrote in a letter to a friend: "In vain have some men of late, transformers of everything, consulted upon her [poetry's] reformation, and endeavoured to abstract her to metaphysical ideas and scholastic quiddities, denuding her of her own habits and those ornaments with which she hath amused the world some thousand years." In 1693, in his essay on the "Original and Progress of Satire," Dryden wrote that Donne "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." These passages agree in associating the word "metaphysical" with the reasoning of the schoolmen and in characterizing that reasoning as abstract and fine-drawn. This use of the word is common in Milton, who spoke variously of "metaphysical trifling" and the "metaphysical fume," and urged a "wholesome

body of divinity without school terms and metaphysical notions." The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that the word has been applied "with more or less of reproach to reasoning, ideas, etc. which are considered oversubtle, or too abstract." The *OED* notes also that the word has meant "surpassing what is natural or ordinary." This is certainly a meaning in the passage from Dryden, when "metaphysics" is opposed to "nature." And both these meanings are in Johnson's "Life of Cowley." Donne and Cowley are metaphysical because they were men of enormous learning who ransacked nature and art for "illustrations, comparisons, and allusions." But the learning is not their distinguishing feature. Their principal pursuit was the unexpected and the surprising, and, since "great things cannot have escaped former observation," these men chose to be subtle and analytic, and this constant analysis required for its raw matter a great body of learning.

The subtleties, the fine distinctions which Drummond, Dryden, and Johnson emphasize, are present because the characteristic technique of Donne and his school is dialectic, the dramatic action of composing and dividing. The schoolmen, who were the great manipulators of the fine distinction, relied almost exclusively on the disputed question (a miniature drama in itself) to expound their doctrines. And it was the schoolmen who assigned the dominant role in the trivium to dialectic.

The modes of dialectic in metaphysical poetry are numerous. Sometimes the poets, and especially Donne, exploit a specific and traditional, scholastic distinction—for example, the distinction between substantial and accidental existence:

Study me then, you who shall lovers bee
At the next world, that is, at the next Spring:

For I am every dead thing,
In whom love wrought new Alchimie.
For his art did expresse
A quintessence even from nothingnesse,
From dull privations and leane emptinesse:
He ruin'd mee, and I am re-begot
Of absence, darknesse, death; things which are
not.

All others, from all things, draw all that's good,
Life, soule, forme, spirit, whence they beeing
have;
I, by loves limbecke, am the grave
Of all, that's nothing.

It is common, too, to find the dialectic of speaker and hearer emphasized by a highlighting of the dramatic situation of the poem. In "The Flea" Donne even writes the action of the hearer into the poem:

Cruell and Sodaine, hast thou since
Purpled thy naile, in blood of innocence?
Wherein could this flea guilty bee,
Except in that drop which it suckt from thee?

The dialectic of conversation between priest and God is a basic mode in Herbert's poems:

Lord, how can man preach thy eternall word?
He is a brittle crazie glasse:
Yet in thy temple thou dost him afford
This glorious and transcendent place,
To be a window, through thy grace.

One of the most celebrated modes of dialectic is the pun, and it is no accident that so many of Empson's illustrations are drawn from the metaphysicals. In a pun the dual applications of a word or phrase set up relations between themselves which are analogous to the relation between speakers in a dialogue:

When thy inconsiderate hand
Flings ope this casement, with my trembling
name,
To looke on one, whose wit or land,
New battry to thy heart may frame,
Then thinke this name alive, and that thou thus
In it offendst my Genius.

Again,

When we have run our Passions heat,
Love hither makes his best retreat,

The *Gods*, that mortal Beauty chase,
 Still in a Tree did end their race.
Apollo hunted *Daphne* so,
 Only that She might Laurel grow.
 And *Pan* did after *Syrinx* speed,
 Not as a Nymph, but for a reed.

Or:

No wonder if my time go thus
 Backward and most preposterous;
 Thou hast benighted me, thy set
 This Eve of blackness did beget,
 Who was't my day, (though overcast
 Before thou had'st thy Noon-tide past).

