

The Metaphysical poets

In his essay on Metaphysical poets, Eliot opens some significant facets of English Classical poetry. He outright rejects Dr. Johnson's dictum that in the metaphysical poems, "most heterogeneous ideas are yoked together by violence." On the otherhand, he takes this as a cue for the special quality of a class of poetry that achieves something highly complex by fusing together heterogeneous materials: "But a degree of heterogeneity of material compelled into unity by the operation of the poet's mind is omnipresent in poetry." Such a statement points to a 'dramatic character' of poetry and Cleanth Brooks holds that the very basis of this poetry is 'irony'. The diction or the image-structure of a poem is like the scaffolding of building which is highly highly complex and artistically perfect. In the words of Brooks, "It acknowledges the pressure of the total context upon the individual word or image, the slight warping of signification continually made by the poet as he sheds the word to its precise meaning to its context."

This process is a highly intellectual

activity and it involves the poet into various technical acrobatics. Eliot traces this element in poetry to the poetry of late Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. The metaphysical, he says, were in extension of this tradition. He, especially, refers to their power of feeling their thought. "In Chapman, specially, there is a direct sensuous apprehension of thought or recreation of thought into the feeling," "Which is exactly what we find in Donne." Donne achieved

his object by strong combination of strange conceits, use of colloquial idioms and by subjecting his wide learning and knowledge to a discipline of thought and feeling. Herbert, on the other hand, was more simple, may rather inimitably simple. But his poems reveal a structural organisation of the sentences which relates to a highly complex experience. It is not an ordinary simplicity says Eliot. "The structure of the sentences, on the other hand, is sometimes far from simple but this is not a vice; it is a fidelity to thought and feeling." This kind of poetry sings with the music of its own, which is far different from the music generated in the poetry of Collins or Gray.

The later evokes a kind of music which is only sonorous whereas the music of Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' or Herbert's 'Virtue' is an expression of a deep-sunk feeling and thought.

Eliot brilliantly calls up some very significant features of this kind of poetry. The Metaphysicals could elaborate a figure of speech to its farthest limit. Donne's poems often set in motion a rapid association of thought, unexpected and sudden contrast in images and words and telescoping the images and implied associations which became a treasure-trove for modern practitioners of poetry. This could be possible because of his synthesis of thought and feeling in pre-Dryden culture in England. Dryden brought about a refinement and polish in language, no doubt, but this process largely took away from the English language its varied and deep potency and strength. Eliot regards this as a blot in the linguistic culture of England from which she never recovered. It was a 'dissociation of sensibility' in which thinking and feeling became divorced. He says, 'but while the language became more refined, the feeling became more crude.' He alleges Milton and Dryden were the precursors of such a movement in language. Before them, language

was a medium by ^{means of} which the entire personality, complex of the reader, involved and brought into action. It was based upon a thorough-going ~~emotional~~ ^{emotional} - lity and feeling. With Milton and Dryden, a greater stress was placed upon sentiment. The poets sought to buttress the sentiment and feeling by an artificial means of language. Eliot calls this 'sentimental age' of language. He says, "The sentimental age began early in the 18th century and continued. The poets revolted against the ~~satiric~~ ^{satiric} the descriptive, they thought and felt by fits, unbalanced; they reflected." Obviously, the attack is on the use of the thinking faculty as something separate and divorced from the stuff of life's experience and feelings. As against this, his remarks on Donne are definitive: "Tennyson and Browning are poets and they think; but they don't feel their thought as immediately as the odour of the rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility." This is a virtue generally of the later Elizabethan and Jacobean, especially of Chapman, Ben Jonson, and, no doubt, Shakespeare. Eliot regrets this dichotomy from which the English language suffered a great loss to its linguistic culture.

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