

Metaphysical poets

The **metaphysical poets** is a term coined by the poet and critic Samuel Johnson to describe a loose group of British lyric poets of the 17th century, whose work was characterized by the inventive use of conceits, and by speculation about topics such as love or religion. These poets were not formally affiliated; most of them did not even know or read each other.

Origin of the name

In the chapter on Abraham Cowley in his *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (1779-81), Samuel Johnson refers to the beginning of the seventeenth century in which there "appeared a race of writers that may be termed the metaphysical poets". This does not necessarily imply that he intended metaphysical to be used in its true sense, in that he was probably referring to a witticism of John Dryden,^[1] who said of John 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. In this . . . Mr. Cowley has copied him to a fault.*" Probably the only writer before Dryden to speak of a certain metaphysical school or group of metaphysical poets is Drummond of Hawthornden (1585–1649), who in one of his letters speaks of "*metaphysical Ideas and Scholastical Quiddities.*"^[2]



John Donne, one of the most famous metaphysical poets.

Nor was Johnson's assessment of 'metaphysical poetry' particularly flattering, since he wrote:

The metaphysical poets were men of learning, and, to show their learning was their whole endeavour; but, unluckily resolving to show it in rhyme, instead of writing poetry, they only wrote verses, and, very often, such verses as stood the trial of the finger better than of the ear; for the modulation was so imperfect, that they were only found to be verses by counting the syllables... The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtilty surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased.^[3]

There is no scholarly consensus regarding which seventeenth-century English poets or poems may be regarded as in the 'metaphysical' genre. Colin Burrow, writing for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, describes John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, Andrew Marvell, and Richard Crashaw as the 'central figures' of metaphysical poetry.^[4]

In 1921, Herbert Grierson published *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century*, which collected poems by Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, Marvell, and Carew.^[4] Helen Gardner's *Metaphysical Poets* anthology, published in 1957, contained work by many more writers, including 'proto-metaphysical' poets such as William Shakespeare and Sir Walter Raleigh, and even poems by the Restoration libertine the Earl of Rochester.^[4] As Burrow remarks, in Gardner's anthology "The all-thinking, all-feeling metaphysical poets were becoming virtually coextensive with seventeenth-century poetry".^[4] By the 1980s many scholars described the 'metaphysical poets' idea as being little more than an attempt by Eliot and his followers to impose a 'high Anglican and royalist literary history' on seventeenth-century English poetry.^[4] But in Burrow's view, the 'metaphysical poets' label still retains much value. For one thing, John Donne's poetry had considerable influence on subsequent poets, who emulated his style. And there are several instances in which seventeenth-century poets used the word 'metaphysical' in their work, meaning that Samuel Johnson's description has some foundation in the poetry of the previous century.^[4]

Characteristics

Their style was characterized by wit and metaphysical conceits—far-fetched or unusual similes or metaphors, such as in Andrew Marvell's comparison of the soul with a drop of dew; in an expanded epigram format, with the use of simple verse forms, octosyllabic couplets, quatrains or stanzas in which length of line and rhyme scheme enforce the sense.^[5] The specific definition of wit which Johnson applied to the school was: "...a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike."^[6] Their poetry diverged from the style of their times, containing neither images of nature nor allusions to classical mythology, as were common.^[7] Several metaphysical poets, especially John Donne, were influenced by Neo-Platonism. One of the primary Platonic concepts found in metaphysical poetry is the idea that the perfection of beauty in the beloved acted as a remembrance of perfect beauty in the eternal realm. Their work relies on images and references to the contemporary scientific or geographical discoveries. These were used to examine religious and moral questions, often employing an element of casuistry (i.e. theoretical reasoning used to resolve moral problems, often evasive or arcane) to define their understanding or personal relationship with God.^[8]

Critical opinion

Critical opinion of the school has been varied. Johnson claimed that "they were not successful in representing or moving the affections" and that neither "was the sublime more within their reach."^[9] Generally, his criticism of the poets' style was grounded in his assertion that "Great thoughts are always general," and that the metaphysical poets were too particular in their search for novelty. He did concede, however, that "they...sometimes stuck out unexpected truth" and that their work is often intellectually, if not emotionally, stimulating.^[10] The group was to have a significant influence on 20th-century poetry, especially through T. S. Eliot, whose essay *The Metaphysical Poets* (1921) praised the very anti-Romantic and intellectual qualities of which Johnson and his contemporaries had disapproved, and helped bring their poetry back into favour with readers.^[11]

Metaphysical poets

Major poets

- John Donne (1572–1631)
 - George Herbert (1593–1633)
 - Andrew Marvell (1621–1678)
 - Abraham Cowley (1618–1667)
 - Saint Robert Southwell (c. 1561–1595)
 - Richard Crashaw (c. 1613–1649)
 - Thomas Traherne (1636 or 1637 – 1674)
 - Henry Vaughan (1622–1695)
-

Minor poets

The following poets have also been sometimes considered metaphysical poets^[citation needed].

