

22/4/20
Lecture No 12
Dr. Hempati Jha

English (Hons)

DI / Paper I / (History of English literature)

Topic: The "Metaphysical" Poets

①

A new kind of poetry was pioneered by John Donne and soon gained popularity with some other poets of the first half of the ^{seventeenth} century; the group being known as belonging to the "Metaphysical School" of poetry. Apart from the name of John Donne, the group consists of such names as Abraham Cowley, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Henry Vaughan, Thomas Carew and Thomas Traherne — the last, ^{poet} to be recognized as belonging to the group because his works remained lost for nearly two hundred years after his death in 1704.

The name 'Metaphysical' was first used by Johnson for the poets of this school when he commented about Donne that "he affects the Metaphysical". Successive critics after him have kept this label afloat after him in adhering to the term. Johnson, however, has excellently explained his term in the following manner: (Metaphysical Poets) — were men of learning... They neither copied nature nor life... ~~their~~ Their thoughts are often new, but seldom natural; they are not obvious; but nevertheless are they just; and the reader, ^{far} far from wondering that he missed them, wonders more frequently by what perverseness of industry they were ever found."

Johnson and other critics have clearly underlined the special characteristics of the poets belonging to the "Metaphysical

(2)

School of Poetry." About these unmistakable distinguishing features of this school Hudson is very apt to describe as follows:-

"Their work is packed with affectations and conceits; in their effort to surprise by boldness and novelty of their images they indulge in strained metaphors, far fetched similes, and the most extravagant hyperbole; they cultivate ingenuity at any cost; substitute philosophical subtleties and logical hair-splitting for the natural expression of feeling; and employ their vast out of the way learning without the slightest regard to propriety."

This show-off of their scholarship and learning at any cost made these poets sacrifice the genuineness of feeling involved in the composition of their verses. They were more bent upon using the device of what the critics have described as "the discordia-concourse" — or ~~putting~~ two "apparently divergent" ideas violently yoked together "to make shock the readers into awareness about the novelty and scholastic value of their conceits."

We have a fine example of this scholastic ~~poetic~~ yearning in an ^{otherwise} accomplished poet like Crashaw to describe the "sorrowing eyes of Mary Magdalene as,

"Two walking baths, two weeping motions,

Portable and confendious oceans,"

This tendency Johnson ^{Johnson} decried in no unce-

retain terms and accused them of doing it "by voluntary deviation from nature in ~~per-~~ pursuit of something new and strange." As a result they are in general violent, harsh, cold, and obscure. Nevertheless, the underlying poetic genius and talent could not remain hidden, ~~in~~ and from time to ^{time} really powerful poems are composed by this group of poets for sure. Hudson writes, "That from time to time ^{they} none the less give us passages or even whole poems of real power and beauty only proves that the promptings of genius were not altogether stifled by vicious theories". Following are the thumbnail sketches of the poets belonging to the "Metaphysical school of poetry": -

John Donne:-

(1573 - 1631)

John Donne it is, who had been credited with the foundation of this Metaphysical school of poetry." He revolted against the set trend modelling upon Petrarchan sonnets made fashionable by Spenser and followed by many prolific poets. He began composing poems at a very early age and most of his famous output was written before he was twenty five. Classified into three categories — amorous, religious and satirical, Donne's works include "Satires", "Songs and sonnets" and "Elegies". Legouis writes: "His style is ~~stano-~~logous. He will have nothing to do with the easy

④ and familiar... His horror for commonplace amounts to a cult of eccentric.... Passion, feeling, sensuality: all are subject to wit. This play of wit sometimes results in astounding hyperbole: Donne excuses himself for mistaking his mistress for an angel on the ground that to imagine her other than she is would be profane. Or he congruously brings ~~ideas~~ together ideas as remote from each other as the antipodes, mingling the lofty and the mean, the sublime and the trivial. He deduces every kind of consequence from the fact that a flea hops from biting him to suck his mistress's blood. He will not let her kill this creature in which their blood has mingled, and which is therefore their bridal bed, the temple of their wedding. "

Abraham Cowley: -

1618 - '67 Abraham Cowley was very highly rated in his own era and certainly is one of the major members of the Metaphysical School. He is also important as a transitional poet of this period considered as a representative of the metaphysical school, Cowley foreshadows the English classical school in many respects. With all his piety, his fantasy, his conceits and his Pindarism, he is first of all, an intellectual. Among his famous poems are "The Mistress", "The Davideis" and "The Pindaric odes".

George Herbert: -

1593 - 1633

Among the Metaphysical poets,

perhaps, George Herbert is the most popular and widely read poet of all; though his poems could only be published after his death. His most famous work is "The Temple", a collection of lyrics considered to breathe the spirit of "purest piety".

Henry Vaughan :-

(1622 - '95) Henry Vaughan's works show a discernable influence of Herbert. Nevertheless, they are "deeper in thought and much more mystical". His books include "Poems", "Silex Scintillans", "Silva Scintillans" and "Thalia Rediviva". His regard and treatment of Nature remind us, in some cases, of Wordsworth.

Richard Crashaw :-

(1613 - '49) Crashaw was both secular and religious in his poetry which are remarkable for their striking and fantastic conceits. "Steps to the temple" is his most regarded composition.

Thomas Carew :-

(1594 - 1639) Carew shows great lyrical talent in his "Poems". His style and versification are so polished and refined that he anticipates the neo-classical poetry.

Thomas Traherne :-

1634 - 1704 His poetry, as well as his prose only existed in manuscripts before being published in 1903. His works includes "The Wonder" which expresses the sense of wonderment of a child at his body and soul. Traherne continues Anglican mystical poetry down to the Restoration.

(concluded)