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by *W. Bradford Smith*

WHAT IS METAPHYSICAL POETRY?

METAPHYSICAL poetry now, as in the past, is amply discussed and only vaguely defined. From Drummond to Dryden, and from Johnson to T. S. Eliot it has been variously mentioned, but never distinguished clearly from the rest of our poetical literature. Two metaphysical anthologies have been published in recent years, with introductions roughly indicating the compiler's conception of metaphysical poetry and poems which do not seem to belong even to the editor's own notions of the genre. Grierson reaches the conclusion that 'all great poetry is metaphysical'. Consequently, one might expect any anthology of the World's Best Poetry, or a Treasure House of English Verse to be a comprehensive metaphysical anthology. Obviously a more restrictive definition must be found. It will not do to call great poetry and metaphysical poetry synonymous.

Are Shelley's lyrics—*Love's Philosophy* and 'Music, when soft voices die'—metaphysical? They fulfill Grierson's requirement in that they are 'born of men's passionate thinking about life, love, and death.' They are written in the very metaphysical realm of metaphor, and they subscribe to ideas that are noticeably present in the work of Donne, the exemplar of the metaphysical muse—fulfillment of physical love and thoughts of death. They are, however, far from the terrain of metaphysical poetry. They are romantic, of course, and the approach is not primarily from the intellect. The poem on death has none of the metaphysical concern with dissolution, nor the psychological analysis of emotion—but I trespass upon my definition. Let me say merely that metaphysical poetry probes the depths; it does not consciously and primarily seek the wings of Daedalus. If the poet is scorched, it is

rather with too much probing into the fire than with flying too near the sun.

Metaphysical poetry is concerned with life, love, and death, and it is metaphorical, but the corollary does not hold true. Neither is all reflective or philosophical poetry metaphysical, as Miss Taggard seems to think. In fact, philosophy which postulates an orderly view of the universe, is inimical to the metaphysical muse, for her tortuous wonderings are born of unresolved complexity.

Let us first of all agree that by metaphysical poetry is meant that type of poetry of which Donne is the great exemplar and which Dr. Johnson attacked under the term 'metaphysical'. The word is, in certain senses, unfortunate, and as Johnson intended it obscurity and subtlety stood foremost. But the word also bears the meanings 'having real being or the essential nature of reality' and 'being concerned with the analysis of experience.' In these senses, as we shall see, it is eminently fitting. There is a further appropriateness suggested in the etymology of the word since meta-physics, or coming after physics, the knowledge of the natural world, might well be adapted for a poetry which makes such large and fruitful use of an imagery based upon realistic, physical terms.

Where are we to look for metaphysical poetry? Who are the metaphysical poets? Miss Taggard is correct when she says that metaphysical poetry is not confined to an age, that it is recurrent throughout all poetry. But, to choose the most obvious examples in our hunt for a definition, let us concern ourselves largely with John Donne and his followers in the seventeenth century—the Herberts, Carew, Marvell. The great flowering of metaphysical poetry is due to them, and to a few others. What are the outstanding characteristics of their poetry as it distinguishes itself from other verse? Broadly, I should say the peculiar flavour of their thought, and its close application to a well-developed, striking, and accurate imagery.

The manifestations are various. Let me mention them here, and prove them later, by quotation. The thought is sensual, whether it move toward eroticism or to an almost morbid pondering of death. The thought encompasses large horizons, bending the universe into the small circle of man's comprehension. There is, however, no ordered philosophy: complexity, unresolved, is apparent.

The eye is too keen to accept an ordered view of a disordered world. Intellect controls this poetry. Passion is examined and probed, not eulogized. Imagery is used not because it is pretty but because it fits the idea. The metaphysical poet has a way of making his image and his idea become one, the image an explanation rather than an embellishment. Metaphors are not high-flown, however ingenious they may be. The metaphysical poet prefers, indeed, a type of common imagery peculiar to himself. He uses the terms employed by an astronomer, a lawyer, a tradesman, and turns them to the use of a highly effective metaphorical vein. He delights in physical concepts and somatic terms. He is a blend of all the contrarities of nature—skeptical, religious, sensual, scholarly, fanciful, abstruse. I must insist upon complexity as a keynote of his nature—complexity born of a desire to examine and analyze everything in his experience.

