METAPHYSICAL WIT

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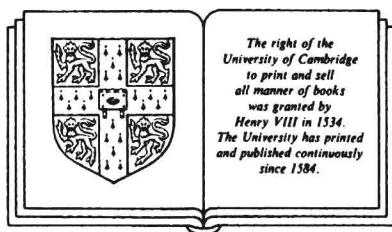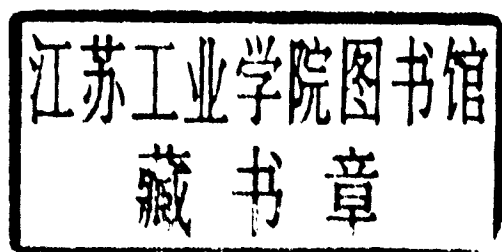
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PREFACE

This essay concludes the study of a metaphysical sentience in Renaissance poetry which I carried forward in two earlier books, *Literary Love*, 1983, and *The Metaphysics of Love*, 1985. Wit focuses an interest in the rendering of our ambiguous state when sensation and idea interfuse in the language itself, opening an absolute consequence in the momentary encounter and registering the shock of metaphysical predicaments posed in the play of the senses.

Versions of poetic wit evolved in Europe from the fifteenth century on. To ask how these versions bear upon the wit of the English metaphysical poets is to seek the qualities which distinguish that mode of wit. The enquiry is of more than literary concern. Wit followed out divergent expectations of the created order, as of poetry. When metaphysical wit simply ceased to have point in the later seventeenth century, an entire way of thinking had changed.

A few expositors of English metaphysical poetry have allowed that the poems owe their general character to a distinctive metaphysical apprehension. The argument that follows engages with the discussions which serve to further it, notably those by James Smith, S. L. Bethell, W. J. Ong and Robert Ellrodt. In contesting an issue with these savants I implicitly acknowledge a debt and a shared – if unfashionable – concern.

I have modernised the spelling of poems in English but otherwise followed the form of my source-texts. Translations of poems in French, Italian and Spanish aim to bring out the wit rather than render the elegance of the original.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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DRASTIC DEVICES

On Tuesday 5 November 1616 Bishop Launcelot Andrewes preached his annual Gunpowder Treason sermon before the King at Whitehall, as he had done since the first anniversary of the discovery of the plot. Both the Bishop and King James himself, as well as many present, were among the intended victims of the plot and would not have been there at all in 1616 had it succeeded. On this occasion Andrewes took what seems on the face of it a capriciously remote text from Isaiah 37: 'the children are come to the birth, and there is not strength to bring it forth'. His sermon is entirely built upon the conceit that the Gunpowder Plot was a failed birth, which he bears out wittily by the elaboration of correspondences between the two predicaments in the teeth of the apparent unlikenesses, and unlikeliness. This process is carried through quite openly and even (so to say) on the hoof, with a sense of real revelation as more and more points of likeness disclose themselves to his mind:

The more I think of it, the more points of correspondence do offer themselves to me, of a birth and coming to birth, and that in every degree: 1. The vessels first give forth themselves, as so many embryos; 2. the vault as the womb, wherein they lay so long; 3. they that conceived this device were the mothers, clear; 4. the fathers were the fathers, as they delight to be called, though oft little more than boys – but here right fathers, in that they persuaded it might be, why not? – might be lawful, nay meritorious then: so it was they that did animate, give a soul, as it were, to the treason; 5. the conception was, when the powder as the seed was conveyed in; 6. the articulation, the couching of them in order just as they should stand; 7. the covering of them with wood and faggots, as the drawing a skin over them; 8. the *Venerunt ad partum*, when all was now ready, train and all; 9. the midwife, he that was found with the match about him for the purpose; 10. and *partus*, the birth should have been upon the giving fire. If the fire had come to the powder, the children had come to the birth, *inclusivè*, had been born. But *Non erant vires*, which I turn, there was no fire given; and so, *partus* they wanted, as God would.[1]

A clinching justification of his witty use of the text is an intricate play on the terms of the Vulgate version, which he sustains throughout the sermon, making the most of any incidental correspondences of letters, sounds, ideas:

