

Symbolism, Metaphysical Poetry, and T.S. Eliot

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ABSTRACT

T.S. Eliot's critical writings have been an outcome of his wide and vast reading of the symbolists as well as the metaphysical poets. Most of his critical concepts seem to have emerged out of the characteristics and trends of the symbolist and the metaphysical poetry, and he, under the influence of these schools, seems to be penning down the characteristics of the symbolist and the metaphysical poetry through his critical concepts and theories, knowingly and unknowingly. He has borrowed even his phrases from these schools. He lacks originality, but he makes every concept look peculiarly his own. He might be indebted to earlier critics and writers for his concepts, but he is original in so far as his logic and argumentation is concerned. This paper tries to emphasize on the fact that his criticism seems to be determined, shaped, and moulded by the symbolist and the metaphysical schools of poetry.

Keywords: Symbolism, Metaphysical poetry, Dissociation of sensibility, nification of sensibility, Objective correlative.

Introduction:

Dr. Samuel Johnson was the first critic to use the term 'metaphysical poets' for a group of poets headed by John Donne, who is regarded as the founder of the Metaphysical School of Poetry. Defining the term 'metaphysical', M.H. Abrams (2012) writes that the name is now applied to a

group of seventeenth-century poets who, whether or not directly influenced by Donne, employ a similar poetic manner and imagery, both in secular poetry (Cleveland, Marvell, Cowley) and in religious poetry (Herbert, Vaughan, Crashaw). Although it was not a movement or a school in the truest sense of the words, yet it was a group of poets who shared common characteristics of wit, inventiveness and a love of elaborate stylistic maneuvers (Housby, 1994).

After the publication of S. Grierson's *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century* in 1921, interest in the metaphysical poets was revived and T.S. Eliot's essay "The Metaphysical Poets" was a review of S. Grierson's collection. According to Eliot, the metaphysical poets were writing at the time when thought and feeling were closely fused in, till 'dissociation of sensibility' set in. He writes that the poets of the seventeenth century, the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth, possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience. They are simple, artificial, difficult, or fantastic, as their predecessors were; no less or more than Dante, Guido Cavalcanti, Guinicelli, or Cino. In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered; and this dissociation, as is natural, was aggravated by the influence of the two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden. (Eliot, 1962). Thus, Eliot holds Milton and Dryden responsible for setting in 'dissociation of sensibility'.

Eliot has always been found to be under the influence of the French symbolists as well as John Donne and the other English metaphysical poets; and all of his poems, including *The Wasteland*, have such vivid imagery and symbols as were the peculiar characteristics of the French symbolists and the metaphysical poets. W.K. Wimsatt Jr. and Cleanth Brooks (1964) write that he has used the bold and often strenuous figurative language of the metaphysical poets. Donne inspired his feeling and thought. Matthiessen (1959) writes in this connection that Donne's technical discoveries did not belong to him alone. They were a product of a whole mode of thought and feeling which has seemed to Eliot the richest and the most varied that has ever come to expression in English.

The metaphysical poetry is metaphysical only in so far as its technique and style is concerned. Some critics hold the view that none of the metaphysical poets was seriously interested in metaphysics. They had very little in common, and the features their work is generally taken to display are sustained dialectic, paradox, novelty, incongruity, 'muscular' rhythms, giving the effect of 'speaking voice', and the use of 'conceits', or comparison in which tenor and vehicle

can be related only by ingenious pseudo-logic (Drabble, 1985). Generally, some of the critics opine that their conceits are excessive use of over-elaborated similes and metaphors drawn from the most far-fetched, remote, and unfamiliar sources. Donne and his follower poets juxtapose the opposites, and by the use of far-fetched similes and metaphors they try and achieve ‘unification of sensibility’. Eliot feels that they amalgamate and fuse thought and feeling together, something that the later poets failed to do, especially, Milton, Dryden, Tennyson, and Browning. In one or two passages of Shelley's “Triumph of Life”, in the second “Hyperion” there are traces of a struggle toward unification of sensibility. But Keats and Shelley died, and Tennyson and Browning ruminated (Eliot, 1962). They ruminated because they meditated upon their experiences, but failed to convert them into poetry, in other words, they were unable to express their thought poetically—something that Donne and other metaphysical poets had done with great success. Eliot does not want poets to merely meditate or ruminate; rather, he wants him to turn his feelings into poetry. He lays down only one condition that the poet should be able turn them into poetry, and not merely meditate on them poetically (Eliot, 1962). Eliot adds further that by assuming that the poets of the seventeenth century (up to the Revolution) were the direct and normal development of the precedent age; and, without prejudicing their case by the adjective ‘metaphysical’, consider whether their virtue was not something permanently valuable, which subsequently disappeared, but ought not to have disappeared (Eliot, 1962).

