17th Century Poets: Metaphysical Poetry

Dr. Alan Haffa

Metaphysical poetry

- Term coined by Samuel Johnson in 18th century
- John Dryden had used it to described 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.”

Objective Description

- Quest for true religion in theme
- Use of conceits
  - A conceit is a comparison that is striking more for its ingenuity than for the justness of the likeness
- Extended metaphors
  - The metaphor extends for multiple lines of verse and multiple points of comparison.
- Intellectual poetry
  - In the late sixteenth century and early 17th the taste was for a poetry that had more substance.

John Donne, 1572-1631

- Well to-do Catholic family; Jesuit uncle was drawn and quartered; brother arrested for harboring a priest; 1590s, converted to Anglicanism
- Secretly married the 17 year old daughter of patron; imprisoned and dismissed
- 12 children
- 1615, ordained a minister

A Valediction: forbidding mourning

- As virtuous men passe mildly’ away,
  And whisper to their soules, to goe,

Whilst some of their sad friends doe say,
  the breath goes now, and some say, no:

So let us melt, and make no noise,
  No teare-floods, nor sigh-tempests move,

‘Twere prophanation of our joyes
  To tell the layetie our love.

Moving of th'earth brings harmes and fears,
Men reckon what it did and meant,
But trepidation of the spheares,
Though greater farre, is innocent.

Dull sublunary lovers love
(Whose soule is sense) cannot admit
Absence, because it doth remove
Those things which elemented it.

But we by'a love, so much refin'd
That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
Care lesse, eyes, lips, and hands to misse.

Our two soules therefore, which are one,
Though I must goe, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like a gold to ayery thinnesse beate.

If they be two, they are two so
As stiffe twin compasses are two,
Thy soule the fixt foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the'other doe.

.

And though it in the center sit,
Yet when the other far doth rome,
It leanes, and hearkens after it,
And growes erect, as it comes home.

Such wilt though be to mee, who must
Like th'other foot, obliquely runne;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end, where I begunne.

Holy Sonnets: Divine Meditations 6

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadfull, for, thou art not soe,
For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,
Die not, poore death, nor yet canst thou kill me;
From rest and sleepe, which but thy pictures bee,
Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee doe goe,
Rest of their bones, and soules deliverie.

Thou art slave to Fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,

And dost with poyson, warre, and sicknesse dwell,

And poppie, or charmes can make us sleepe as well,

And better than thy stroake; why swell’st thou then?

One short sleepe past, wee weake eternally,

And death shall be no more, Death thou shalt die.

Holy Sonnets XVII

- Since she whom I lov'd, hath payd her last debt
  To Nature, and to hers, and my good is dead,
  And her soule early into heaven ravishèd,
  Wholy in heavenly things my mind is sett.
  Here the admyring her my mind did whett
  To seek thee, God; so streames do shew the head;
  But though I have found thee, and thou my thirst hast fed,
  A holy thirsty dropsy melts me yet.
  But why should I begg more love, when as thou
  Dost wooe my soul, for hers offring all thine:
  And dost not only fear lest I allow
  My love to saints and Angels, things divine,
  But in thy tender jealousy dost doubt
  Lest the World, flesh, yea, Devil put thee out.

George Herbert, 1593-1633

- Mother was patron to Donne. His first poems were for his mother and attempted to explain how love of God was greater than love of woman.
- Cambridge; appointed "public orator" for university; elected to Parliament in 1624; Ordained a minister in 1630 at a country parish
- Common tropes: anxiety about not being worthy of Christ; Christ as "friend"; anxiety about inability of Poet to give proper praise to God
- Common Metaphor: Christian as a plant that God needs to water and prune

Man

- My God, I heard this day,

That none doth build a stately habitation,
But he that means to dwell therein.

What house more stately hath there been,
Or can be, than is Man? To whose creation
All things are in decay,

For Man is ev’ry thing,
And more: He is a tree, yet bears more fruit;
A beast, yet is, or should be more:
Reason and speech we onely bring.
Parrats may thank us, if they are not mute,
They go upon the score.

Man is all symmetrie,
Full of proportions, one limbe to another,
And all to all the world besides:
Each part may call the furthest, brother:
For head with foot hath private amitie,
And both with moons and tides.

Nothing hath got so farre,
But Man hath caught and kept it, as his prey.
His eyes dismount the highest starre:
He is in little all the sphere.
Herbs gladly cure our flesh; because that they
Fine their acquaintance there.

