

Metaphysical Poets

The term metaphysics comes from Aristotle – it means a science which investigates being as being ie reality rather than poetic convention, exploring life through the senses. We refer to Donne, Herbert, Marvell etc as Metaphysical poets because they share common characteristics such as wit, inventiveness and elaborate style and a common approach - they investigate the world through rationality rather than mysticism. However, labelling writers is always problematic because it can give the impression that those we call Metaphysical were part of a School of poetry, self-consciously working to Metaphysical guidelines. As with the Romantics in the 19thc, these poets were individuals, who were grouped together under one label by other writers to reflect their common concerns. Donne was influential on the work of Herbert, Marvell etc but he was NOT the head of an organized group or school of poets – they were very much individual writers.

Dryden was the first to use the term when he criticised Donne in 1693: 'He affects the Metaphysics...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.' It is true that Donne appeals to the intellect not the heart of the reader. Johnson commented in *The Lives of the Poets* (with reference to Cowley), that 'about the beginning of the seventeenth century appeared a race of writers that may be termed the metaphysical poets', highlighting the self-conscious intellectualism of their work: 'the metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to show learning was their whole endeavor'.

Dryden disapproved of Donne's writing style, especially his use of conceits (witty comparisons) and his extravagant abstractions. A 'metaphysical conceit' is an extended metaphor; making ingenious comparisons between two apparently incongruous things or concepts. Samuel Johnson described the far-fetched nature of their poetic comparisons as 'a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike' eg. Donne's extended comparison of love with astrology or Marvell's comparison of the soul with a drop of dew. They are comparing things which are not at all alike but within the world of the poem they make sense. Conceits have a crucial role in furthering the argument or persuading the reader.

Helen Gardner explains: 'Argument and persuasion, and the use of the conceit as their instrument, are the elements or body of a metaphysical poem. Its quintessence or soul is the vivid imagining of a moment of experience or of a situation out of which the need to argue, or persuade, or define arises. Metaphysical poetry 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.'

Metaphysical poetry is self-consciously difficult, demanding intellectual effort on the part of the reader. It unashamedly alienates the intellectually lazy, assuming a level of understanding on the part of its readership which it flatters as an elite able to understand its wit. Jasper Mayne summed this up in his elegy on Donne: 'Wee are thought wits, when 'tis understood'.

Donne and Poetic Tradition

Dante had represented love as akin to religion – love for the idealised angelic woman led to awakening of love for God. Petrarch was unable to separate love from the senses – he saw this earthly element as negative, dragging us down. He therefore regretted passion as vain and frivolous. By the end of the 16thc this idealistic courtly love poetry had become full of literary artifice, laden with clichés. Donne's poetry explores the human struggle for wholeness and harmony between head and

heart, seemingly always out of reach but attainable briefly in rare moments of ecstasy or religious insight.

Donne's ideas on man and his place within the scheme of things were fundamentally Medieval - the rational part of man was the most highly valued because reason was believed to lead to truth. Medieval tradition was still powerful – it saw sexuality as incompatible with deep spiritual understanding – hence priests were celibate, to allow them to focus on religion and not be distracted by the things of this world. Love was deemed to be a potentially refining emotion, particularly for men (who could be rescued from an immoral lifestyle by the love of a good woman!!) but also a passion, which should therefore be repented of.

Donne reflects the tension at the heart of Catholic culture, seeking transcendental religious experience [ie on a plane above everyday experience] and a deeper apprehension of divine truth and yet deeply conscious that he was thwarted from such asceticism by bodily desires. Asceticism – the pursuit of holiness through the denial of bodily desires.

To sum up Donne's secular poetry: often amatory (about love), energetic, passionate and daring; the first poet to use 'sex' in its present sense. It's humorous, racy and often facetious; the poet is very self-assured, often playing the role of a cynical 'man of the world'. Yet it's a forthright and honest way of dealing with human relationships - more 'real' than 16th century courtly love poetry which, though beautiful, was designed more to show the poetic abilities of the writer (and often to flatter the recipient or even the recipient's husband) than to explore the realities of human emotion and relationships.

Donne's approach to love and sex is very down-to-earth, funny, touching, sometimes shocking but always original. His style tends to be highly rhetorical, full of intellectual games, with paradoxes and puns and elaborate conceits. His was an intense poetry, dealing with various states of the human mind. The poems are very varied: satires, cynical poems on inconstancy, idealistic poems about neoplatonic relationships (love between souls, without sensual desire) eg the ideal of the union of lovers' souls.

