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THE INFLUENCE OF THE METAPHYSICAL POETS ON THE POETRY OF T.S.  
ELIOT

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## ABSTRACT

T.S. Eliot's poetry changed as he grew older, just as the poets who influenced him changed. The metaphysical poets, especially John Donne, were a great influence on T.S. Eliot in his early life. He admired them for their high place in the world of literary criticism, their combination of intellect and emotion and wit. After Eliot converted to High Church Anglicanism, however, he began to admire different poets instead, poets that he deemed more "religious" than the metaphysicals. Eliot saw Dante as more religious than the metaphysicals because the definition of belief during his time meant more than the belief of the seventeenth-century metaphysicals. Even as Eliot focused more on Dante, he never lost the imprint of the seventeenth century on his poetry, found in elements like wit, irony, the grotesque and the extended conceit. While Eliot exhibited elements of seventeenth-century metaphysicality, he combined the elements of thought and feeling and refined the definition of divine love, creating elements for a type of metaphysical poetry of his own.

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## Introduction

T.S. Eliot benefitted from many influences: Baudelaire, Laforgue, Pound. However, one group of poets influenced Eliot throughout his entire writing career: the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets. In the criticism and poetry of his late twenties and early thirties, Eliot praised the metaphysical poets at the expense of “lesser” poets, such as the Romantics. In 1926, however, Eliot gave a lecture that departed from his previous high opinion of the metaphysical poets. In the next few years, Eliot also faced changes in his personal life. The year after these lectures, he joined the Anglican Church and became a British citizen. As the central themes of Eliot’s poetry became much more religion-oriented, one would think that Eliot would continue to admire the metaphysical poets; yet, as Eliot grew older, he idolized other poets, specifically Dante.

While Eliot’s appreciation of the metaphysical poets may have lessened over the years, I argue that these poets never stopped influencing Eliot’s works. I seek to find answers to questions like, what did the metaphysical poets mean to Eliot? What caused Eliot’s thoughts to change? Once Eliot’s admiration shifted, did elements and themes inspired by the metaphysical poets continue to appear in his poetry? In order to answer these questions, I separated Eliot’s life into two chapters. In the first chapter I discuss his early life from when he published “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in 1915, to 1926, when Eliot gave the Clark Lectures and publicly shared his latest opinion of the metaphysical poets; in the second, I focus on Eliot’s life from 1926 until the 1960s. I then devoted the last chapter to analyzing specific instances of metaphysical allusion and thought in Eliot’s poetry.

Although general elements of seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry often appear in Eliot’s work, there are some metaphysical poets he mentions specifically, such as Crashaw and

Cowley, and others he never mentions at all or only in passing, like Traherne and Vaughan. Throughout this paper, I take the choice of Eliot's subject matter into account. Of all the metaphysical poets, I focus mostly on Donne because of how often Eliot referred to Donne in his criticism; yet as Eliot did in the Clark Lectures, I devote a section to Cowley and Crashaw as well. Eliot's appreciation for Donne originated early in his writing career, when he studied the metaphysical poets as a student at Harvard, and though Anglican Eliot felt a stronger connection with other poets, he still recognized Donne's contributions to his own work. With the publishing of his work on the metaphysical poets, Eliot as a young man was able to find a place in the world of literary criticism, as well as develop and refine his own poetic style.

## Chapter 1 Eliot and the Revival of the Metaphysical Poets (1915-1926)

Eliot was greatly influenced by the metaphysical poets early in his writing career. His early poetry makes references to and includes extended metaphors typically found Donne, Crashaw, Herbert and a handful of Marvell's poems. Eliot wrote that he remembered being introduced to Donne as a freshman at Harvard and reviewing Herbert Grierson's *Metaphysical Poetry*, his first opportunity to write about Donne (*Criticize* 21). Joseph Duncan goes so far as to write that Eliot himself was "the high priest of the modern metaphysical revival," alongside critics such as Alexander Grosart, Edmund Gosse and Herbert Grierson (143). In this section, I will examine what the metaphysical poets meant to Eliot during the period between his years at Harvard and the year before his conversion to Anglicanism in 1927. The two main articles of Eliot's that I will analyze are "The Metaphysical Poets" and "Andrew Marvell," both written in 1921. However, before analyzing Eliot's work, one must establish a background on the literary critics' opinion of the metaphysical poets, because these critics initiated the popularity of the metaphysical poets. While Eliot did not necessarily agree with these critics, they undoubtedly affected his views on metaphysical poetry.

The metaphysical poets, and Donne in particular, during the first decade of the twentieth century inspired discussion in the circles of prominent critics and even high school weeklies (Duncan 169). Three major works published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought the eye of the critical world back to the metaphysicals. In 1872, Grosart published an edition of Donne's poems, in addition to editions of other metaphysical poets like Herbert, Crashaw, Marvell and Cowley. Just over a decade later, in 1899, Gosse published a biography of Donne. About another decade after this publication, prior to an edition of Donne's poems, Grierson published *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century, Donne to Butler*

in 1912 (Duncan 113-119). With Eliot's criticism on the metaphysical poets, published in 1921, Eliot helped to define metaphysical poetry as poetry that combines thought and feeling, attempting to bring this type of writing into the modern era (Murphy 11-13).

### **Eliot and Wit: "Andrew Marvell" (1921)**

In "Andrew Marvell," Eliot focuses on what makes Marvell's poetry metaphysical: his wit. Though not all critics considered Marvell a metaphysical poet, Eliot treats him as a metaphysical due to his wit, anticipating other critics like Earl Miner: "If any feature of metaphysical has seemed to be its prime characteristic, that has been wit" (Miner 118). Eliot defines wit as "[overstating] and [undercutting] simultaneously so that the reader gets the joke...without missing the point" (Murphy 47). Eliot realizes how often this type of wit comes into Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress": "We can easily recognize a witty fancy in the successive images (my 'vegetable love', 'till the conversion of the Jews')" (*Selected* 164).

What really intrigues Eliot in Marvell's poem, however, is that "this fancy is not indulged . . . . It is structural decoration of a serious idea" (Eliot, *Selected* 164). The "witty fancy," referring to the overstatement of the speaker's love using a long succession of metaphors, manages humor with its exaggerations while leading us toward the main point of the poem, that life is short and the object of the speaker's devotion should copulate with him. In line with this conception of wit, Eliot also applauds Marvell for the "alliance of levity and seriousness (by which the seriousness is intensified)," a concept that Eliot attempted in his writing and then eventually moved away from (*Selected* 164). Eliot does more than praise the wit in this poem; rather, Eliot wishes to bring Marvell's wit into the modern era: wit "is something precious and needed and apparently extinct" in modern poetry (*Selected* 171). Marvell's wit is not the only

gift from the metaphysicals, however. In fact, Eliot found much to admire about metaphysical poetry, especially Donne's.

### **Looking into the Cerebral Cortex, the Nervous System and the Digestive Tracts: "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921)**

In "The Metaphysical Poets," published the same year as "Andrew Marvell," Eliot praises the intelligence in the poetry of the metaphysicals, found in the metaphors, sentence structure and word choice at the expense of the writers of the eighteenth century, including Tennyson and Browning. Though Eliot calls the language of the metaphysical poets "simple and pure," "the *structure* of the sentences, on the other hand, is sometimes far from simple," much like his own style (*Selected* 62). Eliot calls the complexity of the metaphysical style "a fidelity to thought and feeling," compared to the poets of the "sentimental age," like Keats and Shelley, who "thought and felt by fits, unbalanced; they reflected" (*Selected* 62, 65).

In combining intelligence and emotion in poetry, Donne exceeded the skill of all the other metaphysicals. He "formed new wholes" from the experiences of "[falling] in love, or [reading] Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking" (Eliot, *Selected* 64). Donne was able to take all of these fragmented thoughts and experiences and mold them into one in the form of a metaphysical conceit. In his article, Eliot focuses on Donne to emphasize the connection between thought and emotion, because "no poet serves as a better illustration of this statement than John Donne, who was the master of the metaphysical conceit" (Maddrey 83).

