

Metaphysical Poetry

Metaphysical poetry expressed the truth of human experience in all its flux, complexity, and ambiguity and this poetry was similar to much modern poetry. Metaphysicals were frequently able to view an experience both emotionally and intellectually at the same time. The seventeenth century metaphysical poets were never self-consciously allied; neither were they individuals working independently. Donne was the livening force in the rise of the style. His poetry abounds in probing analogies and ingenious wit and recent critics have found in Donne, examples of ambiguity and unified sensibility. Following Donne's lead, Edward and George Herbert helped establish the secular and devotional lines in metaphysical poetry. In their structures and figures, Edward and Herbert praised the expression of common things ingeniously and wittily and somewhat out of the ordinary road. Marvel, whose tone is often closer to that of Lovelace and the Cavalier Platonists than to Donne, absorbed the metaphysical style with an easy grace into his own. George Herbert channelled the metaphysical into a true devotional poetry like Donne, he married a careful logic to a metaphorical vision. Both Edward and George Herbert depended for their figures on abstract knowledge and everyday experience. Crashaw's metaphysical style is intertwined with a continental Catholic baroque style. All these poets contributed to the development of the style known as 'Metaphysical'. Thomas Crew in his poem 'An elegy upon the death of the Dean of Pauls', Dr John Donne mentioned Donne's revolt against imitation and conventional imagery of 'Gods and Goddesses', his pregnant fancy, his masculine line that bends 'our troublesome language'. Donne had been able to express something new through the handling of the language. The poetry of Donne and his followers was related to the philosophical, rhetorical and poetic theories of the Renaissance, which constituted still a force in seventeenth century literature. Logical structure, metaphor and wit are usually regarded as typical of Donne and his followers. During the Renaissance many writers forged new links between rhetoric and logic. Part of the new interest in logic was due to Peter Ramus, who, in his artistic revision of Aristotle, stressed the subordination of other sciences to logic and greatly emphasized the logical process of investigation and disposition. There was a new emphasis upon the so-called figures of thought, such as definition, distinction, cause and effect which could be dealt with under the heads of logic. Logical disposition, figures of thought and the metaphysical conceit flourished in the logic-conscious Renaissance climate.