The metaphysical poets were reacting against the sixteenth century poetry and in attempt of reacting against the deliberately smooth and sweet tones of much 16th century verse, the metaphysical poets adopted a style that is energetic, uneven and vigorous” (Housby, 1994). Their poetry may be found to be full of dry reasoning, but it is this very poetry that exhibits ‘unification of sensibility’ through the use of conceits. Their language is completely different from the language of the Elizabethans. Language, with the lapse of time, kept on getting improved, but the expression of thought was poorer. What Eliot writes in this connection is worth-noting. He writes that the language went on and in some respects improved; the best verse of Collins, Gray, Johnson, and even Goldsmith satisfies some of our fastidious demands better than that of Donne or Marvell or King. But while the language became more refined, the feeling became more crude. The feeling, the sensibility, expressed in the ‘Country Churchyard’ (to say nothing of Tennyson and Browning) is cruder than that in the ‘Coy Mistress’ (Eliot, 1962). Donne was a poet who fused thought and feeling successfully. A thought to Donne was an

experience; it modified his sensibility (Eliot, 1962). The work of the poet is to amalgamate and fuse wide and more often opposite experiences in order to create. When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes (Eliot, 1962). It is the duty of the poet to amalgamate and fuse a vast number of experiences into a single whole. He has to ruminate or meditate and at the same time has to turn his thought into poetry. This is what T.S. Eliot thinks about metaphysical poetry. Jules Laforgue, and Tristan Corbiere in many of his poems, are nearer to the 'school of Donne' than any modern English poet. But poets more classical than they have the same essential quality of transmuting ideas into sensations, of transforming an observation into a state of mind (Eliot, 1962). In the light of the above statement made by Eliot himself, it may well be concluded that the symbolists and the metaphysical poets have some common properties. The leading metaphysical poets exhibit the qualities of the leading symbolist poets and vice-versa. In both the schools there is the demand for compression of statement, for containing on the revealing detail and eliminating all inessentials, and thus for an effect of comprehensiveness to be gained by the bringing to bear of a great deal of packed experience into a single movement of expression (Mathessien, 1959). For the poets of Donne's school, there was no separation between life and thought, and that their way of feeling was directly and freshly altered by their reading (Mathessien, 1959). The metaphysical poets seek originality and newness. They strive to achieve their end through the use of metaphysical conceits. In the symbolists there is an increased allusiveness and indirection, a flexibility in their verse designed to catch every nuance of their feeling. Such technical agility fascinated Eliot, especially in Laforgue (Mathessien, 1959).

Eliot was an admirer of the symbolists as well as the metaphysical poets. The principal quality which drew Eliot to the symbolists is one they possess in common with the metaphysicals 'the same essential quality of transmuting ideas into sensation, of transforming an observation into a state of mind'. This quality may be defined more technically as 'the presence of idea in the image' (Mathessien, 1959). The symbolists aim at expressing their thoughts through the use of symbols, which makes their style terse and epigrammatic. The metaphysical poets, too, try to pack their ideas into metaphysical conceits. Both the schools intend to mean more than what the

words or phrases actually express. The condensation of form that was demanded both by Donne and the symbolists logically builds its effect upon sharp contrasts, and makes full use of elements of surprise, which Eliot, as well as Poe, considers to have been ‘one of the most important means of poetic effect since Homer’ (Mathessien, 1959).