Here is a short definition, based upon the metaphysical poetry of the seventeenth century. I attempt, hazardously perhaps, to include all the poetry that is pertinent, and to exclude all that is not truly metaphysical:

Metaphysical Poetry is a paradoxical inquiry, imaginative and intellectual, which exhausts, by its use of antithesis and contradiction and unusual imagery, all the possibilities in a given idea. This idea will predominantly be a psychological probing of love, death, or religion as the more important matters of experience in the life of the poet, and will be embodied in striking metaphorical utterance or in the use of the common (familiar) or the scientific word.

This, one will say, requires some clarification. But before I go on to prove these points by quotation from the poets themselves, I should like to review some comments, past and present, on metaphysical poetry.

Drummond, who probably first used the term, thinks of metaphysical poetry as a thing of 'scholastic quiddities' which has forsaken the classical models and is, therefore, damned. Dryden also thinks of metaphysical poetry as 'nice speculations of philosophy,' that are opposed to 'nature'. Johnson, though prejudiced by his age, offers a reasonable criticism and a convincing analysis in his essay on Cowley. He attacks the linking of 'heterogeneous ideas,' the 'slender conceits and laboured particularities,' but there is a concession:

If they frequently threw away their wit upon false conceits, they likewise sometimes struck out unexpected truth; if their conceits were far-fetched, they were often worth the carriage. To write on their plan, it was at least necessary to read and think.

To Johnson, the greatest sin of these poets was that of non-conformity. Chapman, a hundred and fifty years before, had well stated the opposite attitude, and his premise is one that any metaphysical poet must adopt.

I know that empty and dark spirits will complain of palpable night [Is this Johnson?]; but those that beforehand have a radiant and light-bearing intellect, will say they can pass through Corinna's garden without the help of a lantern.

Of modern critics, whom I can mention only inadequately, T. S. Eliot makes several valuable suggestions. The 'elaboration of figure to the farthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it,' the frequent development by rapid association of thought, and the presence of the analytic method are a few of his most important observations. In the best metaphysical verse, he says, the idea and simile become one; observe, for example, Bishop King's *Exequy*. Grierson suggests the psychological nature of the poetry—its probing of love and religion. It is, he says, more intellectual and less verbal (as fulfilling, one thinks, Meredith's cry for 'More brain, O God, more brain!') The poet is an analyst of his own moods and experiences, but is unable to unify love and religion in his life, both being vital to his experience. This view of the metaphysical school is valuable in its emphasis on an inner conflict of sensuality and spirituality and in its characterization of the verse as psychological. Common opinion has assigned subjectivism to the romantic period of the nineteenth century. It is important to recognize a deep current of self-interest in the literature of the seventeenth century, and a psychological probing which, for accurate and profound analysis, far exceeds the vagueness and generalities of the romantic poets.

Angularity, saltiness of phrase, a coldness which allows self-probing—these appropriate phrases contribute to Miss Taggard's definition. The poetry is psychological, and born of a need to find (and perhaps not finding?) a thoughtful pattern for the universe. The small, every-day image linked with a large idea, concern and

realization and tortured wonder at the complexity of life and the universe are the true marks of the metaphysical poet.

Duplicity of thought, a mingling of life and book knowledge, an attempt to reconcile the body with the soul are advanced as elements of metaphysical poetry in Professor Williamson's book on *The Donne Tradition*. Image and meaning are one; the former seems essential to an expression of the latter, for both are uniquely the poet's own. Professor Williamson finds an apt expression for the peculiar concern of these poets with death—he calls it the 'metaphysical shudder.'

Then worms shall try
That long-preserved virginity.

from Marvell, is an excellent example.

With my short definition, and with some suggestions from these several critics, I have staked out the domain of metaphysical poetry. It now becomes necessary to prove my claim. Quotation is the only means of proof, and unfortunately one cannot quote freely enough in a short article. I can only suggest that a leisurely reading of Donne and Marvell and a few others will bear out the definition. My contention is that metaphysical poetry at its best is any and all of these things. The term has been too loosely construed; an examination of the best metaphysical poetry must necessarily yield these conclusions.