Donne's mastery of combining intellect and emotion by using a metaphysical conceit inspired many modern writers, including Eliot, to think about poetry in new ways. The

metaphysicals were “engaged in the task of trying to find the verbal equivalent for states of mind and feeling,” just as Eliot “aimed at the restitution of intelligence to the acts of poetry and criticism” (Eliot, *Selected* 65; Sharpe 79). Eliot based a theory called “dissociated sensibility” on the concept of the combination of thought and feeling in metaphysical poetry. During the time that followed the period of the metaphysical poets, as the poets of the eighteenth century refined the language in their poems, “the feeling became more crude” (Eliot, *Selected* 64). Eliot blames the origin of the missing sensibility in the eighteenth century on the great poets Dryden and Milton, who wrote poems with intelligent language and concepts, but did not succeed at conveying the emotion that Donne and the other metaphysical poets exhibited in their poems. This dissociation of sensibility worsened with the Romantics and continued into the modern era as a sickness “from which we [modern writers] have never recovered” (Eliot, *Selected* 64). Eliot differentiates between Milton’s and Dryden’s poetry and the poetry of the seventeenth-century metaphysicals:

Those who object to the ‘artificiality’ of Milton or Dryden sometimes tell us to ‘look into our hearts and write’. But that is not looking deep enough; Racine or Donne looked into a good deal more than the heart. One must look into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts (*Selected* 66).

Not only did Donne and Racine include matters of the heart in their poetry, but expanded on these emotions, linking them to more physical and intellectual ways to express their emotions. “Looking” into these places—the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, the digestive tracts—added a taste of the unexpected to the metaphysicals’ poetry and gained Eliot’s admiration, though Eliot’s poetry was rarely balanced between the two. Though some critics were more receptive to Eliot’s analysis of Dryden and Milton, Edwin Muir wrote in *Calendar of Modern Poets* in 1925:

His criticism is more comprehensive and more sound than that of any other writer of this generation, but it would be infinitely better if it were compatible with an appreciation of the important of Milton as well as Marlowe, of Wordsworth as well as Dryden, in the English poetic tradition. Until it is, it will have a faint but damaging, and altogether misleading, resemblance to the criticism of a school (Brooker 126).

Unarguably, despite the dissenting opinions on Eliot's dissociation of sensibility, there is no debate that Eliot influenced the critical world, even as a young critic.

### **The Young Eliot's Attraction to the Metaphysical Poets**

Eliot found much to admire in the Metaphysical poets when he was a young man. One question is—why? One critic, William Pratt, argues that when Eliot made the decision to settle in England in 1915, he focused mostly on poetry instead of philosophy, and therefore gave all of his attention to penning great works like *The Waste Land*:

In the year 1914-15 Eliot discovered the poet in himself with the help of [Ezra] Pound, and the critic in himself with the help of Bradley and Aristotle, and he could leave the philosopher in himself behind at Oxford while taking up the dual roles of poet and critic in London (Pratt 335).

Pound's tutelage shaped Eliot's life, but Eliot never did "leave the philosopher in himself behind" as Pratt claims. In fact, Eliot possibly never left his background in philosophy behind; rather, his interest in philosophy attracted him to the intellectual elements, particularly the concept of religion, of Donne's poetry.

Eliot's preoccupation with the link between thought and feeling in Donne's and the other Metaphysicals' poetry shows that Eliot was still drawn to philosophy, complimenting his uncertainty of his faith. Eliot searched for many years for a religion to which he could devote himself entirely, and one in which he could truly *believe*. At Harvard, Eliot questioned his faith in Unitarianism, the religion he was raised to believe. As a student, Eliot studied Indian philosophy, but the subject "did not provide Eliot with a mainstay in his search for a defining

belief” (Jain 19). Duncan notes that Donne’s “struggle toward faith through doubt,” shown in the changes between the love poetry of “Jack Donne” and the religious poetry of “Dean Donne,” mirrored the feelings of many modern poets, including Eliot (Duncan 168). Eliot could have been part of the “increasing number of critics [who] saw their own moods mirrored in Donne. Lost between old and new values, they envisioned Donne as similarly torn between two worlds” (Duncan 169). While Eliot could have related to Donne’s “struggle,” Eliot could have preoccupied himself with the metaphysical poets in order to increase his own fame.

In “Andrew Marvell” and “The Metaphysical Poets,” Eliot developed new theories about the metaphysical poets, including the term dissociation of sensibility; established a relationship between intelligence and emotion; and discussed their impact on the styles of modern poetry—almost certainly to invite praise of Eliot’s own poetry. Many critics view Eliot’s “The Metaphysical Poets” as “reflections more of Eliot’s standards for poetry writing than of standards for poetry writing in general,” instead of an admiration of the wit of the Metaphysicals (Murphy 306). Murphy writes:

Eliot . . . himself was a poet who could famously compare the evening sky to a patient lying etherized upon an operating room table, so Eliot’s admiration for this capacity of the mind—or wit, as the metaphysicals themselves would have termed it—to discover the unlikeliest of comparisons and then make them poetically viable should come as no surprise to the reader (305).

Eliot himself wrote that “a young poet, such as he was at the time he wrote the review at hand, will most likely condemn those literary practices that he regards to be detrimental to his own developments as a poet” (Murphy 306). In Eliot’s own words, he explains the link between his criticism and his poetry: “In my earlier criticism, both in my general affirmations about poetry and in writing about authors who had influenced me, I was implicitly defending the sort of poetry that I and my friends wrote” (*Criticize* 16). Eliot refers to the “sort” poetry he wrote as a

young man, poetry that had the qualities of metaphysical poetry: extended conceits, wit and the combination of thought and feeling (namely found in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”).

Sharpe goes further:

[Eliot’s] covert purpose, to which he confessed a good deal later, and which is more apparent to us in retrospect, was a natural consequence of the overflowing into one another of his creative and his critical preoccupations: his criticism was a means of encouraging an intellectual climate which would be receptive to the kind of literature he himself valued, and which he and his associates were writing. In this he was to be unprecedentedly successful (79).

When Eliot argued for the value of the metaphysical poets, he forged a link between his and their poetry in order to make his own work look better. Though this is an opinion agreed upon by many critics, and Eliot himself, I believe that Eliot had a great respect for the metaphysical poets that goes further than a hidden agenda.

As suggested by Sharpe’s quote above, Eliot’s early poetry resembled the poetry of the metaphysical poets. It is simple enough to say that Eliot wrote like the metaphysicals because he admired them. In “To Criticize the Critic,” published in 1961, Eliot looked back on “The Metaphysical Poets”:

I think that if I wrote well about the metaphysical poets, it was because they were poets who had inspired me. . . . It was simply because no previous poet who had praised these poets had been so deeply influenced by them as I had been (*Criticize* 22).

Eliot could have been inspired by the intellectual elements of medicine, physics and other sciences that the metaphysicals wove into their poetry. Eliot advocated reading poetry for poetry instead of solely extracting the author’s personal meaning from it, though he “[conceded] the impossibility of such isolation” (Marshall 609).<sup>1</sup> Intellect also ties into the philosophical question

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout his career as a critic, Eliot believed both sides of the argument—poetry should be read for poetry, but at the same time the author’s intent for a poem cannot be ignored. Eliot’s essay, “Experiment in Criticism,” published in 1929, “implicitly invalidated his earlier focus on purely formal issues by compelling him to expand his vision beyond aesthetic considerations” (609).

of religion. At this point in Eliot's life, he struggled with religious doubt. This conflict between doubt and belief is also found in metaphysical poetry: "Doubt is an essential of metaphysical poetry and differentiates it in part from the assurance of the mystic's vision and from the declarations philosophical poetry" (Raiziss 173). Eliot probably found a common ground in this doubt of God and solace in the fact that the metaphysical poets were deeply religious, yet continued to struggle with doubts. Eliot wrote in "To Criticize the Critic" that the metaphysical poets helped him to discover something in himself, possibly his religiosity:

They do not now give me that intense excitement and sense of enlargement and liberation which comes from a discovery which is also a discovery of oneself: but that is an experience which can only happen once (*Criticize* 22).