This *pariendi* was indeed *pereundi*, the bringing forth a quantity of powder, the perishing of a whole parliament. They were not, but put case they had come forth, (it is well we are in case to put this case) certainly they had been Benonis, 'Sons of sorrow', to this whole land, Ichabods right; our glory had been gone clean. For what a face of a commonwealth had here been left? *Exclusivè* they came *ad partum*; if *inclusivè* they had, their *inclusivè* had been our *exclusivè*. We had been shot off, and that out of this life and this world every one, *Venerunt*, if they had come *ad partum*; if they *ad partum*, we *ad perniciem*. *Non erant vires*; if there had, these *vires* had been *virus* to us, and their *pariendi* our *pereundi*. If those children had not been lost, many fathers had been lost; many children had lost their fathers, and many wives their husbands. There had been a great birth of orphans and widows brought forth at once. What manner of birth should this have been, first in itself, then to us?

On the face of it all this ingenuity may seem to do little more than bear out the dismissive presumption of eighteenth-century commentators that the essential shallowness of Court life in the decades before the Civil War is shown in the way Court preachers played with words and conceits. Yet Andrewes was not a shallow man, and the occasion decidedly did not call for flippancy. We must ask ourselves why he is so concerned to make an abortive birth of the Gunpowder Plot, or at least, why he needs to labour the identity so.

Notorious parallels offer themselves in seventeenth-century poetry. Donne derives the decay of the entire cosmos from the recent death of a young girl; or he finds a present enactment of Christ's crucifixion in his journey to visit a friend on Good Friday; or he portrays his fevered body as a flat map over which the physician-cosmographers must pore as they struggle to chart a particularly hazardous progress. Herbert takes Christ's stretched sinews on the cross for the strings of a lute which must be tuned up to the right pitch to set the key for the entire consort. Vaughan finds the promise of a bodily resurrection in the physical make-up of a printed book. Marvell depicts the soul in the body as a prisoner hung up in chains of nerves and sinews, which hold it helpless to resist the torturing head and heart. No one who knows the writings of the time will take these conceits for passing whimsies. They witness an engrained habit of mind, and epitomise a mode of conceited wit which prevailed in seventeenth-century English poetry.

Conceited wit itself was no innovation. It had flourished in Italy, Spain and France from the late fifteenth century, and Renaissance rhetoricians took it for a requisite of some styles of writing well before the seventeenth-century theorists codified it as the pattern of creative thought. If we do not speak of metaphysical wit in reference to Italian or Spanish poetry it might be because our customary use of the term is conventional, without precise meaning. Certainly the use was arbitrarily established. When Dryden spoke of Donne as affecting the metaphysics he plainly took Donne's metaphysical manner for no more than a casual way of sporting with oversubtle ideas.[2] For Johnson metaphysical wit is an artificial trick of style, an arbitrary coupling of unlike images in the manner of Marino which shows off ingenuity.[3] Coleridge shrewdly characterises the diverse energy of Donne's wit, and often takes issue with Donne on metaphysical questions; yet he nowhere proposes that the wit itself may work a metaphysical end.[4]

Nineteenth-century historians of taste in Italy and Spain presumed the ascendancy of a European cult of *secentismo* or *concettismo* which comprehended all the forms of poetic wit.[5] They take the style of the metaphysical poets, where they know of it, for nothing more than a local nuance of the mode of conceited wit which prevailed in Europe from the late fifteenth century on. Nearer our own day Mario Praz lumped Donne with Marino, Gongora and Lyly, taking their writings for aspects of a single cultural phenomenon, so many phases 'of the taste which is commonly designated as *secentismo, marinismo, gongorismo, eufismo, Poesia "metafisica"'*. He finds that seventeenth-century literary theory simply bears out the thinking of the times, which brings the entire universe 'under a mode of wit'. Praz holds that Donne pillaged the witty Italians and Spaniards for his conceits, and the mediaeval schoolmen for his ideas. He allows that Donne's ingenuity is more than the arbitrary cleverness of a Marino, being the habit of a complex mind which generates its own intellectual excitements. Yet the metaphysical ideas simply sustain the ardour.[6] More crudely, D. L. Guss has argued that Donne was an out-and-out Petrarchan whose wit simply develops the conceited ingenuities of such Italian court poets as Serafino d'Aquila.[7]