Imagery is important. I cannot say enough about the precision and appropriateness of metaphysical metaphor.

. . . Her pure and eloquent blood
Spoke in her cheeks, and so distinctly wrought
That one might almost say her body thought.

That is from Donne's Second Anniversary. Beautifully said, but more than that, expressed in such discriminating metaphor that it becomes impossible to have said it in any other way.

How great love is, presence best trial makes,
But absence tries how long this love will be;
 To take a latitude
 Sun, or stars, are fitliest viewed
 At their brightest, but to conclude
Of longitudes, what other means have we,
But to mark when and where the dark eclipses be?

Here too we have the exact image, each point in the main idea corresponding with its accompanying image. This last metaphor brings us to a consideration of the Radical Image, as Professor Wells calls it in his *Poetic Imagery*. The comparison between two terms of the metaphor is incongruent, ingenious, and the minor term possesses, intrinsically, little imaginative value. These images always result in a distinct shock to the reader. The intellectual exercise seems to retard, for a moment, imaginative sympathy. But not for long. The image stands, at last, in strong contrast to mere exuberance of phrase.

Closely allied to the Radical Image is the use of common everyday phrases and of scientific terminology. Unusual metaphorical effects are obtained in the use of words of ordinary talk. The poet, indeed, 'hitches his star to a wagon.' The body is the 'book' of the soul, or a 'poor inn.' Of the heroine in the *Second Anniversary*,

Whose *twilights* were more clear than our *mid-day*.

A virtuous soul is 'seasoned timber' that 'never gives.' Marvell has 'My *vegetable* love should *grow*.' This usage results in an impingement of added meaning upon terms of common speech. It creates an imagery at once alive and familiar, but striking because of its ingenious use of seemingly dull material.

And as the diction is familiar, so the thought remains common-sense and reasonable. There is a tight, logical structure about metaphysical poetry which makes it almost akin to the geometric proposition, with its 'given' and 'to prove.' Recall for a moment Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress*. Given:—her coyness; To Prove:—that coyness is criminal. Proof:—then follow all the reasons necessary for the conversion of his mistress to his own beliefs. There is not 'world enough, and time,' deserts of eternity stretch before them when beauty and song shall be of little worth, youth must be enjoyed—but 'it were profanation' to paraphrase the poem; the point is obvious.

I have mentioned in the short definition the exhaustive treatment of metaphor—the careful and precise relation of many points between the major and minor terms throughout a fairly long poem. Let us call this for convenience the *Extended Image*. Donne employs it, impressively in *The Flea, Valediction of My Name in the*

Window, parts of the *Second Anniversary*, but most happily of all in *A Lecture Upon the Shadow*. I cannot quote in full; a brief resumé must suffice. The shadows which moved with the poet and his love as they walked were, in the morning, before them—like the disguises of infant love. At noon the shadows are under-foot:

And to brave clearness all things are reduced.

But as the shadows decline westward, so in the decline of love disguises formerly made to blind others will be made to blind themselves. The poem ends in a couplet which excellently summarizes the image:

Love is a growing, or full constant light,
And his short minute, after noon, is night

Emily Dickinson, a poet who, I am convinced, more than any other except Donne, has faithfully followed the metaphysical muse, has several extended images of a fine and compelling nature which the perusal of her pages will readily discover to the reader. Thomas Carew, perhaps Donne's closest follower, is particularly rich in the extended image, and employs it often in his more erotic poems, notably in *The Rapture*. Marvell spreads an extended image, with some digressions, through seventy lines of his poem *Upon Appleton House*. And then there is Henry King's *Exequy*, which likens the poet's life, after the death of the loved one, to a journey every day of which brings him closer to his goal. The tapestry of thought is richly interwoven with imagery,

But thou wilt never more appear
Folded within my hemisphere,
Since both thy light and motion
Like a fled star is fall'n and gone;
And twixt me and my soul's dear wish
An earth now interposed is.