The poetry of the metaphysicals spoke to Eliot, inspired his own poetry and even his life. However, though Eliot admired the metaphysicals early in his writing career, his opinion of these poets changed as Eliot refined his religious views.

As I will explain in detail in Chapter 3, Eliot incorporated many elements from the seventeenth-century metaphysicals into his own poetry, such as wit, irony and the extended conceit. As Eliot grew older, he wrote about the metaphysical poets less and less as he focused more on the poets who were, in his opinion, major poets. The literary world continued to discuss the metaphysical poets well into the 1940s, but Eliot's tastes in poetry gradually changed. This change occurred around the time Eliot proclaimed a religious faith and converted to Anglicanism. Eliot's search for religious faith may have influenced his new, lesser opinion of the metaphysical poets; as Eliot grew older, he found inspiration in different poets.

## Chapter 2

### The Older Eliot and the Metaphysical Poets (1926 and onward)

*“A very young man, who is himself stirred to write, is not primarily critical or even widely appreciative. He is looking for masters who will elicit his consciousness of what he wants to say himself, of the kind of poetry that is in him to write. The taste of an adolescent writer is intense, but narrow: it is determined by personal needs” (Eliot, Selected 248).*

As most authors mature, his or her tastes in literature begin to change—T.S. Eliot was no exception. Though Eliot favored the metaphysical poets in his youth, Eliot’s admiration for them diminished as he grew older and became more successful. At 38 years old, Eliot seeks to answer a different question than the ones produced by his youth. In addition to examining Eliot’s opinions toward the metaphysical poets and Donne in particular, during the period of his religious conversion, I will analyze the cause for Eliot’s change in thinking. As a man nearing forty in 1927, what questions does Eliot want to answer, and which poets help him find those answers?

Eliot’s life is often divided at 1927, marking the date he joined the Anglican Church. To analyze the influence of the metaphysical poets on Eliot, I instead suggest dividing his life at 1926. Not only was this when Eliot made the decision to convert, it was also the year he gave the Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, in which Eliot detailed the extensive flaws in the poetry of the metaphysical poets (Sharpe 115). After these lectures, the metaphysicals nearly disappear from Eliot’s critical work. In order to provide a comparison between his early and later

critical work on the metaphysicals, I will give an outline of Eliot's thoughts on these poets based mostly on the Clark Lectures and his criticism on Donne written after 1926.

### **A New View of the Metaphysical Poets: The Clark Lectures (1926)**

Eliot mentions Crashaw and Cowley in passing in "The Metaphysical Poets;" in the Clark Lectures, however, each poet is the subject of an entire lecture, though Eliot often shifts his focus to other poets. Eliot dismisses both Crashaw and Cowley as "lesser poets," though he appreciates Crashaw's work slightly more than Cowley's because of their differences in religious content. In Eliot's opinion, Crashaw is less educated than Donne and of "primarily a devotional, a fervent, temperament;" in Crashaw's poetry, a "sequence of feelings . . . are thought" (*Varieties* 162, 183). Crashaw, unlike Donne, focuses more on feeling rather than thought, making the sequences of emotion create "a string of pearls, a garden of beauties," though they were "pressed together without design" (Eliot, *Varieties* 170). In Crashaw's work, Eliot managed to find language and sentiments he could appreciate; however, he had no positive commentary on Cowley.

Eliot calls Cowley "a small man; a pathetic little celibate epicurean" (*Varieties* 194). He quotes Samuel Johnson:

This obligation to amorous ditties owes, I believe, its original to the fame of Petrarch . . . . The basis of all excellence is truth; he that professes love ought to feel its power. Petrarch was a true lover . . . . Of Cowley . . . whatever he may talk of his own inflammability, and the variety of characters by which his heart was divided, he in reality was in love but once, and then never had resolution to tell his passion" (Eliot, *Varieties* 188).

Referring to this selection, Eliot comments: "Cowley is an inferior Petrarch; that Petrarch whom Johnson treats with the respect only given to a subject one knows nothing about and does not wish to take the trouble of looking into" (*Varieties* 189). Eliot criticizes Cowley, and Crashaw

and Donne as well, for not understanding the difference between human and divine emotion, two concepts that Dante fully understood:

In Dante there is a system of thought to which is exactly equivalent a system of feeling, whilst with Donne there is only a kind of flow of thought to which is equivalent a flow of feeling; and that Dante alters or transforms his human feeling into divine feeling when applying it to divine objects, whilst Crashaw applies human feelings, though of intensity equal to any ever applied to human objects, almost unaltered to divine objects (*Varieties* 200).

Eliot sees this religious concept as incredibly important, putting a distance between himself and the metaphysical poets.

In the Clark Lectures, Eliot's critical attitude toward Donne is clearly visible. While pre-Anglican Eliot did not find Donne's poetry to be perfect by any means, Eliot's analysis of Donne becomes much more critical after Eliot joined the Anglican Church. When discussing Donne's "The Ecstasy," Eliot writes: "Thus one of the finest poems of Donne, which is absolutely a very beautiful poem indeed, begins with one of the most hideous mixed figures of speech in the language" (*Varieties* 109). The first four lines of the poem read:

Where, like a pillow on a bed,  
A pregnant bank swelled up, to rest  
The violet's reclining head,  
Sat we two, one another's best (Donne, "The Ecstasy" (1276)).<sup>2</sup>

While Eliot concedes that Donne created a work of art, instead of comparing Donne to the eighteenth century poets, Eliot instead looks to Dante, and finds Donne lacking. Prior to these lectures, Eliot had never published a work with a specific critique of Donne's poetry, or any other metaphysical poet's, for that matter.

While in "The Metaphysical Poets," Eliot praises Donne, Eliot disapproves of important themes, particularly the treatment of love, in Donne's work. In "The Ecstasy," Eliot calls "the

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<sup>2</sup> All of Donne's poems are cited from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, listed under Greenblatt and Abrams in the bibliography.

conception of the ecstasy of union between two souls. . . not only philosophically crude but emotionally limiting,” with “little suggestion of adoration, of worship” (*Varieties* 114). Donne was “imprisoned in the embrace of his own feelings,” with a “puritanical attitude” and a “cruder state of philosophical speculation” (Eliot, *Varieties* 114). Eliot added:

Donne, I think, did not really pass [into maturity]; I mean that his religious writings, his sermons and his devotional verse, always give me the impression of an incomplete concentration, of a direction of forces more by a strong will than by surrender and assent. While with Dante there is no interruption between the first line of the *Vita Nuova* and the last line of the *Paradiso*. There was no compulsion, and no waste (*Varieties* 117).

Eliot examines religion as “surrender and assent,” a concept he finds in the works of Dante, yet not in Donne. Eliot dislikes the way Donne addressed religion and makes a sweeping generalization about all of Donne’s poetry and even his sermons as well. Though Eliot discusses Donne’s love and religious poetry, he fails to comment in the Clark Lectures on Donne’s “Holy Sonnets,” the most religious of his poems. Despite this hole in Eliot’s criticism, Eliot finds that too many images and topics detract from what Eliot believes is most important in the poetry: religion.

With his verse that jumps quickly from one image to another, Eliot views Donne’s fleeting examinations as leaving religion in the background:

I wish only to indicate how often we feel that there is something else, some preoccupation, in Donne’s mind, besides what he is talking about; his attention is not only often dispersed and volatile; perhaps it is so because it is really distracted. But this bewildering obscurity is part of the attraction of Donne’s mind, and is perhaps what gives the peculiar emotional colour to his every idea, and causes the variety and dispersion of his intellectual curiosity (*Varieties* 149).

