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The Language of Metaphysical Poetry: Scientific Developments and Ongoing Reformations of the English Language in the Seventeenth Century

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Abstract:

The highly intellectual Metaphysical poems had two remarkable characteristics among many. They had multiple integrations of strange and farfetched imagery and recurrent paradox which gave them quintessential characteristics in the Seventeenth century. In fact the poets were composing poems at a time when various reformations were taking place in English language. No fixed consensus was there among the grammarians or lexicographers about basics of either English vocabulary or English grammar. It is interesting to see how the Metaphysical poets were composing their work at a time when there were so many intense excitements going around in economics, politics, science and social life, but English language was yet to attain maturity and consensus. A careful study shows that because of the transitional stage of vocabulary and grammar, which are the basics of a language, the Metaphysical poets took recourse to the terminologies from Mathematics, Astronomy, and Geometry in order to bring a sense of accuracy and solidity to their poetic expressions. It was a challenge for the Metaphysical poets to go with the new ideas, and assertively incorporate these to express themselves through their poems.

Keywords: *Metaphysical, grammar, vocabulary, language, science, geometry, sphere*

1. Introduction

One of the most chronologically overlapped ages in the history of English literature was the age of John Donne or the period when the Metaphysical poets composed their works. With the Age of Shakespeare (1564–1616) on the one hand and the Jacobean Age (1567–1625) on the other, and the first thirty years of the seventeenth century, which stands midway between Age of Shakespeare and the Age of Milton (1608–1674), the metaphysical poets stand with their compositions with a complete new outlook on life and events around them at an age of remarkable literary activity.

The most important point about this age was that it was an age of transition. Things were changing almost every other day. News and events were developing fast from every corner including Italy, Germany, and also England. The domains of economics, politics and social life were affected, with the faster expansion of colonies and with the increase of industries and trade for processing the newly found wealth and knowledge. Astronomy, Geometry, Mathematics was opening up new horizons. With the expansion of new knowledge, people became skeptic and braver. Faiths of ancestors were challenged on a large scale in the new literature of the age. Amidst these all round intense excitements, the English language was attaining conclusive structure, but a considerable amount of reformation was taking place in terms of vocabulary, pronunciation and as a whole existence of grammar was still not entirely customized.

In my paper, I would like to show how all these influences of physical and psychological expansions were reflected and registered, and how the instability of transitional stages of grammar and English language steered the metaphysical poets to borrow words, particularly, from the field of science and geometry where they found approximation of their poetic thoughts and expressions. I would like to take example of four important poets of the age. They are John Cleveland (1638-1658), John Donne (1572-1631), Andrew Marvell (1621-1678), and Henry Vaughan (1621-1695).

The Seventeenth century saw an unprecedented development of scientific and mathematical ideas all across the Europe. The ground was already prepared during the Sixteenth century by various eminent scientists like Nicolaus Copernicus (1473 –1543) in his “De revolutionibus orbium coelestium” (1543) formulated a model of the universe and forwarded a revolutionary model of the Sun at the centre of the universe, contrary to the previous belief that the earth is at the centre of the whole universe. Scientists like Tycho Brahe (1546- 1601) who made accurate and comprehensive astronomical observations about the planetary motions, Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) who clarified the age old blur areas of astronomy and astrology by working on the fundamentals of optics. Mention must be made to John Napier’s (1550-1617) invention of logarithm in the Seventeenth century, which made remarkable contributions to the famous Seventeenth century physicist Sir Isaac Newton (1643-1727). The French mathematician René Descartes (1596-1650)

development of analytic geometry and calculus soon helped the astronomers to put the motions of the planets into graphs. Although the poetic response of a poet could be corroborated from different motives and impulses, but many poets derived the inspiration from such scientific developments and echoes of such developments are frequently registered in the compositions of the Metaphysical poets. In his poem, "Mark Antony" (1647) John Cleveland mentions the accuracy of the beauty of the 'fair Egyptian Queen' in the following way:

Mystical grammar of amorous glances;
 Feeling of pulses, the physic of love;
 Rhetorical courtings and musical dances;
 Numb'ring of kisses arithmetic prove;
 Eyes like astronomy;
 Straight-limbed geometry;
 In her art's ingeny
 Our wits were sharp and keen.

The remarkable point in these above lines is that the poet has no sense of urgency in describing the beloved. He is not carried away by the beauty of the beloved; rather he takes time to describe the accuracy of the beloved. He resorts to a scientific discourse to help him analyze the sight of her.

The first English dictionary, "Table Alphabetical" (1604), was published by English schoolteacher Robert Cawdrey(1538-1604), a little before the "Authorized Version of the English the King James Bible(1611). "Cawdrey's little book contained 2,543 of what he called "hard words", especially those borrowed from Hebrew, Greek, Latin and French, although it was not actually a very reliable resource (even the word words was spelled in two different ways on the title page alone, as wordes and words". (Luke. *The History of English*) Many of the conventional ideas about style and grammar which survived into modern English were established at this time. Mention must be made to the fact that until the end of the Sixteenth century there were almost no grammars of English. There were various reformations taking place in case of vowel and consonant sounds, and grammarians failed to make fixed consensus about punctuation marks. "Up until the 17th Century, English was rarely used for scholarly or scientific works, as it was not considered to possess the precision or the gravitas of Latin or French. Thomas More (1478-1535), Isaac Newton, William Harvey (1578-1657) and many other English scholars all wrote their works in Latin and, even in the 18th Century, Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626) hedged his bets and wrote many of his works in both Latin and English and, taking his inspiration mainly from Greek, coined several scientific words such as thermometer, pneumonia, skeleton and encyclopedia." (Luke. *The History of English*) The problem with the expression of a description of something was one of the major points of these poems because grammar was in transition, and a proper English language was yet to be evolved. Therefore, bringing about a sense of accuracy and solidity to their poetic expressions was one of the principal challenges for these poets.