Notice the double value of the word earth—the spiritual severance and the interment. The journey progresses:

Each minute is a short degree,
And ev'ry hour a step toward thee.
At night when I betake to rest,
Next morn I rise nearer my west
Of life, almost by eight hour's sail,—

Until

. . . my pulse like a soft drum
Beats my approach, tells thee I come;
And slow howe'er my marches be,
I shall at last sit down by thee.

Intellect, in these extended metaphors, glides smoothly into the channel of imagery which is its fittest expression.

But I must leave the consideration of imagery and go on to the important characteristics of metaphysical thought. Let it first be said that the metaphysical poet, whether by chance or requirement, is almost always sensual, and usually erotic somewhere or other in the course of his utterance. The reason for this I leave to the psychologist. But it makes apparent, I think, the reason for his delight in somatic terms and the use of physical, or physiological terms in his imagery. The famous line,

To get with child a mandrake root,

or,

. . . pictures in our eyes to get
Was all our propagation,

are only two of many examples. The doctrine of inconstancy is too recurrent to need more than passing mention:

And swear
No where
Lives a woman true and fair.

The poet is bound by no stringent rules and his questionings reach beyond the petty concerns of Mrs. Grundy.

Sentimentality is banned—any preachment coming direct from the emotions and not interpreted and expounded by the intellect is not metaphysical—here we have a definite distinguishing rule. This is not to say, however, that there is no emotion, for the poetry becomes at times almost ecstatic. But again the paradox—emotion is restrained although it is abundant; even though it achieve transport it is not allowed to overflow. Observe the quiet majesty of Donne's *Hymn to God, My God, in My Sickness*, or the admirable restraint which obtains in such a poem as *A Hymn to God the Father*, where the recesses of emotion are bared and might easily run over into sentimentalism and undignified pe-

tion. Intellect stands at the flood-gate of emotion and keeps even the turbulent stream of impassioned poetry within her banks.

This poetry is metaphysical in another sense, for the poet is interested in his relation to the world—the difference between the circles of the universe and of man's mind concerns him. Man is able to take into his circle the whole universe, relating the detail of his own life to the larger canvas of general experience and natural law. Emily Dickinson's lines beginning, 'The brain is wider than the sky', are an admirable statement of this attitude.

Masculinity is a definite characteristic. Metaphors are bold, the attitude toward religion one of fearlessness or at least of skepticism, and the verse logical rather than intuitive. Sincerity is a hall-mark of good metaphysical verse; without it the method of a metaphorical poetry is unsuccessful. Donne's lines are appropriate:

On a huge hill
Cragged, and steep, truth stands, and he that will
Reach her, about must, and about must go;
And what the hill's suddenness resists, win so.

Donne's conception of truth is well stated here. She *is* placed on a cragged and steep hill, and Donne's method of reaching her—as that of others of his school—is precisely the method he describes. This does not imply the use of subterfuge; it denotes a purposeful assault, on the part of these poets, to discover the truth as they conceive it. That their concept of truth demanded a recognition of all the contradictions of human existence makes their achievement the more remarkable.

It is not untrue to say that, more than any other poets, they have made a serious and sincere attempt to render their ideas of life in poetry. Technique has not been their sole aim; they have had no theories of poetry to uphold except the conviction that it should be written with all the perception and thought and analysis they could bring to it. In this respect they are realists of the first rank. Sentimentality or pure melody do not concern them, but a true rendition of human experience as they find it, with all its confusions and denials and beliefs.

The inherent honesty of this poetry worked its way into the very rhythm of expression, and here is to be found an answer to the accusations of harshness often levelled at Donne's verse. That

Donne was incapable of smoothness can amply be refuted by reference to *Go and Catch a Falling Star*, or any of the lighter things among his poetry. It is the songs which run to a deep and probing analysis of love which are irregular, tortured in form, and as rough in metre as they are involved in thought. A helpful contrast is provided by *The Canonization*, which begins in fairly even metre, even though it is an outburst of feeling:

For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love;
Or chide my palsy, or my gout;
My five gray hairs, or ruin'd fortune flout;

as soon, however, as the poet becomes involved in his own argument, the verse takes on a noticeable ruggedness:

Call's what you will, we are made such by love;
Call her one, me another fly,
We're tapers too, and at our own cost die.

So, among the metaphysical poets, the technique of rhythm as well as the use of imagery, is inseparably allied to the artist's background of thought.