What was Donne being distracted from? I think Eliot would answer, God. Eliot’s feelings for Donne were more complex than those for Crashaw, Cowley and the other metaphysical poets, most likely because Eliot admired Donne so much in his younger years. While in his lecture Eliot criticizes Donne, he also highlights different parts of Donne’s poetry that he admired, such

as the “bewildering obscurity” in Donne’s verse. Though he had some words of praise, Eliot wrote with finality: “It is placing Donne very high to compare him to the circle of Dante” (*Varieties* 154). In Eliot’s other writings on Donne after his religious conversion, Eliot criticizes Donne for this inattention and jumpiness.

### **The “Inferior” Sermons of John Donne**

Eliot’s “For Lancelot Andrewes,” written in 1926, criticizes Donne’s sermons for exactly the same reason he criticized Donne’s poetry: his inability to focus on one topic. This connection between Donne’s poetry and sermons solidified Eliot’s sense of the connection between Donne’s poems and his religion. The fact that Eliot even read Donne’s sermons at all shows that Eliot had an interest in Donne’s religiosity. Eliot saw Donne’s sermons as inferior to those of Lancelot Andrewes, an Anglican preacher who lived during the same time as Donne: “For Eliot, Andrewes truly represented the spirit of the age, and the influence which defined the Church of English as a national community of faith rather than a sect” (Sharpe 110-111). While Eliot viewed Andrewes’ writing as “extraordinary prose,” “seizing the attention and pressing on the memory,” he found Donne’s sermons inferior because they had “an impure motive,” and Donne “lacked spiritual discipline” (Eliot *Selected* 185, 182). This could be because in 1615, Donne was forced to become an Anglican priest by King James. Though Donne was a practicing Christian, the church was not Donne’s first choice of profession. Eliot suggests that this fact affected Donne’s sermons:

Donne had a genuine taste both for theology and for religious emotion; but he belonged to that class of persons, of which there are always one or two examples in the modern world, who seek refuge in religion from the tumults of a strong emotional temperament which can find no complete satisfaction elsewhere (*Selected* 187).

While Eliot concedes that Donne was a religious man, Eliot saw Donne as “primarily interested in man” rather than knowing God, making his sermons inferior to those of Lancelot Andrewes (*Selected* 187). Donne’s poetry had “the cunning knowledge of the weaknesses of the human heart” and “understanding of human sin” (Eliot, *Selected* 187). Without any admiration of Donne, Eliot writes: “He is dangerous only for those who find in his sermons an indulgence of their sensibility, or for those who . . . forget that in the spiritual hierarchy there are places higher than that of Donne (*Selected* 187). Eliot was no longer impressed by Donne’s sensibility—instead he had come to regard it as a danger to those searching for religion. Though Donne’s work may appeal to some critics, the older Eliot was not one of them.

Donne’s religious poetry did not please Eliot, either. He did not doubt Donne’s faith, but what Donne had faith in: “Donne was definitely a Christian believer; but the object of belief was not the same for him that it was in the thirteenth century” (*Varieties* 279). Although Donne may not have been completely focused on religion, which earned Eliot’s disapproval, Eliot continued to admire the improvements Donne made in the art of poetry.

If Eliot’s opinion of Donne changed once Eliot converted, he still appreciated the impact that Donne had on English poetry. In the Clark Lectures, Eliot said, “How wonderful, how impeccable, the diction and versification of Donne! And what a profound change he operated!” (Eliot, *Varieties* 128). Eliot saw Donne as creating a base of “good” writing for the greater writers to come: Dryden, Pope, Goldsmith, Samuel Johnson. Donne was important in initiating poetry’s change in style from Provençal to Italian, from lyrical to philosophical. Eliot argued that Donne is in a class below Shakespeare and Dante, because in Donne’s writing, “the idea has been developed to suit the image . . . the image and not the idea is the important thing;” however, in his “lower” class of poetry, Donne is “of certain secondary modes . . . an indisputable master”

(*Varieties* 133). While Eliot could concede that Donne assisted in introducing a new vocabulary and fresh meters into Elizabethan and Jacobean poetry, once he joined the Anglican Church, Eliot had a greater affinity toward Dante (Duncan 148). Despite the Anglican Eliot's skepticism of Donne's religiosity, he could still appreciate how Donne's verse inspired and influenced the poets to follow.

### **Dante: An Invaluable Inspiration**

At a talk given at the Italian Institute in London on July 4, 1950, titled, "What Dante Means to Me," Eliot said that he believed Dante's poetry to be "the most persistent and deepest influence upon [his] own verse" (*Criticize* 125). While Eliot greatly admired Donne only in the first phase of his literary career, he wrote of Dante: "The kind of debt I owe to Dante is the kind which goes on accumulating, the kind which is not the debt of one period or another of one's life" (*Criticize* 126). Of those writers that influenced him, Eliot writes:

But the poet who can do this [help discover oneself] for a young writer, is unlikely to be one of the great masters. The latter are too exalted and too remote. They are like distant ancestors who have been almost deified; whereas the smaller poet, who has directed one's first steps, is more like an admired elder brother (*Criticize* 126).

But based on the way Eliot talks about Donne in his 1926 lectures, does Eliot really view Donne as an "admired elder brother"? Why does Eliot feel so indebted to Dante and not Donne? What did Dante contribute to Eliot's work that Donne couldn't?

In Eliot's lectures and essays on Dante, he explains why Dante was a better poet than Donne. One reason Eliot preferred Dante is because Dante's treatment of religion in his poetry, which in turn mirrors Dante's beliefs:

The great poet should not only perceive and distinguish more clearly than other men, the colours or sounds within the range of ordinary vision or hearing; he should perceive vibrations beyond the range of ordinary men, and be able to make men see and hear more

at each end than they could ever see without his help. We have for instance in English literature great religious poets, but they are, by comparison with Dante, *specialists*. That is all they can do. And Dante, because he could do everything else, is for that reason the greatest 'religious' poet, though to call him a 'religious poet' would be to abate his universality (Eliot, *Criticize* 134).

Eliot viewed Dante as the best religious poet, greater than Donne, to whom he referred as a specialist. Eliot described "vibrations beyond the range of ordinary men"—the supernatural powers of God. Dante helps the ordinary man see these extraordinary things, which earned Eliot's admiration.

Critics agree that religion was a huge influence on Eliot's opinions on the metaphysical poets. Duncan writes: "[Eliot] thought Dante's poetry was founded on real belief, but Donne's was not" (147). Dante dealt with everything in a religious spirit, but "George Herbert, Crashaw, and presumably Donne as a religious poet, were minor since they dealt with religion only as an isolated part of the total subject matter" (Duncan 147). In Eliot's ideal of great poetry, religion should be the subject matter. Though Eliot and Dante did not hold the same exact religious beliefs, Eliot still admired the way that Dante expressed these beliefs in his poetry.

### **Eliot's Religion and the Metaphysical Poets**

One reason I cited for Eliot's admiration of Donne was that in Eliot's earlier work, Eliot saw himself in Donne as he contemplated life's philosophical questions. As Eliot grew older, he decided that Donne's poetry focused too much on human nature instead of focusing on God and believed that even Donne's late, more religious poetry was insincere. After his conversion, Eliot had new philosophical questions to answer about religion (Duncan 146). I argue that Eliot, at this point in his life, was looking for a different conception of religion in poetry than the one Donne provided, which in turn led Eliot to admire poets such as Dante.

Critics agree that Eliot's views on religion changed the way he viewed poetry; however, each critic differs in what he or she believes Eliot sought in poetry. Helen Gardner writes: "After *The Waste Land* [published in 1922], Mr Eliot's poetry becomes the attempt to find meaning in the whole of his experience, to include all that he has known" (185). George Williamson sees another philosophical problem that Eliot tried to solve: "As poet and as religious man his relation to the past, to time, has been the critical problem . . . . While he seeks the permanent in the temporary, the timeless in time, he ultimately finds it on the religious level" (29). Through religion, Eliot found the answers to the meaning of life, time and the afterlife, a concept that Eliot grapples with in *Four Quartets*. Donne also addresses these issues in his poetry, but he had a different opinion on God than Eliot did, as shown in Donne's "Holy Sonnets."