Given the arbitrary emergence of the designation 'metaphysical' itself it is not surprising that commentators who disrelish metaphysics have been slow to allow it any real substance. J. C. Ransom, in 1941, characterised the metaphysical conceit as a 'functional or structural metaphor'. The metaphysical poets are distinguished not by some

special way of thinking and feeling but by the mode of metaphor they favour.[8] Rosamund Tuve shows no specific concern with wit in her laborious study of Elizabethan and metaphysical imagery; but she defines metaphysical images purely in terms of their logical basis and development, and their rhetorical function. She claims that Elizabethan and metaphysical conceits alike draw upon the categories of the Aristotelean logic, and vary only in the number and complexity of the logical parallels they discover. Metaphysical wit would thus be distinguished from earlier modes of wit just by its greater logical complexity.[9]

T. S. Eliot quietly adjusted his view of wit as he grew more interested in spiritual presence than in the workings of his own mind. In his celebrated 1921 *TLS* review Eliot points out two distinguishing features of metaphysical poetry, which he appears to connect with each other. One is the agile management of figures of speech, especially those figures which call for the rapid association of unlike objects. The other is the peculiarly close association, if not actual fusion, of feeling and thought, sensuous experience and intelligence, sensation and idea. Eliot posits that the seventeenth-century poets, in common with their predecessors back to Dante and the *dolce stil nuovo* poets, possessed an all-devouring mechanism of sensibility which subsequent poets have forgone.[10]

Some five years later, and rather less publicly, Eliot sought to differentiate Donne's poetry from Dante's. Donne is a metaphysical poet, Dante a philosophical poet. Donne, Poe and Mallarmé share a passion for metaphysical speculation but they do not necessarily subscribe to the ideas they entertain as Dante and Lucretius believe in their ideas; indeed Donne's ideas serve just to refine and develop his sensibility.[11]

By 1927 Eliot was pointing out a fundamental shift of attitudes to love which occurred between the time of Dante and the *dolce stil nuovo* poets and the time of Donne. The Italian *trecentisti* aspire to the pure contemplation of a transcendent beauty whereas Donne argues for union and possession, following out a formal dualism between the body and the soul which is wholly alien to the thirteenth century. Eliot thus reserved for a Clarke lecture which was published only obscurely in French his tacit recantation of the cultural theory of the dissociation of sensibility. Nonetheless he has tellingly come to surmise that the distinctive sensibility of the metaphysical poets, the peculiar fusion of thought and feeling in their wit, may have something to do with a particular understanding of the relationship of body and soul.[12] Eliot's developed pondering of the intersection of the timeless

with time must be sought in his own poetry and playwriting from *Ash Wednesday* on.

James Smith's essay in *Scrutiny* in 1933 attempts the first explicit justification of the term 'metaphysical' in the entire course of its use, and reflects Smith's preoccupation with some metaphysical issues in Aquinas. Smith argues that Donne is properly called a metaphysical poet because his verse is overwhelmingly concerned with metaphysical problems, such as derive from or resemble the problem of the Many and the One. Yet Donne is not a Dante or a Lucretius. Metaphysical propositions occur in Donne's verse in a peculiar way. What makes him a metaphysical poet is not just that he entertains such propositions but that he finds metaphysical problems lurking behind any action, and is continually excited or disturbed by this apprehension. He holds opposite possibilities in play, maintaining a balance between rival claims to reality.[13]

Father W. J. Ong suggestively links the English metaphysical poets with such mediaeval Latin hymnologists as Aquinas and Adam of St Victor, who found witty paradoxes and puns at the heart of Christian truth, not least the truth of Christ's double nature.[14] J. A. Mazzeo and S. L. Bethell also discover a true metaphysical disposition in metaphysical wit. They more or less concurrently followed out Croce's induction to a body of seventeenth-century discussions of wit. Mazzeo rehearses the ideas of some theorists who claim that wit is the means of discovering, or recovering, the hidden correspondences which link the entire creation in a providential interchange of love. This view makes a witty poem an embodiment of occult truth, which differs from a talisman or a magical hieroglyph only in that it does not seek to activate the power of love.[15]