An extension of this mode of dialectic, and the most controversial feature of metaphysical poetry, is the conceit. Johnson's famous passage on the conceit begins by defining wit as "a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike." When he goes on to say that in metaphysical poetry the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together, he implies that the conceit is an unjustified accentuation of one of these occult resemblances. He adduces an example from Cleveland:

The mod'rate value of our guiltlesse ore,
 Makes no man atheist, nor no woman whore:
 Yet why should hallow'd vestals sacred shrine
 Deserve more honour than a flaming mine?
 These pregnant wombs of heat would fitter be
 Than a few embers for a deity.
 Had he our pits, the Persian would admire
 No sun, but warm's devotion at our fire:
 He'd leave the trotting whipster, and prefer
 Our profound Vulcan 'bove that waggoner.
 For wants he heat? or light? or would have
 store?
 Or both? 'tis here: and what can suns give more?
 Nay, what's the sun, but in a different name,
 A coal-pit rampant, or a mine on flame!
 Then let this truth reciprocally run
 The sun's heaven's coalery, and coals our sun.

This is a good example for Johnson's purpose, but a score of metaphysical poems refute him and show that the terms of a conceit may exhibit a marked con-

naturality. Here, for example, is Crashaw's "Easter day":

Rise, Heire of fresh Eternity,
 From thy Virgin Tombe:
 Rise mighty man of wonders, and thy world
 with thee
 Thy Tombe, the universall East,
 Natures new wombe,
 Thy Tombe, faire Immortalities perfumed Nest.
 Of all the Gloryes Make Noone gay
 This is the Morne.
 This rocke buds forth the fountaine of the
 streames of Day.
 In joyes white Annals live this houre,
 When life was borne,
 No cloud scoule on his radiant lids no tempest
 lowre.
 Life, by this light's Nativity
 All creatures have.
 Death onely by this Dayes just Doome is forc't
 to Dye;
 Nor is Death forc't; for may hee ly
 Thorn'd in thy Grave;
 Death will on this condition be content to Dy.

Critics of metaphysical poetry have attempted to describe the conceit in two ways, by reference either to the kind of terms brought together or to the quality of the relation between them.⁹ But both methods are unsatisfactory. The first tries to measure by genus and species the distance between terms which are analogically united, and analogy is notoriously disrespectful to generic and specific boundaries. The second method, description according to relation, overlooks the fact that in analogy (as in the unified sensibility) the correspondence or relation is, strictly speaking, always the same. Two examples from Aristotle's *Poetics* will illustrate the point. Old age is the evening of life; the cup is the shield of Dionysus. In both, the relation is one of proportion; in fact, it is a proportion of proportions. As old age is to life, so is evening to the

⁹ On the one hand, Milton Rugoff, *Donne's Imagery: A Study in Creative Sources* (New York, 1939); on the other, Rosemond Tuve, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery* (Chicago, 1947).

day; as the cup is to Dionysus, so is the shield to Mars. The relation within each term (e.g., the relation of the cup to Dionysus) will be distinct, but, when that relation comes to be united with another, the union is not mathematical (2 is to 4 as 6 is to 12) but harmonic. The relations of the cup to Dionysus and of the shield to Mars, when contemplated together, are perceived to be "in tune."

This is not to say that description of conceits is impossible, for if analogy is not amenable to the two methods mentioned above, it is amenable to description by technique. Analogy may be exhibited in a number of different ways. The proportion may be stated: "My luve is like a red, red rose"; it can also be shown by mere juxtaposition, as when Chaucer juxtaposes the logical studies of the Clerk and the leanness of the Clerk and his horse. When we come to the metaphysicals, I would suggest that the special mark of their conceit is that they take an analogy and develop it with the kind of rigor proper to dialectic:

Whilst my Physitians by their love are growne
Cosmographers, and I their Mapp, who lie
Flat on this bed, that by them may be showne
That this is my South-west discoverie
Per fretum febris, by these streights to die,

I joy, that in these straits, I see my West;
For, though their currants yeeld returne to
none,

What shall my West hurt me? As West and East
In all flatt Maps (and I am one) are one,
So death doth touch the Resurrection.