One critic of the metaphysical school I have not mentioned. It is Carew, the man who caught the standard from Donne and turned out some very fine metaphysical poetry, not the least of which is an *Elegy Upon the Death of Dr. Donne*. It contains, or is, a definition of metaphysical poetry unusual in the clarity of its observation—the artist describing his own art. I can quote, inadequately, but a few lines. Donne

Did through the eye the melting heart distil,
And the deep knowledge of dark truths so teach,
As sense might judge what fancy could not reach . . .

Since to the awe of thy imperious wit
Our troublesome language bends, made only fit
With her tough thick-ribb'd hoops to gird about
Thy giant fancy, which had proved too stout
For their soft melting phrases.

This praise of a great metaphysical poet is itself a fine piece of metaphysical poetry. Not often can a poet so justly estimate and define the type of poetry which he himself is writing. Carew notices the omnipresence of 'sense' in metaphysical poetry—in-

tellect clarified by judicious yet striking metaphor, or as he has it, 'rich and pregnant fancy'. 'Masculine expression' is important: not the 'soft melting phrases' but a tough, logical diction which requires of the language more than it can give in the expression of 'dark truths' too deep, perhaps, for any expression.

All these things are the ear-marks of metaphysical poetry. A distinctive imagery and diction and a unique intellect are the signs by which it may be detected. Always the imagery is crystal-clear, serving as a window through which the thought may be observed, not as an ornament which detracts from the central design. Izaak Walton, that charming biographer of Donne, knew this when he said,

His fancy was inimitably high, equalled only
By his great wit, both being made useful by
A commanding judgment.

These words, interpreted, enforce a central point of our definition—the inseparable twinship of imagery, or fancy, and judgment, or intellect, which was the bone of this body of poetry.

Sonority is not the goal of metaphysical poetry; neither is a romantic feeling for nature nor the expression of philosophic creeds. The metaphysical poet is interested first in his own life and experiences, next in the life and actions of those who are close to him. The careful analysis of these things leads, quite without premeditation, to a human understanding of far greater universality than the theological apologist or the romantic effusionist can attain. The deeply probing finger of the metaphysical poet seems to uncover both personal and universal truths. In climbing the hill to his own satisfaction, he discovers that the world lies spread before his feet.

Just so long as men wonder about themselves and the world and so long as they must go to intellects greater than their own for analysis and vision, and for the conviction that other men have sought to solve the same problems, metaphysical poetry will continue to be of importance. It may be that another poet like John Donne will arise (as Emily Dickinson did) to express these things as only the metaphysical medium can express them. For the contradictions and complexities of existence have nowhere else been as well expressed. The mind that throws out some truths

and retains others, to the better establishment of a unified view, has its value. But one enjoys the statement of wholeness, too, for the satisfaction it brings of being true because of its diversity. The ironical concurrence of life in all its opposites—body and soul, intellect and passion, grandeur and simplicity—were fascination to the minds of the metaphysical poets. This purgative of wholeness is good for the intellect, which tends otherwise to the acceptance of half-truths and unfinished pictures.

Definitions always attempt the impossible. For it is impossible in a few words—or in many volumes—accurately to convey anything, when knowledge of itself is the only way to complete understanding. The examples I have been able to give here are obviously inadequate, but the reader can easily find more for himself. The definition will become clear, I think, when you turn to the poetry itself.

One scarcely expects to find a perfect example of any definition, particularly of a literary one. By rare chance we have that example here. Andrew Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress* happily discovers all the things I have enumerated in definition of metaphysical poetry. It is strange that Donne, the father and great exemplar of the metaphysical strain, did not provide it. That irony he would probably have appreciated. Turn to the poem, then, and discover the metaphysical combination of thought and image, the sensuality, the universal outlook, the distinctively common diction ('my vegetable love'), the metaphysical shudder. All the things which have made metaphysical poetry great are here combined in a perfect poem. There are lines that one never forgets: they are great, and they are truly metaphysical. Who could fail to admire the poetical tradition which produced these lines, so close to the peak of all poetry?

But at my back I always hear
Times winged chariot hurrying near,
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.