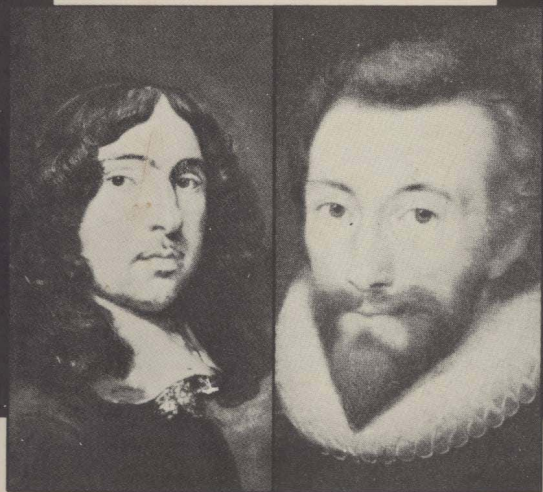


AN INTRODUCTION TO THE METAPHYSICAL POETS



PATRICIA BEER

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TO THE
METAPHYSICAL POETS

Patricia Beer



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Preface

This book is based on my teaching experience and is intended for students. Although by 'students' I naturally do not mean only those going through the academic mill – I hope anyone approaching the work of the Metaphysical Poets for the first time would find these comments helpful – I do have in mind particular students at a particular stage of their studies, that is, those in their first year of reading for an English Honours degree. The book might also be suitable for pupils in their last year at school, provided they were not just being crammed for A-levels with dictated notes.

From a biographical and bibliographical point of view this introduction does not pretend to offer anything new; to that extent it can be regarded as a compilation. What novelty there is consists, firstly, I should like to think, in the critical remarks; and, secondly, in the fact that every point made is directly founded on some difficulty or query that has arisen in an actual classroom situation.

P. B.

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CHAPTER I

The Term 'Metaphysical'

There is not much doubt as to whom we mean when we speak of the Metaphysical Poets. They were men who wrote in a certain manner during the first three-quarters of the seventeenth century, who were led, both chronologically and from the point of view of influence and importance, by John Donne, and whose way of writing came to an end with the poetry of Andrew Marvell and Abraham Cowley. There is considerable agreement about names. No anthology of their work, however select, would exclude the poetry of George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, Richard Crashaw, Thomas Carew and Henry King, and no thoroughly comprehensive collection would omit such minor figures as William Habington, Sidney Godolphin and John Hall. Only occasionally would the selector have to justify some inclusion or exclusion by special pleading.

What right the Metaphysical Poets have to be called metaphysical is another matter and needs comment. The selection of this word as a critical term in the first place was arbitrary. Dryden implied it in *A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire*. He says of Donne:

He 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 softnesses of love.

But he was not suggesting it as a definitive description of a style of writing or of a school of poets. It was Dr Johnson who did that in his *Life of Cowley*:

About the beginning of the seventeenth century, appeared a race of writers, that may be termed the metaphysical poets.

Undoubtedly a word was needed from the beginning to define these poets' clearly recognisable way of expressing themselves. 'Metaphysical' was not the only candidate, however. Professor Helen Gardner, in her introduction to *The Metaphysical Poets*, discusses the term 'strong-lined', which was used by such contemporaries of the poets in question as Robert Burton to indicate not only their kind of writing but also that of certain prose-writers who seemed to show the same characteristics. The word was soon to be as nastily meant as 'metaphysical' was to be by its earliest users but nevertheless it is a reasonably accurate and explanatory term. Sir Herbert Grierson in his introduction to *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century*, which presented these poets to the twentieth century with important consequences, puts forward 'fantastic' as a possibility, though only to reject it; this word, too, if properly interpreted, would have been rather suitable.

However unsatisfactory the word 'metaphysical' in this connection may be, it came to stay two centuries

ago and will hardly be replaced now. Many critics and most readers, after preliminary reflection and perhaps comment, accept the term without trying to justify it, and use it as one would use any adjective that is no longer particularly informative – like Protestant, Liberal or Georgian – but which serves its purpose in that everyone knows what it refers to.

T. S. Eliot in his essay *The Metaphysical Poets* (in effect a review of Grierson's anthology) after remarking that 'the term has long done duty as a term of abuse, or as the label of a quaint and pleasant taste', is concerned not to discuss its possible accuracy but to define the essential qualities of the poets who are so called. Mrs Joan Bennett, in *Five Metaphysical Poets*, sets herself the same task. She certainly touches on the aptness or otherwise of the name. She admits that Donne, for example, does in fact possess what might be called metaphysical knowledge and draws on it in his poetry but she concludes that 'he is expressing a state of mind by referring to a background of ideas rather than describing the ideas themselves for their own sake', or, as she puts it later (in the chapter specifically on Donne): '“The metaphysics” occur in his poetry as a vehicle but never as the thing conveyed.' Her real purpose, however, is to analyse metaphysical poetry as we know it and as we accept the term.

