The Unified Sensibility and Metaphysical Poetry

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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. 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. 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 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

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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 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

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 re-ordering 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.


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 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 softness 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
Plings 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 dis-
cordia concors; a combination of dissimi-
lar images, or discovery of occult re-
semblances in things apparently unlike."
When he goes on to say that in meta-
physical poetry the most heterogeneous
ideas are yoked by violence together, he
implies that the conceit is an unjustified
accentuation of one of these occult re-
semblances. 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? *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 coality, and coals our sun.

This is a good example for Johnson's
purpose, but a score of metaphysical po-
ems refute him and show that the terms
of a conceit may exhibit a marked con-
naturality. Here, for example, is Crash-
aw'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 Glories Make Noone gay
This is the Morn.
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 ana-
logically united, and analogy is notori-
ously disrespectful to generic and specific
boundaries. The second method, descrip-
tion according to relation, overlooks the
fact that in analogy (as in the unified sen-
sibility) the correspondence or relation is,
strictly speaking, always the same. Two
examples from Aristotle's Poetics will il-
lustrate 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 Im-
agery: 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 felbris, 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 Eastern riches? Is Jerusalem? Anyan, and Magellan, and Gibrallare, 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 concepts; 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-

10See 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