

Metaphysical Poets

A term used to group together certain 17th-century poets, usually DONNE, MARVELL, VAUGHAN and TRAHERNE, though other figures like ABRAHAM COWLEY are sometimes included in the list. Although in no sense a school or movement proper, they share common characteristics of wit, inventiveness, and a love of elaborate stylistic manoeuvres.

Metaphysical concerns are the common subject of their poetry, which investigates the world by rational discussion of its phenomena rather than by intuition or mysticism. DRYDEN was the first to apply the term to 17th-century poetry when, in 1693, he criticized Donne: 'He affects the Metaphysics... 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.' He disapproved of Donne's stylistic excesses, particularly his extravagant conceits (or witty comparisons) and his tendency towards hyperbolic abstractions. JOHNSON consolidated the argument in *THE LIVES OF THE POETS*, where he noted (with reference to Cowley) that 'about the beginning of the seventeenth century appeared a race of writers that may be termed the metaphysical poets'.

He went on to describe the far-fetched nature of their comparisons as 'a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike'. Examples of the practice Johnson condemned would include the extended comparison of love with astrology (by Donne) and of the soul with a drop of dew (by Marvell).

Reacting against the deliberately smooth and sweet tones of much 16th-century verse, the metaphysical poets adopted a style that is energetic, uneven, and rigorous. (Johnson described its roughness and violation of decorum, the deliberate mixture of different styles.) It has also been labelled the 'poetry of strong lines'. In his important essay, 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921), which helped bring the poetry of Donne and his contemporaries back into favour, T. S. ELIOT argued that their work fuses reason with passion; it shows a unification of thought and feeling which later became separated into a 'dissociation of sensibility'.