Some critics on the other hand have made serious attempts to show that the designation is a justifiable one and no mere tag. (Dr Johnson was not one of them; the aim of *his* argument was to prove, not that these poets were truly metaphysical or otherwise but that they were hardly poets at all.) Sir Herbert Grierson

begins the introduction to his anthology with a round definition of authentic metaphysical poetry:

a poetry which, like that of the *Divina Commedia*, the *De Natura Rerum*, perhaps Goethe's *Faust*, has been inspired by a philosophical conception of the universe and the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence.

He admits that 'it is no such great metaphysical poetry as that of Lucretius and Dante' that he will be dealing with and, later, speaking of *Paradise Lost*, he states: 'Metaphysical in this large way, Donne and his followers to Cowley are not.' But he would allow them some claim to metaphysical knowledge, the priests because of their calling:

Donne is familiar with the definitions and distinctions of Mediaeval Scholasticism. . . . The divine poets who follow Donne have each the inherited metaphysic, if one may so call it, of the Church to which he is attached, Catholic or Anglican,

the scholar because of his secular studies:

Cowley's bright and alert, if not profound mind, is attracted by the achievements of science and the systematic materialism of Hobbes,

and on the whole he feels the word metaphysical is apt:

It lays stress on the right things – the survival, one might say the reaccentuation, of the metaphysical strain . . . ; the more intellectual, less verbal, character of their wit compared with the conceits of the

Elizabethans; the finer psychology of which their conceits are often the expression; their learned imagery; the argumentative, subtle evolution of their lyrics; above all the peculiar blend of passion and thought, feeling and ratiocination which is their greatest achievement.

Quite the most interesting discussion of the term 'metaphysical' is that of Professor James Smith in his essay *On Metaphysical Poetry*. He insists that we cannot dispose of the matter simply by saying that Donne and his followers use metaphysical propositions, not seriously as though they were true or at least worth debate, but in order to advance different arguments and beliefs:

If Donne merely plays ducks and drakes with metaphysics, we may as well abandon our investigation; we shall find a perfectly satisfactory account of him in Johnson.

He claims that Donne's poems deal with subjects of a truly metaphysical nature, for example, 'the stability and self-sufficiency of love, contrasted with the mutability and dependence of human beings' and 'the shortcomings of this life, summarised by decay and death, contrasted with the divine to which it aspires'; and that the treatment of such subjects necessarily leads to the typical metaphysical style:

For metaphysics, while highly abstract, is by the very reason of its high degree of abstraction intimately concerned with the concrete.

He demolishes most ingeniously the obstacle that has

always prevented readers from thinking that the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets could be metaphysical in the way that Dante and Lucretius were, that is, the fact that they do not sound magisterial and confident, by maintaining that bewilderment and uncertainty in the face of life's problems are in fact part of the essential metaphysical approach. There *ought* to be 'a note of tension or strain'. So by this showing Donne and his school are not less metaphysical than Dante and Lucretius; they are more so.

But however intriguing we may find this argument and to whatever extent we agree with Professor Smith that 'though we may not be saying much when we say that a poem is metaphysical, it is as well to know exactly what the little is we are saying', it is obviously more important to recognise and respond to the unique qualities of the Metaphysical Poets than to argue about the fitness of their name.

Students coming to the work of these poets for the first time are sometimes surprised by the extent to which they themselves thought they were writing differently from the Elizabethans. To a twentieth-century reader the gulf may not seem as great as that between, for example, *The Lyrical Ballads* and eighteenth-century poetry or between *Prufrock* and Victorian poetry. But Thomas Carew writing in 1631 or 1632 *An Elegie upon the Death of the Deane of Pauls, Dr. John Donne* makes the case seem analogous to these poetic revolutions:

The Muses garden with Pedantique weedes
O'rspred, was purg'd by thee; The lazie seeds

Of servile imitation throwne away;
And fresh invention planted, Thou didst pay
The debts of our penurious bankrupt age;
Licentious thefts, that make poetique rage
A Mimique fury, when our soules must bee
Possest, or with Anacreons Exstasie,
Or Pindars, not their owne; The subtle cheat
Of slie Exchanges, and the jugling feat
Of two-edg'd words, or whatsoever wrong
By ours was done the Greeke, or Latine tongue,
Thou hast redeem'd, and open'd Us a Mine
Of rich and pregnant phansie, drawne a line
Of masculine expression.

These are large claims; their magnitude cannot be accounted for by the fact that Carew himself was of the school of Donne and might therefore have written in the possible spirit of a Movement poet of the Fifties speaking well of another Movement poet whatever he actually thought. We are so little used to thinking of the Elizabethan age as being a derelict allotment rank and overgrown with worthless and boring weeds that a demonstration of the difference between the two poetic modes in question might be helpful, even if we do not come down unhesitatingly on the same side as Carew. Here are two poems written in the same age on a very similar theme: Thomas Campion's *When thou must home to shades of underground* and Donne's *The Apparition*:

When thou must home to shades of underground,
And there arrived, a new admired guest,
The beauteous spirits do engirt thee round,
White Iope, blithe Helen and the rest,

To hear the stories of thy finished love
From that smooth tongue, whose music hell can
move:

Then wilt thou speak of banqueting delight,
Of masks and revels which sweet youth did make,
Of tourneys and great challenges of knights,
And all these triumphs for thy beauty's sake.
When thou hast told these honours done to thee,
Then tell, oh tell, how thou didst murder me.