Eliot's writing in *Four Quartets* is much calmer and confident about the afterlife than Donne's voice in "Holy Sonnets." Cooper states that Eliot wrote this way to give confidence to war-torn Europe in 1943, when the poem was published in one volume: "With unaffected dignity, and by striking the right balance between intimacy and elevation, Eliot found a way to perform the public duty of offering succor to frightened people in a dark time" (93). In "Four Quartets," Eliot repeats throughout the poem: "And all shall be well and/ All manner of thing shall be well" (209). However, Murphy argues that this sense of well-being comes from Eliot's confidence in God:

The answer that the poetry offers is that if there is holiness, it cannot be confined to a particular experience or moment or way of life or culture or belief system. It must be, too, a state of being that is recognizable and achievable, in which one can function in perfectly ordinary ways among perfectly ordinary people and things, as well as extraordinary things (Murphy 229).

This is not to say that Eliot does not struggle within his poetry to find this answer; rather, in the overarching theme of Eliot's "Four Quartets," there is a confidence that God has a plan for us

after we die. This theme of Eliot's contrasts greatly with Donne's sentiments about the afterlife in "Holy Sonnets." Donne has a real terror of God and facing the consequences of his sins: "Death before doth cast/ Such terror, and my feeble flesh doth waste/ By sin in it, which it toward hell doth weight" (Donne, "Holy Sonnets" 1295). Donne calls upon God: "Burn me, O Lord," and "Batter my heart, three-personed God" (1295, 1297). Unlike Eliot, Donne reverts to using desperate and highly sexual language in his request to God:

Divorce me, untie or break that knot again;  
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,  
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me (Donne, "Holy Sonnets" 1298).

This sort of sexual tension in Donne's language as he addresses God opposes Eliot's. Eliot's writing, at least in "Four Quartets," loses the sexual undertones that were common in his early poetry such as in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." The confidence that Eliot possesses about his fate after death in *Four Quartets* that Donne lacks in "Holy Sonnets" explains why Eliot came to admire different poets. It was not only Donne's perspective of the afterlife, however, with which Eliot disagreed. What really troubled Eliot the most about Donne's poetry, as well as the poetry of the other metaphysicals, was its presentation of love between humans and love between God and humans. Eliot believed that Donne saw these two types of love as interchangeable, which was completely incorrect in Eliot's opinion.

One question critics have asked about Eliot's personal life is: what is missing? Some of Eliot's contemporary critics, because of his poetry, called Eliot "learned and cold," which offended Eliot. Sharpe considers the answer to this question:

We might propose the answer 'love'; but it becomes increasingly apparent that, for Eliot, that term needed qualification. It could not simply stand for emotional relationship between humans; it required a larger context, which he was coming to see as essentially religious (Sharpe 108).

In middle age and after, Eliot appreciated poets who wrote about God's love instead of the love between humans on earth. In Eliot's view, these were two completely different kinds of love that one could not interchange or combine. Duncan asserts that Eliot suggested that Donne "in seeking the absolute in the corporeal and the ephemeral, [approached] the kind of spiritual bankruptcy in 'le bon mariage à la Tennyson'" (Duncan 148). According to Eliot, there was a fault with these representations of love compared to the way a greater poet like Dante wrote about love. In Eliot's words:

Dante and his contemporaries were quite aware that human love and divine love were different and that one could not be *substituted* for the other without distortion of the human nature. Their effort was to enlarge the boundary of human love so as to make it a stage in the progress toward the divine (*Varieties* 166).

In Eliot's opinion, Donne, Crashaw or Cowley did not capture the difference between human and divine love, and then applied this flawed view of love to God. Donne's presentation of love was mostly sexual, even in his most religious poetry:

This union in ecstasy is complete, is final; and two human beings, needing nothing beyond each other, rest on their emotion of enjoyment. But emotion cannot rest; desire must expand, or it will shrink . . . . There is little suggestion of adoration, of worship (Eliot, *Varieties* 114).

To Eliot, Donne's presentation of love was not eternal and therefore would not be suitable to him as a representation of divine love. There's no doubt that Eliot's religious conversion changed his opinion about some poets; however, Eliot may have begun to dislike the metaphysical poets because he wished to be grouped with more famous poets in order to increase his own standing in the world of literary criticism.

Most of these critics fail to take into account another possible reason for Eliot's cooling passion for the metaphysical poets: he no longer wished to be associated with them. Just as he had associated himself with the metaphysical poets to attain readers, Eliot now wanted to

associate himself with Dante and other “greater” poets like Shakespeare and Milton to be remembered with them. Though Eliot revered Dante because of their similar devotion to their respective religions, some critics believe that Eliot may have focused more on Dante in order to be categorized with him, just as Eliot may have done in his earlier life with the metaphysical poets. Tony Sharpe writes that Eliot

focused on aspects of these writers of most immediate relevance to himself. . . his criticism was a means of encouraging an intellectual climate which would be receptive to the kind of literature he himself valued, and which he and his associates were writing (Sharpe 79).

Once Eliot joined the Anglican Church, he wished to dissociate himself from Donne and the characteristics that came with him. In one of his essays, Eliot disagrees with Sharpe’s assertion: “When I have written about Baudelaire, or Dante, or any other poet who has had a capital importance in my own development, I have written *because* that poet has meant so much to me, but not about myself, but *about* that poet and his poetry” (Eliot *Criticize* 127). While this is certainly true, as no critic would choose to write about a topic that does not interest him, Eliot possibly could have written about Dante to associate himself with him and his reputation, as Eliot did with Donne in his earlier years. Despite Eliot’s devotion to Dante in the later part of his career, Donne was a great influence on Eliot when he was a young writer. In fact, though Eliot’s tastes changed as he grew older, Donne and the other metaphysical poets continued to influence his poetry.

In his poetry even after his conversion, Eliot continues to use the metaphysical conceit and to reference works by the metaphysical poets in his poetry. Eliot stopped worshipping Donne; however, the influence of the metaphysical poets never completely vanishes from Eliot’s poetry. On the contrary, though Eliot’s tastes turned to “greater” poets like Dante, the marks of

the metaphysical poets are still easily discernible in Eliot's poetry during and after this period of his life.

## Chapter 3

### Metaphysical Marks in Eliot's Poetry

Eliot was greatly influenced by the metaphysicals in his youth, especially Donne. These influences show in Eliot's poetry, found in the lines and the conceits that Eliot uses. Though there are obvious differences between Eliot's poetry and the poetry of the metaphysical poets, Eliot goes as far as to quote lines from the metaphysicals to include in his own poetry, proving that he admired them. However, though the metaphysicals impacted Eliot's earlier poetry, does his later poetry (from 1926 onward) still bear the mark of the metaphysical poets? I want to examine how Eliot mimicked the metaphysical poets and speculate why he continued to use these methods to emulate them. Duncan writes:

Eliot . . . took suggestions from techniques he analyzed in the work of the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets, but modified these techniques in his own way, often introducing a note of modern discord through his experiments. Exploring problems of sensibility, thought-feeling-sense relationships, and psychological realism, Eliot became a metaphysical poet according to his own definition (156).

I want to explore Duncan's statement. Was Eliot really a metaphysical poet by his definition of metaphysical poetry? As a definition for seventeenth century metaphysical poetry, Duncan compiled a list of common elements: dependence on correspondences, an extensive use of logic, metaphors (often elaborately extended) linking disparate realms of being, witty devices (often in a serious context) and the witty grotesque (156-164). Based on this definition of metaphysical poetry, Eliot certainly qualifies as a metaphysical poet. But, more importantly, does Eliot qualify by his *own* definition? However, before we answer this question, we must ask in what ways Eliot was influenced by the metaphysicals.