As is evident from the discussion held above, both Donne and the symbolists aim at incorporating the ‘element of surprise’ in their poetry. This ‘element of surprise’ is what separates them from earlier and latter schools of poetry. It is the hallmark of their poetry and this is what Eliot admires in them. Eliot was well-versed in the art of understanding and appreciating the symbolist as well as the metaphysical poetry. Both the schools have influenced him profoundly and he exhibited the qualities of both kinds of poetry in his own writings. But if the details of Eliot’s style show everywhere the mark of his responsive mastery of the later symbolists as well as of the metaphysicals, the impression of Baudelaire upon his spirit has been even more profound (Mathessien, 1959). Eliot follows Baudelaire when he advocates that the poet must have a sense of his age, as Baudelaire’s intensity is the result of his having a ‘sense of his own age’ a quality not easy to analyse, but one which, as Eliot stresses it again and again in the course of discussing very different poets, is revealed to be one of his fundamental tests for great poetry (Mathessien, 1959).

He was deeply influenced and motivated by Remy de Gourmont, Baudelaire, and Laforgue. Almost all of his critical writings have been a matter of borrowing from the earlier critics. His criticism has been determined by his study of metaphysical and symbolist poetry. He shapes his criticism according to it and whatever merits or qualities he finds in the poetry of the metaphysical and symbolist poets; he advocates their use in poetry through his critical writings. His concepts, generally, are formulated keeping in mind the general trends of poetry of both the schools. So, effect of both–metaphysical and symbolist schools–upon him is everlasting.

The symbolists emphasized upon having rhythm in poetry and wanted to look for musicality in language by means of the use of evocative words. ‘Music of ideas’ is the phrase used by I.A. Richards for Eliot’s *The Wasteland*. The phrase itself suggests Eliot’s particular attraction to Laforgue. Eliot emphasizes on form and rhythm under the influence of the symbolists. He wants to suggest in the rhythms of his verse the movement of thought in a living mind, and thus to communicate the exact pattern of his meanings not so much by logical structure as by emotional suggestions (Mathessien, 1959). Eliot seeks to attain the musicality of poems without affecting

its meaning. Similarly, the metaphysical poets also lend music to their poetry by the use of metaphysical conceits and they also succeed in doing so when they breathe 'element of surprise' into their poetry. The metaphysical as well as the symbolist poets lend music to their poetry by evocation and suggestiveness.

Eliot, thus, is influenced both by the French and the English symbolists. It was Ezra Pound who introduced him to the leading and great writers of his age. It is through Pound that Eliot's sensibility got developed and he started admiring symbolist poetry with a fresh insight and ultimately became a part of the English symbolists. His association with Ezra Pound contributed a lot towards making Eliot a great poet-critic. F.O. Matthiessen (1959) in *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* writes that in the years just before the first world war, the speculation of T.E. Hulme and Ezra Pound brought a new quickening of life which prepared the way for Eliot's own development.

As has already been mentioned that it was through S. Grierson's *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century* that Eliot got introduced to the world of metaphysical poetry in the same way in which Arthur Symons' book *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* got him introduced to the French Symbolists which afterwards led to his association with Pound and other symbolist poets of England. Eliot after going through Grierson's edition got attracted towards the metaphysical poets and he was largely responsible for the revival of interest in the metaphysical poetry in the twentieth century. With the generation of readers since the First World War, Donne has assumed the stature, of a centrally important figure for the first time since the seventeenth century; and his rise has been directly connected with the fact that Eliot has enabled us to see with fresh closeness, not only by means of his analysis of the method of metaphysical poetry but also because he has renewed that method in the rhythms and imagery of his own verse (Mathiessen, 1959). So, Eliot not only contributed to the revival of interest in the metaphysical poetry in the twentieth century, but his contribution as a poet-critic to the symbolist poetry in England is also very significant. He did a great service to both the schools, and contributed a lot to enrich them by the means of his writings.

Metaphor as a means to amalgamate and fuse thought and feeling was adopted both by the symbolists as well as the metaphysical poets. English symbolists inherited it directly from both of these schools. For Eliot, as for Pound, the essence of poetry is metaphor; but the special insights that he brings to metaphor come, not from Chinese picture writing, but from the French

symbolist poets of the 19th century and from the English ‘metaphysical’ poets of the 17th century (Wimsatt and Brooks, 1964). Both the schools were against the direct representation of thoughts and feelings. Some or the other agent was required to represent the thoughts and feelings exactly and precisely. And it was the metaphor that helped them achieving their end. Though Eliot advocates the use of ‘objective correlative’, yet he is an advocate of the use of metaphor along with the other symbolist poets of England. Metaphor has the power to startle and also it lends that ‘element of surprise’ to the poetry, which is the hallmark of both the symbolist as well as the metaphysical poetry.