Bethell believes that seventeenth-century wit is a revival of patristic wit, whose end is to reveal the exquisite order of the universe. He finds support in the contemporary theorists for the view that witty conceits are in essence logical sophistries – 'urbane cavillations' – which deliberately flout the decorum of the established categories of matter in the service of a higher truth. Bethell takes wit for a sacramental agent in that it works to offer us a double view of events in the world, as at once historical and timeless. The understanding implicit in his argument is that metaphysical wit is quite precisely so called because it discovers the presence of the spiritual order in the sensible experience.[16]

The most rigorous demonstration of a metaphysical intent in the verse is that attempted in Robert Ellrodt's magisterial study, *Les Poètes*

métaphysiques anglais. Like James Smith before him Ellrodt distinguishes metaphysical poetry from philosophical poetry and poetry which merely entertains metaphysical propositions. He thinks that true metaphysical poetry registers a particular kind of experience or perception. It follows out a sense of double natures simultaneously apprehended whose warrant is Christ's own nature, the union of man and God. We are body and soul together. Metaphysical wit seeks to hold in a tense equilibrium two orders of being which are irremediably distinct yet indissolubly bound together.

Donne and Herbert incarnate in the instant a concrete and living intuition of spiritual truth. They discover a spiritual presence which underlies all human experience and makes the eucharist itself a continual sacrifice. They are true metaphysical poets because their poetry uncompromisingly follows out the sense of a double nature. Ellrodt judges that Crashaw, Vaughan and Marvell fall short of that sense in various ways. He finds that other poets who have been taken to exhibit metaphysical traits of style, such as Herbert of Cherbury, Traherne, and Cowley, do not sustain such a doubleness at all.[17]

A range of expectation which takes us from a wanton figurative ingenuity to the apprehension of the timeless in time leaves scope for enquiry. Some large questions propose themselves. What accounts for the emergence of witty poetry in Renaissance Europe, and why did the conception of wit which shaped that poetry not outlast the seventeenth century? What distinguishes metaphysical wit from the other modes of wit which burgeoned in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? Any answer which can be given to these queries must come partly from the poetry itself. But it might also be sought in the thinking about literature which attended the poetry.

2

MIRROR OF CREATION

The re-emergence of classical discussions of discourse loosed a flood of critical theory in the sixteenth century, some of which directly fostered poetic wit. Two considerations dominate these sixteenth-century exchanges and need to be put in focus at the start. One of them is the conception of perceived truth which shaped contemporary notions of metaphor. The other is the drive towards literary emulation which followed out the conceit of a rebirth of ancient wisdom. These concerns were formulated in cognate modes of imitation.

Imitation of nature curiously advanced the imitation of classic authors. The idea of imitating nature had metaphysical consequence when art was taken to mirror the order of the creation, or further our attempts to apprehend it. To imitate an ancient masterpiece might be to come nearer that ideal order when we seek to make the earlier writer's truth our own in some novel application, as it were revitalising the pristine vision. Both modes of imitation put in question our present capacity to comprehend the creation and our own nature. Both raise the issue of the relation of form to matter.

Renaissance thinking about discourse is ordered by Aristotle's schematic account in the *Organon* of the nature of the material universe. The sections of that work known as the *Categories* and *Topica* offer an analytic categorising of matter by qualities. This analysis is grounded in an absolute discrimination between essential qualities and accidental or contingent qualities. The essential qualities of a thing define it, giving it its distinct nature and making it what it is and not something else. The accidental qualities of a thing are not essential to it but may or may not be present in any particular specimen of that class of thing. The essential qualities of a thing are its defining characteristics, those attributes which it shares with all other members of its kind. The accidental qualities of a thing are contingent upon circumstance. In Aristotelean terms they might fall within some subclass of

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the general categories of quantity, relation, place, time, position, state, activity, passive condition and the like.

