

The Metaphysical Poets

In his 1921 essay 'The Metaphysical Poets', T. S. Eliot made several of his most famous and important statements about poetry – including, by implication, his own poetry. It is in this essay that Eliot puts forward his well-known idea of the 'dissociation of sensibility', among other theories. You can read 'The Metaphysical Poets' here before proceeding to our summary and analysis below.

By 1921, T. S. Eliot has established himself as one of the leading new poets writing in English: his two collections of poems, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) and *Poems* (1920), had heralded the arrival in London literary society of someone who had, in his friend and fellow modernist poet Ezra Pound's words, 'modernised himself on his own'. Eliot had read widely, in medieval Italian religious poetry (Dante's *Divine Comedy*), Renaissance verse drama (Shakespeare, Thomas Kyd, John Webster, and their contemporaries), and nineteenth-century French Symbolist poets (such as Baudelaire and Laforgue).

But Eliot had also studied the canon of great English poetry, and his essay on the metaphysical poets shows that he identified his own approach to poetry with these poets from the seventeenth century. This is somewhat strange, when we analyse it more closely (as we will do in a moment), but first, here's a brief rundown of what Eliot argues in 'The Metaphysical Poets'.

Summary

Eliot's article on the metaphysical poets is actually a review of a new anthology, Herbert J. C. Grierson's *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century*. Eliot uses his review of Grierson's anthology, however, as an opportunity to consider the value and significance of the metaphysical poets in the development of English poetry.

Although the metaphysical poets were a distinctly English 'movement' or 'school' (Eliot uses both words, while acknowledging that they are modern descriptions grouping together a quite disparate number of poets), Eliot also draws some interesting parallels between the seventeenth-century English metaphysical poets and nineteenth-century French

Symbolist poets like Jules Laforgue, whose work Eliot much admired.

Eliot begins by reminding us that it's difficult to define metaphysical poetry, since there is a considerable difference in style and technique between those poets who are often labelled 'metaphysical'. We have explored the issue of defining metaphysical poetry in a separate post, but the key frame of reference, for us as for Eliot, was Samuel Johnson's influential denunciation of the metaphysical poets in the eighteenth century.

Eliot quotes Johnson's line about metaphysical poetry that 'the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together'. Eliot's response to Johnson's censure, however, is to point out that all kinds of poets – not just the metaphysicals – unite heterogeneous or different materials together in their poetry. Indeed, Eliot quotes from Johnson's own poem, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*: His fate was destined to a barren strand,

A petty fortress and a dubious hand;

He left a name at which the world grew pale,

To point a moral or adorn a tale.

Eliot argues that, whilst such lines as these are different in degree from what the metaphysical poets did in their own work, the principle is in fact the same. Johnson is 'guilty' of that which he chastised Abraham Cowley, John Cleveland, and other metaphysical poets for doing in their work.

Eliot then goes on to consider the style of numerous metaphysical poets. He points out that, whilst someone like George Herbert wrote in simple and elegant language, his syntax, or sentence structure, was often more complex and demanding. Key to Herbert's method is 'a fidelity to thought and feeling', and it is the union of thought and feeling in metaphysical poetry which will form the predominant theme of the remainder of Eliot's essay.

Eliot next considers what led to the development of metaphysical poetry: reminding us that John Donne, the first metaphysical poet, was an Elizabethan (Donne wrote many of his greatest love poems in the 1590s, when he was in his early twenties), Eliot compares Donne's 'analytic' mode with many of his contemporaries, such as William Shakespeare and George Chapman, who wrote verse drama for the Elizabethan stage.

These playwrights were all influenced by the French writer Montaigne, who had effectively invented the modern essay form in his prose writings. (We can arguably see the influence of Montaigne, with his essays arguing and considering the various aspects of a topic, on the development of the Shakespearean soliloquy, where we often find a character arguing with themselves about a course of action: Hamlet's 'To be, or not to be' is perhaps the most famous example.) The key thing, for Eliot, is that in such dramatic speeches – the one he cites is from George Chapman's drama – there is a 'direct sensuous apprehension of thought', i.e. reason and feeling are intrinsically linked, and thought is a sensory, rather than a merely rational, experience. This is where we come to his thesis concerning the 'dissociation of sensibility' which occurred in the seventeenth century.

'Dissociation of sensibility'

The idea of the 'dissociation of sensibility' is one of T. S. Eliot's most famous critical theories. The key statement made by Eliot in relation to the

‘dissociation of sensibility’ is arguably the following: ‘A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility.’ Or, as he had just said, prior to this, of the nineteenth-century poets Tennyson and Browning: ‘they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose.’

In other words, whereas poets like Donne, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, felt their thoughts with the immediacy we usually associate with smelling a sweet flower, later poets were unable to feel their thought in the same way. The change – the ‘dissociation of sensibility’, i.e. the moment at which thought and feeling became separated – occurred, for Eliot, in the mid-seventeenth century, after the heyday of metaphysical poetry when Donne, Herbert, and (to an extent) Marvell were writing.

This watershed moment, this shift in poetry, is represented, for Eliot, by two major poets of the later seventeenth century: John Milton and John Dryden. Both poets did something consummately, but what they did was different. Dryden’s style was far more rational and neoclassical; Milton’s was more focused on sensation and feeling. (It is worth noting, although

Eliot doesn't make this point, that the Romantics – whose work rejected the cold, orderly rationalism of neoclassical poets like Alexander Pope and, before him, John Dryden – embraced Milton, and especially his *Paradise Lost*. Wordsworth references Milton in several of his sonnets, while Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is steeped in Milton.)

Eliot concludes 'The Metaphysical Poets' by drawing some comparisons between the metaphysical mode and nineteenth-century French Symbolists, to demonstrate further that the 'metaphysical' was not some entirely distinct variety of poetry but that it shares some core affinities with other schools of poetry. He then returns to Johnson's criticism of the metaphysical poets' techniques and metre, and argues that, whilst we should take Johnson's critique seriously, we should nevertheless value the metaphysical poets and look beyond poets like Cowley and Cleveland (who are Johnson's chief focus).

In conclusion, Eliot's essay was important in raising the profile of the metaphysical poets among his own readers: people who looked to Eliot for discerning critical judgement and viewed him as a touchstone

of literary taste were inclined to go and reread the metaphysicals. This led to a tendency among critics of Eliot's work to identify him as a latter-day metaphysical poet, a view which, as the poet-critic William Empson pointed out, isn't borne out by reading Eliot's work. Prufrock, the speakers of *The Waste Land*, and the *Hollow Men* don't really speak to us in the same way as Donne or Marvell do: there aren't really any elaborate and extended poetic conceits (central to the metaphysical method) in Eliot's work.

So, this connection between Eliot's own work and the work of Donne, Herbert, and others has been overplayed. (Empson was well-placed to point this out: his own poetry clearly bears the influence of Donne in particular, and Empson is rightly called a modern metaphysical poet for this reason.) However, Eliot himself encourages such a parallel at one point in 'The Metaphysical Poets', when he writes that poets writing in modern European civilisation must be difficult because the civilisation is itself complex and various, and so the poet, to do justice to this complexity and variety, must become 'more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in

order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning'. Certainly this statement is equally applicable to Andrew Marvell and T. S. Eliot.