Donne's religious poetry is as complex and intense as his secular writing but reflects the seriousness and religious passion of the older Donne, using his poetry to explore spiritual tension and to work through spiritual problems. His wife had died and he was intensely aware of his own mortality and sinfulness; his primary concern was to have a right relationship with God. Donne's religious poetry is often difficult because it is intellectually unresolved. It mirrors the poet's own spiritual concerns, doubts, problems, fears and struggles and tends to be sincere and honest but, perhaps inevitably, less confident than the secular work.

NB The secular and religious poetry are not entirely unrelated – there are continuities in style and subject matter / themes. Donne's main concerns: the passing of time, death, love and sex and religion, the relation between the spirit and the senses, concerns which were shared by other poets we would call 'Metaphysical'. Think of the 'carpe diem' theme of many of their poems, literally meaning 'seize the day'. Famous egs include Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress', Herrick's 'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may'.

Metaphysical poetry is very varied but it is characteristically self-consciously clever.

Rochester

Rochester gives us a twist on the traditional Horatian theme of young girls' attraction for older men, suggesting that they may not be incompatible

A Song of a Young Lady to Her Ancient Lover

Ancient Person, for whom I
All the flattering youth defy,
Long be it e'er thou grow old,
Aching, shaking, crazy cold;
But still continue as thou art,
Ancient Person of my heart.

On thy withered lips and dry,
Which like barren furrows lie,
Brooding kisses I will pour,
Shall thy youthful heart restore,
Such kind show'rs in autumn fall,
And a second spring recall;
Nor from thee will ever part,
Ancient Person of my heart.

Thy nobler parts, which but to name
In our sex would be counted shame,
By ages frozen grasp possest,
From their ice shall be released,
And, soothed by my reviving hand,
In former warmth and vigour stand.
All a lover's wish can reach,
For thy joy my love shall teach;
And for thy pleasure shall improve
All that art can add to love.
Yet still I love thee without art,
Ancient Person of my heart.

Give Me Leave to Rail at You
Give me leave to rail at you, -
I ask nothing but my due:
To call you false, and then to say
You shall not keep my heart a day.
But alas! against my will
I must be your captive still.
Ah! be kinder, then, for I
Cannot change, and would not die.

Kindness has resistless charms;

All besides but weakly move;
Fiercest anger it disarms,
And clips the wings of flying love.
Beauty does the heart invade,
Kindness only can persuade;
It gilds the lover's servile chain,
And makes the slave grow pleased again.

A Satyre on Charles II – 1 of Rochester's more infamous poems - he had to flee the court for several months after handing this to the King by mistake

In th' isle of Britain, long since famous grown
For breeding the best cunts in Christendom,
There reigns, and oh! long may he reign and thrive,
The easiest King and best bred man alive.
Him no ambition moves to get reknown
Like the French fool, that wanders up and down
Starving his people, hazarding his crown.
Peace is his aim, his gentleness is such,
And love he loves, for he loves fucking much.
Nor are his high desires above his strength:
His scepter and his prick are of a length;
And she may sway the one who plays with th' other,
And make him little wiser than his brother.
Poor Prince! thy prick, like thy buffoons at court,
Will govern thee because it makes thee sport.
'Tis sure the sauciest prick that e'er did swive,
The proudest, peremptoriest prick alive...
Restless he rolls about from whore to whore,
A merry monarch, scandalous and poor...
All monarchs I hate, and the thrones they sit on,
From the hector of France to the cully of Britain.

Donne on poetry

The Triple Foole

1st stanza begins strikingly. Poets usually glorify their verse but here he refers to it as 'whining' – weak, ineffectual, rather annoying. In lines 4-5 he tells us there's no wise man who wouldn't swap places with him IF she would accept his advances. In the first 3 lines he condemns himself; here he justifies himself.

Lines 6- 7 image of the sea – it was believed that sea water was filtered by passing through the earth. Just as land filters away salt and leaves water pure, the poet hopes poetry will filter away his pain.

Donne takes the convention of unrequited love but rather than adopting the conventional view of poetry as a comfort, he refers to it as 'rimes vexation' – we have, as so often in Donne, a rejection of idealised conventions. There's no idealism here – the process of writing sounds painful, suggests discipline and struggle and the catharsis of grief: line 10 asserts that when grief is articulated in poetry it must lessen but this is no easy process – line 11 uses the image of taming a wild animal; 'tames' and 'fettters' are strong words, emphasising the struggle.