From Aristotle's categorical analysis of matter follows his scheme of logic, based in the syllogism, the form of reasoning which shows what relationships are deducible within the scheme. Dialectics becomes the master-discipline of thinking, investigation and argument. In separating substantial or essential qualities from accidental or contingent qualities this analysis cleanly distinguishes form from matter, opening the way to the differentiation of soul and body, style and content. The characteristic effect of the Aristotelean physics is the distinction between shaping form and formless mass: 'out of this, which is bronze, we make this other, which is a sphere . . . we bring form into this particular matter, and the result is a bronze sphere'.[1]

Cicero directly exploited the Aristotelean scheme when he ordered the categories of matter in some forty topics or places and made them the necessary instruments of legal pleading and oratory. In manuals by Cicero or attributed to him, such as the *De Inventione*, *Topica*, *De Oratore*, *Ad Herennium*, orators were shown how to resort to particular categories or places for appropriate means of legal suasion. They might draw upon personal disposition, motive, intention, opportunity, probability, manner, antecedents, causes, effects, consequents and so on, measuring one person's actions against another's in degrees of likeness, or difference, or contrariety.

The sixteenth-century logician Thomas Wilson exemplifies the relentless systematising which followed out Cicero's scheme. Wilson orders the material of reasoning under five broad heads called predicables. These predicables are genus, species, differentia, proprium and accidents. Then he works steadily through each predicable, proliferating such subclasses as definition, whole, parts, power, will, passions, cause, effect, action, antecedents, consequents, similitudes, synonyms, contraries.[2] Ultimately he has an instrument for analysing and classifying every property and relationship of matter, at least to the extent that objects may be treated as the sum of their properties:

> Therefore ye must needs have these predicaments ready, that when so ever ye will define any word or give a natural name unto it, ye may come to this store house, and take stuff at will . . . As for an example, if ye will know what a man is, ye must have recourse to the place of *Substantia*.[3]

This is no arbitrary aid to legal pleading. Wilson takes the entire network of properties thus projected for a blueprint of the providential order of creation, to which the processes of logic provide the key. 'We

know hereby, that God hath ordained nothing in vain, and that every-thing is ordained for some one end'.[4]

Wilson demonstrates his scheme with the term 'magistrate', sys-tematically dredging the places to throw up every conceivable quality which might be attributed to a magistrate under such heads as definition, general rule, kind, words yoked, adjacents (necessary and causal), deeds, thing containing (by which he means the names of magistrates as David, Moses, Edward VI), efficient cause (God), second efficient cause (rebels, criminals and the like), ends, effect, authority, things incident, similitude (the shepherd to his sheep, master to his ship, head to the body), things compared (as servants are to masters so men are to magistrates), and many more:[5]

Ye may see by this one example that the searching of places, ministereth arguments plentifully.[6]

He goes on to debate a specific question concerning magistracy, culling syllogisms from the places both to advance his own cause and destroy an adversary's, and making confirming arguments from comparisons, similitudes, and other such places of relation.

The key to an apt literary use of the system of places was the classifying of kinds of oratory according to circumstance and occasion, which followed out the assumption that certain places better serve some purposes than other: 'Those kinds of speeches, then, which have different ends and purposes cannot have the same rules'.[7] Appropriate places were assigned to specific ends and manners of oratory, epideictic, deliberative, forensic or whatever. Minturno used the places to categorise styles and characters in a set system of decorum by which he gauged the rhetorical skill of poets, ancient and modern.[8] Major sixteenth-century poets measured other poets by their judgment in accommodating styles and places to the subject matter in hand, as Bembo did in Book 2 of the *Prose della Volgar Lingua*, and Tasso did in Books 4 to 6 of the *Discorsi del Poema Eroico*.