The reference to the 'Feeling of pulses' in the poem has special connotation too. It was a very interesting topic during that time which was established by William Harvey (1578-1657) in his "De Motu Cardis" also known as "On the Motion of the Heart and Blood" published in 1628. Likewise the mention of Mathematics, Astronomy, and Geometry has connotations with the ongoing and rapid developments that were taking place during those times as mentioned earlier.

Similar ethos were also resonated in the most primary figure of the Seventeenth century poet John Donne. In his poem "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" (1633) could be mentioned as a one of the best examples where the idea of spheres is used to describe the condition of human love in its most complete and perfect form.

"Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears;
 Men reckon what it did, and meant;
 But trepidation of the spheres,
 Though greater far, is innocent.
 Dull sublunary lovers' love
 —Whose soul is sense—cannot admit
 Of absence, 'cause it doth remove
 The thing which elemented it."

Here, with the use of 'sphere' as metaphor, Donne appropriates the idea of microcosmic nature of the lovers' minds where they ignore the distance between them and start prioritizing the closeness of hearts over the physicality of love.

To explicate the idea of souls, he further delves into geometrical terms:

Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to airy thinness beat.

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fix'd foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the' other do.

And though it in the centre sit,
Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

If we remember the idea of optics forwarded by Johannes Kepler in his "*Astronomiae Pars Optica*" which was published in 1604 that led to many further experiments and discoveries pertaining to human eye, projection of images in retina, and which is still recognized as a foundation of modern optics, and the date of composition of this Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" which was composed either 1611 or 1612, it is very easy to find how Donne has remarkably played around the idea of dimensions and optics in this poem. There is a tendency to measure the movement of lovers with the idea of a compass movement. This tendency to measure everything with accuracy was common in the poems of the Metaphysical poets.

In his poem "Air and Angel" (1633), Donne talks about his love being overlapped by his beloved's love

Then as an angel, face and wings
Of air, not pure as it, yet pure doth wear,
So thy love may be my love's sphere.
Just such disparity
As is 'twixt air and angel's purity,
'Twixt women's love and men's will ever be.

The mention of love's sphere, here, has a reference to what has famously been called as a 'Flat-error', a train of controversies that ran right from the medieval science and literature through the Seventeenth century till the middle of the nineteenth century. The 'Flat error' controversy was about whether the earth was flat or spherical. The Metaphysical poets were always trying to voice scientific and physical account of the controversial developments in their poems. They always prefer to go with the new ideas, and assertively incorporate them in most of their poems.

The idea of sphere has repetitively been used by the metaphysical poets in their compositions. Henry Vaughan in his poem "The World" (1650) while describing the preference for eternity over worldly affairs describes certain images and their transformations in the following way:

I saw Eternity the other night,
Like a great ring of pure and endless light,
All calm, as it was bright;
And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years,
Driv'n by the spheres
Like a vast shadow mov'd; in which the world
And all her train were hurl'd.
The dotting lover in his quaintest strain
Did there complain;
Near him, his lute, his fancy, and his flights,
Wit's sour delights,
With gloves, and knots, the silly snares of pleasure,
Yet his dear treasure
All scatter'd lay, while he his eyes did pour
Upon a flow'r.

The references to time, space and human action are all brought together with the help of geometry and measurement of time suggesting the poet's efforts to put every detail in a meticulous way.

A quintessential example is to be found in the opening lines of the Andrew Marvell's "Upon the Hill and Grove at Billbrough" (1681)

See how the archèd earth does here
Rise in a perfect hemisphere!
The stiffest compass could not strike
A line more circular and like;
Nor softest pencil draw a brow
So equal as this hill does bow.
It seems as for a model laid,
And that the world by it was made.

The fusion of geometry and poetry to consolidate the ethereal beauty of earth is exceptionally commendable in these lines.

2. Conclusion

A careful study of the development of the English language shows that it was probably in the early Twentieth century, English started to gather a sociological meaning and the class structure was added to it which used to be identified with the accent. For example, a speaker with a Cockney sound will be branded as a vagabond. Therefore, we may imagine the situations of the Metaphysical poets who were witnessing so much around them, yet they were facing multiple obstructions in terms of vocabulary, speech, accents, humor etc. while expressing themselves through poetry. This could be one of the major reasons for their inclinations toward appealing words from the field of science, geometry and cosmology. The language of poems in the hands of metaphysical poets at a time of linguistic transformations found a great solace in the rhetoric of scientific and geometrical discoveries of the day. The idea of accuracy to describe their feelings, even the ultimate passions of love, is amply evident in their poems.

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