2nd stanza begins 'But' – abrupt change of tone. Lines 2 and 3 suggest that someone will set the poem to music and sing it, making capital out of another's distress. Hence the rather disdainful reference to 'some man' as opposed to a musician.

Lines 15 – 16 articulate an essential problem for the poet – the song will give pleasure to the hearers but will make the poet unhappy again. The image of taming and controlling grief continues in words like 'restraine' and 'frees'. The singer doesn't help the poet or empathise – he simply selfishly lets the grief loose. The poet argues that both love and grief deserve tribute. They both have a kind of victory over the man but must be reconquered.

The poet goes on to consider the problem that if the verse gives pleasure, both love and grief are strengthened. Line 20 reads as though they are people and the verse a form of praise, publicising their conquest. Line 21 returns to the opening line thematically – this publicising and thus heightening of his emotion makes him a fool – hence the seeming paradox of line 22 – wisdom and foolishness don't normally go together. The sentence structure emphasises the main point: the little wisdom he attained in his poetry has made him a fool.

The Funerall

Different tone – elegiac and sad – real reflection on death and time. In 'The Flea' the speaker claims not to be bothered by time; here he realises the inevitability of death. His 'outward Soule' ie his soul which unified his being is no longer after death. The wreath of hair which she wove for him becomes an emblem of her love which holds him together – refers to the Elizabethan conceit that lovers' souls are chained together. Underpinning this is the scientific idea that the sinews of the body spread from the brain. This leads him to think of different kinds of thread eg 1.9 and threads of hair which are like it but external. Suggests love will prevent him from decomposing! Her hair is superior in that it grew UP rather than falling as in 1.9 – she's superior to him (her brain is) and so her threads will unify him better than his own.

He argues that she intended to demonstrate his slavery to her – the bracelet is described as a manacle – her hair has been a 'wreath', a 'crown' and now a manacle. Moves from something insubstantial, 'hair' to something more substantial, threads in the brain, to a solid metal manacle. Wreath has connotations of death but also triumph – hence ref to 'crowns'. The speaker wants to be buried with the bracelet because he sees himself as a martyr, dying due to unrequited love: 'since you would have none of mee, I bury some of you'. Donne's fascination with drama is apparent in this poem – he was fascinated by his own image acting out the roles of life.

Una Nelly notes that Donne was the first major English poet to treat love as a wholly natural passion in which body and soul have a part, in which the union of hearts doesn't mean identification of personality, desires, tastes and outlook but the acceptance of divergent attitudes and moods, prejudices and fears, that 'infinite variety' which is the glory of our human nature.

Donne's poetry is characterised by ambivalence and struggle between the spiritual and the carnal. In 'Loves Progress' we have a justification of natural love but in 'The Extasie' he champions the role of the spirit in love. In 'Loves Alchymie' he poses the 2 extremes – lust versus the notion of soul mates – each defeats the other in the confrontation and no compromise let alone resolution is offered; we sense frustration in the speaker engaged in such an impossible rhetorical exercise: 'tis imposture all (l.6). The final couplet of stanza 1 simply asserts the impossibility of happiness in either extreme. [see level 1 lecture for more detailed discussion of this]

Most of the later poems in *Songs and Sonnets* are flights from the divided soul. Donne creates an imaginative world where the ambiguities and paradoxes which caused him so much angst are resolved by the unitive force of love. Donne's poetry is rooted in the difficulties of lived experience. The love poems are Donne's secular investigation of the problems of alienation, ambivalence and loneliness; love is the secular and temporal solution; the ultimate solution lies in the spiritual realm.

Donne's poetry is rooted in the intellectual debates and practices of his time but he reworks them to suit his individual concerns. Eg 'Negative Love'

Here Donne adapts the dialectic of negation, frequently used in scholastic rhetoric, to analyse his own response to love. He insists he's not attracted by the physical, the 'eye, cheeke, lip' of l.2, nor by 'vertue or the minde' of l.4 yet cannot determine what fuels the fire of his love (typically we have a conventional image used in an unconventional way in this poem), conceding:

If that be simply perfectest

Which can by no way be exprest

But Negatives, my love is so'

He concludes, 'Though I speed not, I cannot misse.' Ie though I don't succeed I can't fail – that's his only comfort.

For Donne there are no answers to infinite questions – they exist beyond the limits of the human mind. We need to remember Aristotle's definition of metaphysics as 'a science which investigates being as being'. For Donne God is the ultimate reality, reflected in the divine order of creation. The secular poetry explores metaphysical problems but can offer no resolution. Donne's religious poems consider the nature of man and life but from a different angle and, crucially, he can offer some resolution.