The supplying of the places and use of apt matter from them became a Humanist preoccupation which prompted Erasmus's *De Duplici Copia Verborum ac Rerum*, published at Paris in 1512. The places were treated as storehouses of oratorical provender and used as the basis of analytical thesauruses in which material was systematically ordered by its conventionally ascribed properties and qualities. Much of this categorising became prescriptive, and the prescribed characters of things acquired moral force in oratorical use. Natural lore, gathered from Pliny or Diodorus Siculus or whoever, became fossilised in stock

figures and emblems which were rhetorically more effective when they could command general acceptance. Theological and literary matter went into the databank with the rest. F. Panigarola, Bishop of Asti, showed how to make the places into a vast storehouse of over a thousand compartments – 'quasi una selva' – from which preachers might fetch apt conceits for their sermons.[9] F. Alunno made a much-reprinted thesaurus of 'voices' from Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio 'and other good authors' whose ten books covered the estates of the entire universe, God, heaven, the world, the elements, the soul, the body, man, quality, quantity, hell.[10] Giulio Camillo discovered in the scheme of places nothing less than a universal network of correspondences which discloses 'the secrets of God under obscure veils' and mirrors the eternal mind.[11] An exposition of the use of the places became standard in Renaissance manuals of discourse.

The scheme of categories could authoritatively be taken for a map of the creation. By the middle of the sixteenth century it had been scholasticised in a providential order of love,[12] Neoplatonised in transcendental hierarchies of being,[13] hermeticised in a system of occult correspondences.[14] The system had come to present a universe of settled qualities in which understanding alone is free, a hierarchy of values which rational beings are uniquely at liberty to range: 'If the intellect can trace the very totality of being, and as it were divide it into all its members by their degrees, diligently comparing them now to each other and now to the sum . . . how much more will it be able to run through the broad range of the whole!';[15] 'Admirable felicity of man! to whom it is given to have what he wishes, be what he will'.[16] The vast consonance of natural and supernatural being was taken for a picture of a universal order to which the degeneration of our reason denies us a ready key:

It is as difficult for man to pursue his bliss when he is set outside his place in nature as it is easy for him to follow it when he is restored to his natural place.[17]

The discovery of truth entails the restoration of our understanding of nature to what it was, if not the rectifying of Nature herself to what she was. Our search for truth requires the renewal of our wits to the point where they may seize upon the links in that infinitely subtle web of correspondences which constitutes the harmony of creation, discerning 'the likeness and conformities between things which seem diverse in themselves'.[18] Bringing together attributes which unexpectedly couple we reassemble the disjointed fragments, recover the order which God created. True knowledge comes by the

disclosing of hidden relationships between categories which seem distinct, and the disjoining of things which are only arbitrarily brought together. Such hidden patterns of relationship may disclose themselves in the work of men of uncorrupted wit, especially those men of antiquity who retained so much more of the pristine vision than we do. Ancient myths embody divine mysteries which they yield to us now only in allegory, as Boccaccio demonstrates when he finds all four levels of allegorical meaning in the episode of Perseus's slaying of the Gorgon.[19]

The projection of the categories into a universal order gave prominence to our human means of apprehending and controlling our state. Poetic invention itself amounts to a rediscovery of the hidden articulation of the creation, the recovery by human wit of the infinitely subtle interconnection of all the forms of being. Yet this exalted office of wit is inseparable from the humdrum task of exploiting the system of places for legal and oratorical ends. Discovery and persuasion share their procedures.

The three major arts of thinking and discourse, logic, rhetoric and poetry, were each allowed their distinctive ways of managing the Aristotelean scheme. In effect they disposed and exploited the relationships between created things themselves. They were commonly grouped together, yet formally differentiated by their means and ends. Commentators generally agreed that all three arts depend upon an apt resort to the categories or places; and invention in rhetoric and poetry was judged to be a matter of handling the places wittily so as to produce new and ingenious conjunctions and recombinations of things by their discovered possession of like attributes. This manner of invention is 'a skill which one cannot take from others, on the contrary it is an index of an acute wit in whoever does it well; for the apt transporting of things from distant places calls for nothing other than a shrewd perception of the likenesses of things'.[20] The end of logic is truth, so that its task will be proof and its means the syllogism. The end of rhetoric is persuasion, its particular work being argument and its means the enthymeme, which is simply an abbreviated and less rigorous form of syllogistic reasoning. The end assigned to poetry is the amendment of civil life by moral instruction, which poets seek to bring about by conveying truth delightfully in memorable fables and fictions: 'Poetry is nothing else than antique philosophy, which with its arguments and precepts covered by the veils of fables, verses, and harmony moved the minds of those early beings and drew them into institutional life by pleasing them';[21] 'Truly the poet will wish to do