- Anne Bradstreet (c. 1612–1672)
- Thomas Carew (1595–1640)^[12]
- George Chapman (c. 1559–1634)
- John Hall (c. 1627–1656)^[13]
- Edward Herbert (1583–1648)^[14]
- Richard Leigh (1649-1728)^[15]
- Katherine Philips (1632–1664),
- Sir John Suckling (1609–1642)^[16]
- Edward Taylor (c. 1642–1729)

Notes and references

- [1] Gardner, Helen. *Metaphysical Poets*, Oxford University Press, London, 1957.
- [2] Gardner, Helen. *Metaphysical Poets*, Oxford University Press, London, 1957.
- [3] Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*, vol. 1 (1779)
- [4] Colin Burrow, 'Metaphysical poets (act. c.1600–c.1690)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press. accessed 7 May 2012 (<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/theme/95605>.)
- [5] Gardner, Helen *The Metaphysical Poets* Penguin Books, 1957 ISBN 0-14-042038-X
- [6] Johnson, Samuel. *Selected Writings*, Penguin Books, 1968.
- [7] Halleck, Ruben. *Halleck's New English Literature*, American Book Company, 1913.
- [8] Ceri Sullivan, *The Rhetoric of the Conscience in Donne, Herbert, and Vaughan* (Oxford University Press, 2008)
- [9] Johnson, Samuel. *Selected Writings*, Penguin, 1968.
- [10] Johnson, Samuel. *Selected Writings*, Penguin, 1968.
- [11] *The Metaphysical Poets* by T.S. Eliot, 1921.
- [12] Helen Gardner (Ed.) "The Metaphysical Poets", Penguin Classics, 1985
- [13] Helen Gardner (Ed.) "The Metaphysical Poets", Penguin Classics, 1985
- [14] Helen Gardner (Ed.) "The Metaphysical Poets", Penguin Classics, 1985
- [15] Helen Gardner (Ed.) "The Metaphysical Poets", Penguin Classics, 1985
- [16] Helen Gardner (Ed.) "The Metaphysical Poets", Penguin Classics, 1985

Further reading

- Gardner, Helen, *The Metaphysical Poets*, [London] Oxford University Press, 1961, 1967; originally published by Penguin Books 1957.
- Grierson, Sir Herbert J.C., *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems of the Seventeenth Century* (<http://www.bartleby.com/105/>), Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1921.

External links

- 17th Century English Literature Metaphysical Poets (<http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/metaphysical.htm>) – *Luminarium* website anthology
- Metaphysical Poetry – Timeline, Context, Biographies of Various Poets, Critical Analysis (<http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/Metaphysical-Poetry/4/0>) – Crossref-it.info
- The Metaphysical Poets, by T.S. Eliot (<http://personal.centenary.edu/~dhavird/TSEMetaPoets.html>)
- Johnson's Lives of the Poets, vol. 1 (<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/9823>) at Project Gutenberg, containing the 'Life of Cowley'.

Article Sources and Contributors

Metaphysical poets *Source:* <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?oldid=570128068> *Contributors:* 28421u2232nfencenc, AJokinen, Adambiswanger1, Alexander Tendler, Antandrus, Aphaia, AragornElessar86, Bab-a-lot, Bearcat, Ben9dan16, Bigbutts69, Camw, Capricorn42, Celuici, Ceri sullivan, CharlesMartel, Chasingsol, Chick Bowen, Chillllls, ColonelHenry, Countdown to oblivion, Deb, DenJones, Diplomacy, Discospinster, Dlyons493, DominvsVobiscvm, Dpsaves, Drmies, El C, Elb2000, ElishaZG, Epbr123, Ethicoaestheticist, Exitr, Favonian, Firsfron, Fluffernutter, Freddie Gate, Gamaliel, Gentleness, Ghirlandajo, Gilliam, Happymercury, Harry R, Hut 8.5, Huw Powell, Hymnto, Ichthys58, JHunterJ, JaGa, JanInad, JockeSnygg, Johnsu01, K.C. Tang, Ko221b, Kocio, Kungfuadam, Local.empire, Mandarax, Mandel, Mattinbgn, Max staudt, MeltBanana, Mfcayley, Mithrandirthewise, Mohammad Rajabpur, Nasnema, Neilc, Newspaperman, Pecepc, Pharaoh of the Wizards, Philip Trueman, Phoe, Piano non troppo, Picatrix, Poindexter Propellerhead, Reconsideration, RobertG, Rwood128, SDedalus91, Scherzo triste, Shoessss, SilkTork, SkyWalker, Soap, SpuriousQ, Straw Cat, Stumps, Surv1v411st, Tangsyde, Techman224, Thenickdude, TomBeasley, Tony1, TonyBrit, Viriditas, Vsiref, Wayland, Whiskey in the Jar, Wikiklrsc, Wikirib, William Avery, ZephyrAnycon, عامر شالين, 187 anonymous edits

Image Sources, Licenses and Contributors

Image:John Donne BBC News.jpg *Source:* http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:John_Donne_BBC_News.jpg *License:* Public Domain *Contributors:* Original uploader was Paul Haymon at en.wikipedia

License

Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported
[//creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)