For us the windes do blow,
The earth doth rest, heav’n move, and fountains flow.
Nothing we see, but means our good,
As our delight, or as our treasure:
The whole is, either our cupboard of food,
Or cabinet of pleasure.

The starres have us to bed;
Night draws the curtain, which the sunne withdraws;
Musick and light attend our head.
All things unto our flesh are kinde
In their descent and being; to our minde
In their ascent and cause.

Each thing is full of dutie:
Than he'l take notice of: in ev'ry path
He treads down that which doth befriend him,
When sicknesse makes him pale and wan.
Oh mightie love! Man is one world, and hath
Another to attend him.

Since then, my God, thou hast
So brave a Palace built; O dwell in it,
That it may dwell with thee at last!
Til then, afford us so much wit;
That, as the world serves us, we may serve thee,
And both thy servants be.

The Pulley

- When God at first made man,

Having a glasse of blessings standing by;
Let us (said he) poure on him all we can;
Let the worlds riches, which dispersed lie,
contract into a span.
So strength first made a way;
Then beautie flow'd, then wisdome, honour, pleasure:
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that alone of all his treasure
Rest in the bottome lay.

For if I should (said he)
Bestow this jewell also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts in stead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature:
so both should losers be.

Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlesnesse:
Let him be rich and wearie, that at least,
If goodnesse leade him not, yet wearinesse
May tosse him to my breast.

Death

- Death, thou wast once an uncouth hideous thing,
  Nothing but bones,
  The sad effect of sadder grones;
  They mouth was open, but thou couldst not sing.

For we consider’d thee as at some six
  Or ten yeares hence,
  After the losse of life and sense,
  Flesh being turn’d to dust, and bones to sticks.

We lookt on this side of thee, shooting short;
Where we did finde
the shells of fledge souls left behinde,
Dry dust, which sheds no tears, but may extort.

But since our Saviours death did put some bloud
Into thy face;
Thou art grown fair and full of grace,
Much in request, much sought for as a good.

For we do now behold thee gay and glad,
As at dooms-day;
When souls shall wear their new aray,
And all thy bones with beautie shall be clad.

Therefore we can go die as sleep, and trust
Half that we have
Unto an honest faithful grave;
Making our pillows either down, or dust.

Andrew Marvell, 1621-1678

- Son of a Clergyman; Cambridge; London, briefly converted to Catholicism; Taught at Cambridge;
- Tutor to Cromwell's nephew, William Dutton; joined Milton as Latin Secretary to Cromwell
- Accepted Restoration; favored religious toleration and constitutional gov.
- Served in Parliament from 1659-1678
- Complex poetic style; difficult to identify the poet's point of view

To His Coy Mistress

- Had we but world enough, and time,
  This coyness, lady, were no crime.
  We would sit down and think which way
  To walk, and pass our long love's day;
  Thou by the Indian Ganges' side
  Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide
  Of Humber would complain. I would
  Love you ten years before the Flood;
  And you should, if you please, refuse
  Till the conversion of the Jews.

My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires, and more slow.
An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast,
But thirty thousand to the rest;
An age at least to every part,
And the last age should show your heart.
For, lady, you deserve this state,
Nor would I love at lower rate.

But at my back I always hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.
Thy beauty shall no more be found,
Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
My echoing song; then worms shall try
That long preserv'd virginity,
And your quaint honour turn to dust,
And into ashes all my lust.
The grave's a fine and private place,
But none I think do there embrace.

Now therefore, while the youthful hue
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
And while thy willing soul transpires
At every pore with instant fires,
Now let us sport us while we may;
And now, like am'rous birds of prey,
Rather at once our time devour,
Than languish in his slow-chapp'd power.
Let us roll all our strength, and all
Our sweetness, up into one ball;
And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Thorough the iron gates of life.
Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

Observations

- The 17th century poets, more so than the 16th century, come from the rising Bourgeois class; many from clerical families and many become clergyman
- Display the religious conflict of the time as several of them convert from or to Catholicism; Importance of being Anglican if you hope to advance
- While some, like Herbert, write passionately Christian poetry, others write passionately secular poetry; some display the ambivalence of the battle of the secular and the spiritual (Donne, Jonson, Herrick, Marvell)
- Metaphysical Poetry—use of complex and extended metaphors—School of Donne
- Poetry was highly politicized, more so than in the Early Renaissance;