The Apparition

When by thy scorne, O murtheresse I am dead,
And that thou thinkst thee free
From all solicitation from mee,
Then shall my ghost come to thy bed,
And thee, fain'd vestall, in worse armes shall see;
Then thy sicke taper will begin to winke,
And he, whose thou art then, being tyr'd before,
Will, if thou stirre, or pinch to wake him, thinke
Thou call'st for more,
And in false sleepe will from thee shrinke,
And then poore Aspen wretch, neglected thou
Bath'd in a cold quicksilver sweat wilt lye
A verier ghost than I;
What I will say, I will not tell thee now,
Lest that preserve thee'; and since my love is spent,
I' had rather thou shouldst painfully repent,
Than by my threatnings rest still innocent.

The Apparition lacks many of the characteristics of the most typical metaphysical poetry; certainly it has no

claim to be called 'metaphysical' in the full sense of the word that has just been discussed. But to compare it with Campion's poem is to demonstrate some important differences between the two ways of writing.

Both poems announce the same theme in the first line, a theme which was entirely conventional at that time: the death of the loving man because of the savage cruelty of the loved woman. Campion's poem throughout its short length does not depart from this convention: the lover's attitude reveals itself in all its resentment but nothing new emerges in the course of the poem; even the contrived shock of the last line is hardly a surprise. Donne's poem enacts at least three changes of feeling, each one a step away from the Petrarchan convention. His anger at his ill-treatment turns to active and calculated revenge which he thinks out in great detail. The imagined success of his retaliation gives him something so much like pleasure that he takes back the idea with which he must have originally begun – that of threatening her into more complaisant behaviour – as he feels he would enjoy her punishment better than her reformation.

These are interesting glimpses into a man's mind. Psychological insight is not necessary to Campion's poem. It is not intended to be either introspective or subtle. The crack at female heartlessness is boldly and openly delivered, and is not meant to be insidiously penetrating. The speaker, in spite of the strong 'me' ending might be almost anybody. He presents himself simply as a wronged man; in so far as he has any personality at all it is unpleasantly self-righteous; only the women in the poem behave badly.

In *The Apparition* everybody behaves badly, not least the hero, who has a distinct personality. He is dramatically conceived; his own observations on the situation are integrally connected with inferences which we the readers cannot help drawing as part of our response to what he is saying, as we might if we were watching a play. The psychology of lust and resentment is beautifully and faithfully analysed, with its complications and deceptions. The speaker is attractively shameless; he does not attempt to deny the joys of exacting vengeance. Like Heathcliff, when counselled to leave retribution to God, he might have replied, 'God won't have the satisfaction that I shall'. He makes pure spite seem quite a respectable point of view. He is not afraid either to acknowledge the nursery reaction of 'When I'm dead you'll be sorry'; in fact he goes further: in case she is not automatically sorry (he assumes she will not be) he will make her so.

A great part of the poem's strength lies in the discrepancies, psychologically so convincing, which it presents. The whole poem is based on such a discrepancy: that so strong-minded a man would let himself die for love in the first place. There are other realistic contradictions. The last four lines show a mature man indulging in infantile fantasies with such self-awareness that his maturity is not harmed. He sounds perfectly aware, too, of his vanity in supposing that whatever arms she is in they will be 'worse armes' than his. His sexual confidence – though the blow it receives will kill him – is strong enough, or he is hopeful enough, to suggest that the other man will be unable to satisfy her; one attempt by a genuinely frightened woman to

wake him up would not result in all that theatrical snoring unless something had previously gone wrong. It is part of the situation, and he maliciously savours the way in which neglect will undermine *her* sexual confidence.

Technically, there are striking differences between the two poems. The static nature of the material in the first is expressed with the smoothness, the regularity and the balance which it needs and which cannot be accounted for completely by the fact that the verses were written to be set to music. *The Apparition*, though metrically far more regular than most of Donne's poems, has none of this rhythmical smoothness. Except for a few trochaic feet the lines are straightforwardly iambic, yet the variety in their length and in their pauses, and above all the speaking voice which transforms them, make the pattern much less obtrusive than Campion's in spite of such noticeable features as the triple rhyme at the end. This question of the speaking voice is a key to much of the technique; anyone in doubt could read aloud the wonderfully sinister line 'What I will say, I will not tell thee now'.

The work of the Metaphysical Poets spans nearly ninety years. Donne was born in 1572 and started writing about twenty years later; Marvell died in 1678. The early work of Donne coincided with some of the most typical Elizabethan poetry; Marvell and Cowley were still writing after the Restoration, when Dryden's career was well under way and Milton's had been ended by death. And these were years of great social and political change. It may seem strained, therefore, to find as many