#### Quoting the Metaphysical Poets

Eliot often mixed lines from other poets into his own poetry to the point that he was accused of plagiarism (Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* 121). Many poets that Eliot read were featured in his poetry, including the metaphysical poets. Murphy said of Eliot's usage of others' lines:

Surely the parts must fit, but there must also be in his motivation the artist's powerful inclination not to let a good line fade into obscurity. Too, Eliot had a developing but nevertheless consistently coherent vision throughout his poetic career that lines from one piece might serve quite suitably in another really is no surprise at all (251).

Based on his focus on the metaphysical poets, Eliot was well-versed in the poetry of poets like Marvell, Herbert, Crashaw, Cowley and Donne. If Murphy is right, and Eliot was using the lines to preserve them, then Eliot would believe that poetry from the metaphysicals was important to him and to posterity. If Eliot was not influenced by the metaphysicals, why did their lines appear in his poetry? Eliot had to be familiar with their poetry to use their lines; however, I believe that Eliot's usage of lines from the metaphysical poets goes farther than that. These lines from the metaphysical poets fit into Eliot's poetry because Eliot called upon them to help him convey the same message, or introduce an underlying message into the poem.

The greatest amount of line usage from the metaphysical poets appears in Eliot's early work. Eliot's "Whispers of Immortality," published in 1918, specifically mentions Donne. In the poem, Eliot works with the ideas of mixing intellect and the senses, as Donne did in his poetry (Jain 112). Eliot writes:

Donne, I suppose, was such another  
Who found no substitute for sense,  
To seize and clutch and penetrate;  
Expert beyond experience,

He knew the anguish of the marrow  
The ague of the skeleton;  
No contact possible to flesh

Allayed the fever of the bone (“Whispers” 45).<sup>3</sup>

In these two stanzas concerning Donne, Eliot praises the ability to see morality as more than a concept, to give it sensory perception and a metaphysical twist. Eliot struggled with this section of his piece and rewrote it at least twice, unlike the section on Webster, which is previous to the two stanzas cited above (Maddrey 83). He tried to get his point across while writing in Donne’s style, in this case tying together the “skeleton” and the “flesh,” and then linking it to lust and death (Jain 113). Also, “sense” here is a play on words, as it could refer to sensibility, or intellect, as well as the senses, which Donne was an “expert beyond experience” at combining. “Whispers of Immortality” was only the start of Donne’s appearances in Eliot’s poetry and criticism. By the time the poem was written, the critical resurgence of the metaphysical poets had already begun.

Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” which includes unmistakable lines from poetry of Marvell and Donne, was published in 1915. “Prufrock” is a poem about a man who is anxious about his social situations, especially how people view him and how to interact with women. Though this summary contrasts with the theme of Donne’s poems, Eliot still alludes to a line of Donne’s in his poem. Eliot writes, speaking of a woman:

And I have know the arms already, known them all—  
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare  
(But in the lamplight downed with light brown hair!) (“Prufrock” 5)

The line “Arms that are braceleted and white and bare” could very well have been inspired by Donne’s “The Relic.” Donne writes:

When my grave is broke up again  
Some second guest to entertain  
(For graves have learned that woman-head  
To be to more than one a bed),

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<sup>3</sup> All of Eliot’s poems are cited from *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, listed under Eliot in the bibliography.

And he that digs it spies  
 A bracelet of bright hair about the bone,  
 Will he not let us alone (“The Relic” 1280).

The two lines “Arms that are braceleted and white and bare” and “A bracelet of bright hair about the bone,” though they are not an exact match, are strikingly similar. Both convey the same image of a white arm, though Donne’s is more morbid. Eliot’s addition of “in the lamplight downed with light brown hair,” shows that in the light, the typical metaphor for knowledge, these arms are not as perfect as they seem—they are “downed with light brown hair,” and human. Both sections of poetry show the love of a woman, though Donne’s is much more morbid in being buried with her and Eliot’s character is in love with an ideal, a perfection that can never be a reality. Eliot brings in the morbidity of Donne’s poem by including specific lines of Donne’s poetry.

This morbidity of Eliot’s goes even further when the narrator mentions the mermaids near the conclusion of the poem. The narrator questions, and then concludes:

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?  
 I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.  
 I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think they will sing to me. (Eliot, “Prufrock” 7).

In the very last lines of the poem, “human voices wake us, and we drown,” ending in death as the characters of Donne’s “The Relic” begin (Eliot, “Prufrock” 7). Donne’s “Song,” in contrast, is much less morbid, but still mentions mermaids:

Go and catch a falling star,  
 Get with child a mandrake root,  
 Tell me where all past years are,  
 Or who cleft the Devil’s foot,  
 Teach me to hear the mermaids singing,  
 Or to keep off envy’s stinging,  
 And find  
 What wind

Serves to advance an honest mind (1264).

Donne asks an unspecified party to “teach [him] to hear the mermaids singing,” just as Prufrock “heard the mermaids singing, each to each.” While the excerpt of Donne has a mystical, whimsical tone, Eliot’s speaker is much more anxious. Eliot’s speaker has been taught to hear the mermaid’s voices, as Donne’s speaker requests; however, Eliot’s speaker is excluded from the mystical world that Donne has created in his poem.

Donne was not the only metaphysical poet Eliot borrowed lines from; Eliot, in a couple of his poems, clearly quotes a line from Andrew Marvell. In “Prufrock,” Eliot writes:

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
 After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,  
 Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,  
 Would it have been worth while,  
 To have bitten off the matter with a smile,  
 To have squeezed the universe into a ball  
 To roll it towards some overwhelming question” (6).

The line, “To have squeezed the universe into a ball” is reminiscent of Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress,” a poem using wit and irony where the speaker attempts to convince a woman to have sex with him. Marvell writes:

Let us roll all our strength and all  
 Our sweetness up into one ball,  
 And tear out pleasures with rough strife  
 Thorough the iron gates of life:  
 Thus, though we cannot make our sun  
 Stand still, yet we will make him run (“To His Coy Mistress” 1703-1704).<sup>4</sup>

Eliot’s “To have squeezed the universe into a ball” and Marvell’s “Let us roll all our strength and all/ our sweetness up into one ball” Eliot draws upon Marvell to make a connection between the two situations. The speaker of “Prufrock” has a high anxiety of women and anything sexual, so

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<sup>4</sup> All of Marvell’s poems are cited from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, listed under Greenblatt and Abrams in the bibliography.

by using Marvell's line, Eliot may be hinting that the "overwhelming question" may be to "tear out pleasures with rough strife," as Marvell writes. Marvell's lines from "To His Coy Mistress" also appear in other works of Eliot's, such as "The Waste Land."

Eliot does not allude much to the metaphysical poets in "The Waste Land." The poem was published in 1922, close to the time of Eliot's conversion. Eliot evokes Marvell twice in "The Waste Land." In the first stanza of Part III, "The Fire Sermon," Eliot writes:

But at my back in a cold blast I hear  
The rattle of bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear (*The Waste Land* 60).

Later in the following stanza of Part III, Eliot again alludes to Marvell's line:

But at my back from time to time I hear  
The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring  
Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring (Eliot, *The Waste Land* 60).

Though Eliot changes the words a little, Marvell's influence is unmistakable. In "The Coy Mistress," Marvell's line is as follows:

But at my back I always hear  
Time's winged chariot hurrying near;  
And yonder all before us lie  
Deserts of vast eternity (Marvell 1703).