Is the Pacifique Sea my home? Or are
The Easterne riches? Is *Jerusalem?*
Anyan, and *Magellan*, and *Gibraltar*,
All streights, and none but streights, are wayes
to them,

Whether where *Japhet* dwelt, or *Cham*, or *Sem*.

For the schoolmen the technique of composing and dividing belonged to the order of conceits; when that dialectic technique is applied to the analogical order, we have what Eliot describes as the "re-

creation of thought into feeling," an act which corresponds to the sensuous apprehension of thought in the poet's act of cognition. Here, to use the words of Thomas Carew's elegy on Donne, the reader may judge by sense what fancy cannot reach.

Carew's elegy is full of observations on Donne's techniques and on the techniques of the metaphysicals generally. It may be valuable, therefore, as a final focus on these techniques to consider briefly the kind of poetry which Carew thought Donne had displaced. The contemptuous references to the tuned chime of language which charms the outward sense, to "soft melting Phrases," to the "traine of gods and goddesses," to the "tales o' th' Metamorphoses," identify the poetry as that of the so-called "Spenserian" school. Quite apart from Carew's obvious preference, there is an important difference between the techniques of Donne and Spenser, a difference which is in some sense a difference between two basic traditions in the history of poetry.¹⁰ Donne exploits the potentialities of language as instrument of communication and presents by verbal dialectic the dance of meaning. Spenser, on the other hand, exploits quite a different potential and creates a structure rich in plastic and visual effects; the internal relations of his poetry are wrought by a landscaping of these effects. And so the music of his work comprehends far more than just the melody of his lines. Donne shows no interest in the plastic and visual, and the sound of his lines is an echo of the mind composing and dividing.

In closing, then, I would suggest that the relation of the unified sensibility to metaphysical poetry is the relation of poetic process to poetic technique. Cer-

¹⁰ See H. M. McLuhan, "Tennyson and Picturesque Poetry," *Essays in Criticism*, I (1951), 262-82, for some discussion of these two traditions.

tain techniques can validly be said to distinguish Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, and Marvell as a school (and there are significant differences within that school). The unification or dissociation of sensibility, on the other hand, is a judgment on a poet's mode of creation, whatever the nature of his techniques.

High Is Our Calling

“Let us think of *quietly* enlarging our stock of true and fresh ideas. . . .”

MATTHEW ARNOLD

PROLOGUE

High is our calling, Friends! To teach belief
 In God's ways (and those of businessmen)
 To a generation of war-weaned children,
 Old in tears, futility, and grief.
 “‘God's in his heaven’? Like hell,” they say. “The
 World's in one awful sorry mess;
 The answer, by a long shot, isn't yes
 Nor no . . . it's in between, it's maybe!”
 These we must teach—but not to think,
 To analyze, to ferret fact and find
 The economic missing link;
 These we must teach to be resigned
 To evil, status quo of normal stink;
 Give these the anodyne of meat and drink.

I

This is Lit. 64. Ah, Literature, Life!
 Truth, flashed in code from a magic Mount. . . .
 “Yeah? That kind of truth is no-account;
 I'm here to learn a living; I've a wife
 And two kids and ninety bucks per
 For three more years. Life, Literature!”
 Truth, fictioned forth in forms that endure
 Time, though stone monuments and man
 Are dust and dry decay. . . . This is section “B”. . . .
 “Life, Literature: a sermon, for free!
 Lissen to old know-it-all fan
 The breeze!”
 The first lesson will be
Beowulf, Volume I, page three;
 Read it all tonight, if you can.

II

You've read the lesson, I presume. . . .
 At any rate, let's see. . . . It's only right