It is a well known fact that symbolism began in America well before it began in France. It is not to be forgotten that the symbolist movement has its roots in the work of the most thoroughly conscious artist in American poetry before Eliot, Edgar Poe; and that, therefore, in Eliot’s taste for Baudelaire and Laforgue as well as for Poe, the wheel has simply come full circle (Mathessien, 1959). The metaphysical school existed in England, which also has had a far reaching effect on Eliot’s mind. Amalgamation of opposite thought and feeling is also the essence of both these schools. The poet’s mind has to amalgamate disparate experiences. Metaphors and conceits are the means employed by both the schools to achieve their end. According to Eliot (1962), it is important to find the verbal equivalent for states of mind and feeling. So, in addition to the form of poetry, substance and presentation are also equally important. As far as the language, meaning, and structure of the poetry are concerned, what Eliot writes about the metaphysical poets may well be applied to the symbolists also. He writes that the meaning is clear, the language simple and elegant. It is to be observed that the language of these poets is as a rule simple and pure; in the verse of George Herbert this simplicity is carried as far as it can go – a simplicity emulated without success by numerous modern poets. The structure of the sentences, on the other hand, is sometimes far from simple, but this is not a vice; it is a fidelity to thought and feeling.

He derived idea for his ‘objective correlative’ from the symbolists. The doctrine of the objective correlative is a kind of summation of what Eliot, along with Hulme and Pound, derived from the theory and practice of the French symbolists. The symbolists had argued that poetry cannot express emotion directly; emotions can only be evoked (Wimsatt and Brooks, 1964). Comparing these lines with that of Eliot (1950) in “Hamlet and His Problems” when he describes objective correlative as a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula

of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked, it may very well be maintained that both these statements are the one and the same thing. This is because of the influence of the French symbolists upon Eliot that he airs the same views as were aired by the symbolist poets. It is, generally, believed that he probably borrowed the phrase ‘dissociation of sensibility’ from Remy de Gourmont, thus, it may very well be established that most of Eliot’s ideas and critical concepts are borrowed from the symbolists.

Eliot, as a critic, has borrowed ideas and concepts from earlier critics, especially from the symbolists, but he has made his ideas and concepts look different. Ransom found Eliot’s criticism too psychologistic (Wimsatt & Brooks, 1964). Some critics have found him to be a romantic critic, some a classical critic, and some others a neo-critic. So, Eliot may be termed as a critic who was influenced by many schools of criticism and poetry. Under the influence of the French symbolists, he devised such concepts as ‘objective correlative’ and ‘dissociation of sensibility’, and he used them to suit his purpose. He applied his critical theories to the metaphysical poets and found them having ‘unified sensibility’, a quality that distinguishes ‘good’ poetry from ‘bad’ poetry. Eliot (1962), in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” writes that to divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim: for it would conduct to juster estimation of actual poetry, good or bad. Thus, he wants the poet to acquire the historical sense and be traditional, and sets the poet in contrast and comparison with the great writers and poets of the past, for no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead (Eliot, 1962). The essay itself has not been considered as original in thought and concept, and idea for it seems to have been derived from Aristotle. But it is now as much of a classic as Matthew Arnold’s ‘The Study of Poetry’ (Mathessien, 1959).

So, it may well be concluded that Eliot lacks originality, but he makes every concept look peculiarly his own. He may be indebted to earlier critics and writers for his concepts, but he is original in so far as his logic and argumentation is concerned. Eliot’s critical writings may be said to be an outcome of his wide and vast reading of the symbolists and the metaphysical poets. Whatever qualities he found in the writings of these two schools, he took them for granted and on the basis of these qualities formed his concepts. He even borrowed his phrases from these

schools. His criticism, thus, emerges out of the characteristics and trends of the symbolist and the metaphysical poetry, and he, under the influence of these schools, seems to be penning down the characteristics of the symbolist and the metaphysical poetry through his critical concepts and theories, knowingly and unknowingly. All his criticism seems to be determined, shaped, and moulded by the symbolist and the metaphysical schools of poetry. But it may well be added that with all his successes and failures Eliot stands for orderliness; both in art and in criticism (Prasad, 1985).

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