The first example of Eliot's selection of Marvell mirrors the theme of death in "To His Coy Mistress," and the mention of Sweeney and Mrs. Porter hint at a sexual relation, as Eliot's Sweeney is a figure of the brutish, uncivilized male and Mrs. Porter comes from a soldier's rhyme about a prostitute (Parker). Each instance, both of Eliot's and Marvell's as well, carry a foreboding tone; "At my back" implies that something is sneaking up on the speaker. Eliot's "rattling bones" and a car to aid another instance of meaningless copulation mirror Marvell's "deserts of vast eternity." Not only the emotions of the characters, but the landscape of *The*

*Waste Land* is a “desert of vast eternity,” making Marvell’s influence spread to the theme of the poem rather than simply a line.

After “The Waste Land,” not many direct allusions to the metaphysicals poets appear as obviously in Eliot’s poetry. Eliot had a different purpose for the metaphysical poets in his poetry of his late career. As Eliot moves into a more religious thinking, his thoughts about death, and many other topics, change. For example, even in his more religious poems, Donne was concerned with the body, possibly too much so for the converted Eliot’s tastes; Eliot lost this anxiety about the body between the publishing of *The Waste Land* and “The Four Quartets.” He instead focused on God rather than the needs of the body: “There is no imagined struggle of soul and body, only the one struggle toward perfection” (Eliot, *Varieties* 114). Eliot exchanged the lines and the (in Eliot’s opinion) less-religious themes of Donne and Marvell to draw on and learn from other poets he admired, most often Dante. However, though the lines from the metaphysical poets cease to appear in Eliot’s later works, characteristics of the seventeenth century metaphysicals, such as images of the grotesque, the extended conceit and irony, were still featured in Eliot’s later work when he focused his admiration on other poets. In fact, Duncan writes, “most of these characteristics [of the seventeenth century metaphysicals] belong as much to Eliot’s later poetry as to his earlier work” (156).

### **Metaphysical Characteristics in Eliot’s Poetry**

There are many legitimate comparisons that Duncan draws between Eliot’s and Donne’s poetry. Duncan cites one of these comparisons as the idea and usage of paradoxes, “the compressed figure with its surprising union of widely separated realms” (Duncan 161). The opening lines of *Four Quartets* are a great example of Eliot’s obsession with paradoxes:

Time present and time past  
 Are both perhaps present in time future,  
 And time future contained in time past (Eliot 175).

These paradoxes continue throughout the poem as Eliot struggles with understanding the meaning and purpose of time. It's no coincidence that Donne is a master of paradoxes. Not only is Donne a master of paradoxes, however; Donne is also a master at puns. Puns to Eliot are a form of wit, a wit that Eliot truly admired about the metaphysical poets, as he wrote in his article, "Andrew Marvell." Even as Eliot grew older and began to dislike the metaphysical poets, he still admired their wit: "Eliot, like Donne, also sometimes used puns in a serious context or employed other ways of wringing the utmost meaning out of words" (Duncan 162).

Another common element of metaphysical poetry and Eliot's poetry are "unpoetic" figures from medicine, business and mathematics, often widely separated from subject of poem (Duncan 158). In Eliot's work, Part IV of "East Coker" in *Four Quartets* is an extended conceit centered on medicine. In the first stanza:

The wounded surgeon plies the steel  
 That questions the distempered part;  
 Beneath the bleeding hands we feel  
 The sharp compassion of the healer's art  
 Resolving the enigma of the fever chart (Eliot, *Four Quartets* 187).

George Williamson cites the "wounded surgeon" as Christ, working with his "healer's art" to resolve "the enigma of the fever chart" and bring the world to salvation (221-222). These references to medicine and science are typical in metaphysical poetry, especially Donne's. In "Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness," Donne compares his body to a map:

Whilst my physicians by their love are grown  
 Cosmographers, and I their map, who lie  
 Flat on this bed, that by them may be shown  
 That this is my southwest discovery  
*Per fretum febris*, by these straits to die" (1301).

Donne uses the language of geography to describe his dying body. According to *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, “Per fretum febris” means “through the straits of fever” (Greenblatt and Abrams 1301). The footnote adds that the line includes “a pun on straits as sufferings, rigors, and a geographical reference to the Strait of Magellan” (Greenblatt and Abrams 1301). Donne often used scientific language and references to enhance his metaphors and imagery, an element that influenced Eliot in both his late and early poetry: “Several modern scientific conceptions enter Prufrock’s feeling that his morbid self-consciousness is ‘as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen’” (Duncan 158). Mathematical and other scientific imagery were not the only imagery that appear in both Donne’s and Eliot’s poetry. In fact, both poets feature grotesque and morbid imagery in their writing, forging a connection between Eliot and the metaphysical poets, especially Donne.

Imagery of death abounds in the poetry of Eliot and Donne. In “The Relic,” Donne describes a time when his and his lover’s grave will be dug up and the people of the future will respect their bones. Donne’s “The Apparition” claims he will haunt an unfaithful lover from the grave. In the opening lines of the poem, Donne writes:

When by thy scorn, O murderess, I am dead,  
 And that thou thinkst thee free  
 From all solicitation from me,  
 Then shall my ghost come to thy bed,  
 And thee feigned vestal, in worse arms shall see (“The Apparition” 1274).

Donne’s idea of ghosts can easily be compared to being devoured by leopards in Eliot’s “Ash-Wednesday,” published 1930. In Part II, Eliot writes: “three white leopards having fed to satiety/ On my legs my heart my liver and that which had been contained/ In the hollow round of my skull” (87). This detailed description of the leopards feasting on the speaker’s innards continues, mentioning “the whiteness of bones,” an image quite common to the poetry of Donne. Eliot

continues to describe the leopards' meal: "My guts the strings of my eyes and the indigestible portions/ Which the leopards reject" ("Ash-Wednesday" 87). Though Donne did not go into as much detail as Eliot in describing anatomy, both poets shared an interest in the grotesque throughout their careers. Often, this morbidity would appear in their extended conceits, another element that was common in the poetry of both poets.

In Eliot's poetry throughout the years, one notices extended conceits, the most distinguishing aspect of metaphysical poetry. Duncan writes that Eliot used metaphysical conceits, but in a different way than the metaphysicals: "Eliot has shown less interest in defining an inner experience through a conceit or in exploring an analogy for its own sake, but considerably more interest in employing the objective correlative to evoke a complex, often ironic, cluster of thoughts and feelings" (158). To support this claim, Duncan cites lines from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," with the metaphor of the yellow fog as a cat as the extended conceit:

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,  
 The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,  
 Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,  
 Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,  
 Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,  
 Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,  
 And seeing that it was a soft October night,  
 Curled once about the house, and fell asleep (Eliot 3).

While Eliot could have had other intentions for the purpose of this passage, I believe this passage does more work for the poem along the lines of the conceits of the metaphysical poets rather than just to "evoke . . . feelings." There is, as Duncan argues, "a minimum of logic" in the comparison of the yellow smoke to the cat; however, the conceit still contributes to the themes of the poem. The idea of the dirty, wasted landscape of the "yellow smoke" mirrors not only the disgust Prufrock feels about himself, but also the theme of time as a waste as well. Prufrock sees "time

as trap, time as prison, time as punishment or exile,” just as he sees his surroundings of yellow smoke as a punishment in Hell (Ellis 36). However, if Duncan is correct that Eliot used this conceit to evoke a feeling rather than “defining an inner experience,” Duncan’s idea of Eliot’s conceits are more like the metaphysicals’ than not.

One of Eliot’s criticisms of Donne in the Clark Lectures stems from an extended conceit.

In “The Ecstasy,” Donne writes:

Where, like a pillow on a bed,  
A pregnant bank swelled up to rest  
The violet’s reclining head,  
Sat we two, one another’s best (1276).

As I stated in Part II, Eliot found this conceit to be absolutely terrible (Eliot, *Varieties* 109).