Gardner notes that there are two kinds of religious poetry – the deliberately anonymous, designed for public use eg prayers, hymns, where there is no individual poetic persona – and poems in which we witness the poetic persona acting out a religious drama. This is what we get in Donne – he gives us an exaggerated imaginative vision of his own spiritual experience as a dramatic scenario. We're not supposed to identify with the poet – much of the language he uses is intense, even extreme – only a special kind of man can experience religious states so intensely.

We witness in Donne's poetry the tension between the desire to make his own experience an emblem of religious experience for the benefit of others and absorption in the self which, whilst spiritualised, contradicts the religious aspirations articulated in the poems ie the desire to share religious experience, to teach and inculcate spiritual awareness.

In 'Hymn to God My God in my Sickness' Donne fuses images from contemporary science (cartography, for eg) with Medieval religious belief ie that the crucifixion tree and the tree of life were rooted in the same spot. He refers to his physicians as 'Cosmographers, and I their Mapp'(l.7) as he lies

sick. The map imagery is extended to the spiritual realm. He tells the reader, 'I joy, that in these straits, I see my West'(l.11) ie death (figured in the setting of the sun); note the pun on straits of water and straits of human suffering.

He explains:

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

This is a clear example of Donne's metaphysical reasoning, providing a point of contact with the secular poems. The argument is simple, if we engage imaginatively with the idea of the poet as a map: just as east and west become one in a map, so life and death meet mystically in the resurrection.

This originality of thought is nonetheless rooted in Medieval thinking, 'We thinke that Paradise and Calvarie, / Christs Crosse, and Adams tree, stood in one place' but transformed by the passion of his own spiritual conviction: 'As the first Adams sweat surrounds my face, / May the last Adams blood my soule embrace.' It just as his physical descent from Adam is apparent in his sickness and impending death, he trusts that Christ's blood will save him [Christ is sometimes referred to as the second Adam because Adam's fall led to humanity's destruction but Christ brings salvation]

This poem isn't an articulation of common spiritual experience but it is designed to teach us: 'Be this my Text, my Sermon to mine owne'(l.29).

The focus of the religious poetry may be different to that of the secular poetry but we see the same intellectual interests and influences – science, the law, death, contraries, the desire to explore imaginatively the extremes of human experience, the search for resolution. In 'The Litanie' he articulates his frustration with his own nature: 'When wee are mov'd to seem religious / Only to vent wit, Lord deliver us'(l.188-9). We see the tension between the fascination with the intellectual intricacies of art and metaphysical thought and the limitations of the fickle self. Donne sought resolution in losing himself in God, who embodies and transcends all that cannot be explained, in Donne's words 'Eternall God, for whom who ever dare / Seeke new expressions, doe the Circle square' ie if we attempt to reduce a circle to a square we reduce the infinite to the finite. [Opening lines of 'Upon the translation of the Psalmes by Sir Philip Sydney]

Donne was not a mystic – he was unable to transcend the self, too fascinated by psychological contraries and mortality. Helen Gardner notes that 'The strength of the religious poetry of the metaphysical poets is that they bring to their praise and prayer and meditation so much experience that is not in itself religious.'

Nocturnall Upon St Lucie's Day

An elegy for his wife, Ann – without her he becomes the angry man of 'Loves Alchymie'. Ann becomes the fantasy woman of the later love poems, the weeper of the valedictions, the private kingdom of 'The Good Morrow'. Her death has brought about what he contemplated in 'Aire and Angels' – complete extinction l.28-9. Donne names her as the genius of his love poetry but she also provides a vital link between the love poems and the religious ones.

In the 'Nocturnall' Donne identifies his personal dejection with the anniversary of Lucy's martyrdom but he moves from lament to vision, with Ann becoming a spirit of rebirth after annihilation, a promise of light.

The poem teaches that Lucy's rejection of the world should serve as a pattern for the reader. It contrasts the heat of the world with the coolness of night, the time of vigil for St Lucy, virgin martyr and patron saint of sight. Carnal lovers will experience the flame of passion 1.38-41. His love for Ann, symbolised in the sun, can't renew: Ann is now free from such heats, 'enjoyes her long nights festivall'. Donne longs to be with her and looks to a resurrection, a reuniting, 'let mee prepare towards her' 1.43. [This line refers to both Lucy and Ann.]

