

The Contribution of the Metaphysical Poets to English Literature

- (i) The metaphysical poets have given to the English language its best religious poetry. The moods of incisive introspection and mysticism could best be expressed not through commonplace, conventional poetic images and language but unconventional and bald imagery which would jolt the mind and spirit of the reader into an intimate rapport with the mood of the poet. Herbert, Donne, Vaughan, Crashaw and Traherne are the most important among the religious English poets of all ~~any~~ ages.
- (ii) In the field of love poetry, too, the contribution of the metaphysicals is considerable and quite important from the historical point of view. When Donne appeared on the stage, Spenser and his followers were following the Petrarchan tradi-

tion of highly sentimental and idealised love poetry which had not much to do with reality. Donne demolished this claptrap and started a vein of highly realistic, frankly sensual and sometimes downright cynical amatory verse. He was critical of the Elizabethan sonneteers and lyricists who put their mistresses, real or imaginary, on the pedestal of deity, and pretended to woo them as their "servants", dying or living in accordance with their moods of rejection or acceptance of their supplications. Donne was frank enough:-

"Love nor so pure and abstract as they use  
To say which have no mistresses  
Love sometimes would  
Contemplate, sometimes do."

(iii) Even in the ruggedness and occasional vulgarity of their

diction and versification the metaphysicals did some service to English poetry in that they made the poets realise that the "smoothness of numbers" alone does not make for great poetry. What was needed was a hard core of sense and deft handling of experience related to the poet himself who reserved for himself the liberty to employ whatever diction and style he thought was eminently suitable for his purpose. After Donne and his followers the mere music of poetry could not capture for it any appreciative audience.

(iv)

The intellectualism of the metaphysical poetry and the compositeness of its imagery and even the crabbed nature of its style secured for it a continuous stream of readers from generation to generation. In the modern times all these qualities appear agreeable

to a large number of readers. The modern poets, particularly T.S. Eliot living in an age of crumbling values have found a guide and a source of inspiration in Donne. It is not surprising, then that in the modern critical canon Donne is rated as one of the best English poets.

The end.

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