However, Eliot used conceits in the same manner: to combine thought and feeling, though in this example the “thought” is much more sexual than intellectual. The two characters are sitting on “a pregnant bank” which is “like a pillow on a bed,” two subtly sexual images. Donne and the other metaphysicals used conceits so frequently that they sometimes used conceits to evoke a feeling as well, as Duncan claims Eliot did. Duncan writes: “The surprises, like the rapid juxtaposition of ideas and images, tend to be more connotative and ironic than in Donne” (156). This is only because Eliot uses conceits less frequently. In fact, Donne does use his conceits ironically. For example, in “The Canonization,” Donne writes:

Alas, alas, who’s injured by my love?  
What merchant’s ships have my sighs drowned?  
Who says my tears have overflowed his ground?  
When did my colds a forward spring remove?  
When did the hears which my veins fill  
Add one man to the plaguy bill? (1268).

Donne piles one image after another to support his extended conceit of the effects of being in love. The outlandish comparisons in this excerpt show Donne’s sense of wit and irony. He uses

this irony to prove that what he suffers from love is of no harm to anyone else, he writes, “though she and I do love” (Donne, “The Canonization” 1268). Both poets, Donne and Eliot, use ironic conceits. While Duncan is correct in writing that Donne and Eliot write conceits in different ways, he fails to examine exactly why.

Duncan argues that Eliot writes like a metaphysical poet because of his dependence on correspondences, an extensive use of logic, metaphors, linking disparate realms of being, witty devices and the witty grotesque (Duncan 156). Eliot must have admired this type of writing to incorporate it into his own lines. But why? I think that as Eliot grew older, he picked the elements from the metaphysical poets that worked for him in his writing, such as the metaphysical conceit, puns, paradoxes and irony. These elements create verses that are more than pretty lines of poetry. My theory is that these elements made writing more interesting, fun and unexpected for him. However, Eliot did not base his poetry off of the metaphysical poets alone, which gave his poetry more depth. The influence of the seventeenth century metaphysicals certainly does appear in Eliot’s work, though Eliot’s poetry is an amalgam of different time periods of metaphysical poetry (namely the thirteenth, seventeenth and twentieth centuries) rather than solely the seventeenth. Much of this influence can be found in “Four Quartets.”

In “Four Quartets,” Eliot worked toward finding God’s place in a person’s life in the aspects of time, love and the afterlife (Murphy 227). Like many other poets and writers, the metaphysicals were concerned with the same questions; however, the metaphysicals as a group were much more religious than many poets who grappled with these questions. Though Eliot did not appreciate them during the time he was writing *Four Quartets* as he did when he was young, the metaphysicals helped Eliot convey his ultimate theme of self-examination and true humility before God (Ellis 102). Donne and Crashaw did not play as much of a part in this theme as did

the metaphysical poet George Herbert. Though Eliot never devoted entire essays to Herbert, Herbert was still considered a metaphysical poet. After his conversion, Eliot preferred the work of Herbert to Donne and Crashaw: “It is to other poets than these that I am likely to turn now for pure delight. I turn more often the pages . . . of George Herbert than those of Donne” (*Criticize* 22-23). In Eliot’s writing after he joined the Anglican Church, Eliot exhibited “the reserve, humility, and economy of expression to be found in George Herbert, rather than in the more exhibitionistic performances of the late Donne and Crashaw” (Cooper 83). Though Eliot turned from Donne and Crashaw, he still found value in the Metaphysical poetry of Herbert. Eliot mimics Herbert’s writing in *Four Quartets* in order to draw upon Herbert’s own humility, which rounds out the point of the entire poem. In “Little Gidding,” Eliot writes: “You are here to kneel/ Where prayer has been valid,” to humble yourself in a holy place before God (*Four Quartets* 201). Eliot’s “Little Gidding” was named after a site of the same name, an Anglican religious community established in the 1620s in Huntingdonshire. Little Gidding was a brief refuge in 1646 for Charles I, linking the poem to the English Civil War and the seventeenth century (Ellis 119). At Little Gidding, even kings were humble. Eliot refers to Charles I as “a broken king” and links him to anyone brought on a pilgrimage to Little Gidding, because everyone comes for a specific purpose:

If you came this way,  
 Taking any route, starting from anywhere,  
 At any time or at any season,  
 It would always be the same: you would have to put off  
 Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,  
 Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity  
 Or carry report. You are here to kneel  
 Where prayer has been valid” (*Four Quartets* 201).

Little Gidding is a holy place, one of humility, for people of the present and past (even Crashaw and Herbert visited) and for people of all classes (Williamson 227). Eliot draws upon Herbert’s

language of humility to strengthen his own idea of subservience to a divine power in “Four Quartets.” Though Eliot turned away from Donne’s fervent, dramatic and sexual language in “Four Quartets,” Eliot utilized elements inspired by the metaphysical poets.

Duncan writes that “in *Four Quartets*, however, [Eliot] showed a fascination with systems of correspondence, analogical reasoning, and incarnational symbolism that was remarkably in the spirit of the seventeenth century” (156). For example, each section of *Four Quartets* related man to the natural world. Burnt Norton showed man’s powers of abstraction as air, East Coker focused on the body as the earth, Dry Salvages linked blood to water and finally, in Little Gidding, Eliot connected the spirit and fire (Duncan 157). These seventeenth-century elements worked for Eliot to establish unity between humankind and the elements around us, giving him a solution to the questions of the afterlife: “Linking all of these various spheres to each other and to God is the principle of incarnation” (Duncan 157). Traces of the metaphysical poets and the seventeenth century in *Four Quartets* give strength to Eliot’s idea of incarnation, showing that the metaphysical poets continued to influence Eliot’s work.

## Conclusion

In the Clark Lectures, Eliot comes up with his own definition of metaphysical poetry, a definition that he calls a partial success:

I take as metaphysical poetry that in which what is ordinarily apprehensible only by thought is brought within the grasp of feeling, or that in which what is ordinarily only felt is transformed into thought without ceasing to be feeling. My examples have been Donne for the former and Crashaw for the latter (*Varieties* 60-61, 220).

While Eliot was not a man to focus on emotion in his poetry, he admired the mixture of intellect that metaphysical poets—metaphysical poets of any age—incorporate into their poetry, as Eliot's definition of metaphysical poetry contains more than the seventeenth century. In fact, in accordance with other critics, Eliot believes that the age of the 1920s, along with the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, was a metaphysical age (Eliot, *Varieties* 43).

Eliot drew upon all metaphysical poetry to create his own poetry; the love and devotion for the divine from Dante's era, the extended conceit and wit from Donne and his contemporaries mixed with Eliot's persona and time period to create a new type of metaphysical poetry. Eliot added nearly excessive knowledge to the irony and grotesque images of the seventeenth century (Raiziss 17). He used more thought than feeling in his poetry, building off of what he learned from Donne, Crashaw, Herbert and Cowley. Raiziss writes: "Eliot has given us what the seventeenth-century poets gave their readers in comparable circumstances: rebelliousness, conscientious doubt, yearning, and the terrifying suggestion of two worlds" (183). There is no doubt that Eliot is indeed a metaphysical poet, but a metaphysical poet of his own age and making.

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*Embers, Sisters Inn* and *The Kona Dog* by Ruth Zavitsanos      Summer 2011- Present  
Editor, Downingtown, PA

- Corrected grammatical and factual errors on book manuscript
- Explained to author suggestions on phrasing and plot

Voices of Central Pennsylvania Newspaper      May 2012-Present  
Editor of Environment Section, State College, PA

- Designed sections to be visually appealing
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- Corrected grammar and errors in AP Style

Associated Press      Summer 2012  
Freelance writer, State College, PA

- Visited houses of victims and jurors in Jerry Sandusky case

Lunar Lion Team, competing in Google Lunar X Prize      Summer 2012  
Team Writer, State College, PA

- Designed and wrote newsletter in layman's terms to keep donors informed of team's progress

Centre Daily Times, annual circulation 108,492 January 2012- May 2012  
Reporting Intern, State College, PA

- Wrote and edited feature stories and news articles

Main Line Today Magazine, annual circulation 213,840 Summer 2011  
Editorial Intern, Newtown Square, PA

- Edited magazine articles on hard copy and computer
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