Ann died in August but Donne chooses Dec 13th (St Lucy's day) as an image of rebirth. In this poem he keeps a promise made to Ann at the end of the first Anniversarie, '[I] will yearely celebrate they second birth, / That is, they death' (1.449-51). Lucy represents the hope of spiritual rebirth, eternal life.

The Divine Sonnets provide a sustained interrogation of the poet's spiritual state.

The first 6 sonnets are eschatological ie concerned with death, judgement, heaven and hell. They are at once intensely personal and yet universal, addressing mankind's apocalyptic end. Donne was profoundly conscious of the re-enactment of the fall in each man's daily life.

No 6 and 14 – here we see the archetypal expression of Donne's desperate search to lose himself in God. He conveys a sense of genuine passion but it's held in check by the firm stanza form, imposing some logic on the emotional struggle. We see the same struggle in sonnet 19, where the poet seeks to escape the contradictions of the self in the unity of God, in whom contraries meet.

The sonnets operate as a working through of Donne's spiritual meditations but 7 is the usual number for spiritual meditations. Donne represents eternity and redemption in the number 7; he's unable to be confident in his redemption

NB Donne, although Dean of St Paul's and therefore part of the institution of the Church of England, struggled with theological issues such as the immaculate conception (which he couldn't accept) and the notion of Mary as mediatrix: he venerated Mary but could not believe that she mediated between God and man. Brought up in the Catholic faith, Donne was a man of passionate faith but who struggled with the tenets of both Catholic and Protestant teachings. Donne's work is deeply influenced by Catholic teaching, its saints, its rituals and yet permeated by Protestant dependence on Christ offering undeserved grace and full pardon.

Sonnet 10 is different in tone, a triumphant version of Paul's 'O Death, where is thy sting?' (1 Cor. 15:55), reversing the fears of the early sonnets. 'Death be not proud' anticipates the joy of the 2nd Anniversarie where escape from human time is attained.

No 14 uses the language of erotic love to describe man's relationship to God. It feminises Donne's role, which is essentially passive and compliant. The poem laments that he hasn't achieved total submission, hasn't received the Pentecostal fire. He distrusts his own reason, 'Reason your viceroy in mee, mee should defend, / But is captiv'd and proves weake or untrue' (1.7-8).

Campbell in his introduction to the *Macmillan Renaissance Anthology* notes:

'In Donne's sonnet 'Batter my heart', for example, the poet assumes the voice of a Petrarchan lady, God is described as a male Petrarchan lover, and Satan is portrayed as the despised other man in an adulterous Petrarchan triangle. The poem ends with a plea on the part of the lady to be ravished by God (to be 'ravished' in early modern language also meant to be transported emotionally, ie to transcend / get beyond and above ordinary emotional states).

Campbell argues: 'in the early seventeenth century Christians were so soaked in the traditions of neo-platonism that they assumed that the love of man and woman was an earthly reflection of the love of God and his believers for each other. [Biblical tradition too – see *Song of Solomon*, idea of church as bride of Christ in *New Testament*] This analogy even extended (in Renaissance poetry and neo-platonism) to the sexual aspect of human love, so that, for example, the ecstasy of joining God in the moment of death is assumed to be analogous to human sexual ecstasy; this analogy often manifests itself in the infamous pun on 'die', which in some contexts refers to both physical death and sexual consummation...[Renaissance people] inhabited a world which was deemed in all respects to reflect the divine order of things'(xxiv-xxv).

Sonnet 19 begins with characteristic Donnean vigour, 'Oh, to vex me, contraries meet in one'. Donne was attracted by the way in which contraries are resolved in Christian thought eg life and death intersect in the figure of Christ, who lived, dies and rose from the dead. This conquering of death is the central hope of Christian tradition. In this poem Donne tries to escape the contradictions of the self in God. He examines his own motives sceptically, noting his inconsistency, 'I durst not view heaven yesterday; and to day / In prayers, and flattering speeches I court God'; 'my devout fitts come and go away'.

Una Nelly notes that Donne's early poems were forged in the passionate experience and intellectual turmoil of the living moment, whereas the divine poems are mainly based on facts from which his faith had never really wavered. There is considerable continuity with the secular poetry in that we find Donne trying to reconcile the diversities of his being: the bodily senses seeking gratification, his heart seeking love and his mind and soul seeking union with something which transcends sensory experience yet includes it in a deeper vision. He sought an ultimate unifying force to explain and give significance to the diverse parts of his being.

Donne's metaphysics begin, in Aristotelian fashion, with sense experience – in both the secular and divine poetry. The closest he got this in the material world was through the love of his wife, who he felt gave him meaning.