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SOME LIGHT ON METAPHYSICAL OBSCURITY AND ROUGHNESS

By ROBERT LATHROP SHARP

I

Just as the far-fetched conceits of the metaphysical poets were often deliberately intended to be a demonstration of wit, so were their obscurity and roughness likewise the result of intention. Both were common metaphysical traits, significant enough to have a place in the metaphysical aesthetic. Apparently this aesthetic, however, was never fully formulated: only scraps of it exist in the prefaces and commendatory poems of the poets themselves. The rest must be deduced before we can fully appreciate their art and the principles underlying it.

Because I think that obscurity and roughness were of greater importance in this aesthetic than is recognized, I intend in this article to present evidence showing (1) that these traits aroused contemporary comment; (2) that they were thought of in connection with metaphysical poetry; and (3) that they played a purposeful part in it. Any passages explaining why these traits developed are only incidental to this main purpose.

It will be more convenient to discuss obscurity and roughness separately. Though they often appear together in the poetry of the seventeenth century, they are not inseparable; and though they were present in metaphysical poetry from the outset, they are not equally connected with previous tradition.

It is not difficult to understand why they appeared concurrently. Each had its opposite in a trait of Elizabethan poetry, which was marked, comparatively, by clarity and harmony; and each represents a reaction to that popularization and cheapening of poetry

which accompanied the widespread imitation of Petrarchan moods and phrases. As early as 1591 Spenser lamented that his harmony was beginning to lose its charm for many ears:

For the sweet numbers and melodious measures,
With which I wont the winged words to tie,
And make a tunefull Diapase of pleasures,
Now being let to runne at libertie
By those which haue no skill to rule them right,
Haue now quite lost their naturall delight.¹

The early writers of metaphysical poetry, all men of education and feeling, sought to refine poetry by deepening its moods, by intellectualizing its images, and by making use of contemporary philosophy and science. Metaphysical poetry most clearly represents an attempt to energize poetry, to bring it up-to-date and make it reflect a new sensibility. The metaphysicals attempted to rid poetry of those "servile weeds"—imitative moods and phrases, superficiality, facility, and that sensuousness which is always antithetical to intellectual content. Because of the endless Petrarchizing of the Elizabethans, imitation, superficiality, and facility became identified with Petrarchan characteristics. But not only Petrarch became anathema to the metaphysicals. Spenser, by developing the sensuous graces of English and in achieving his reputation for "mélodie, clarté, abondance," gave the English Petrarchans a more pleasingly molded language with which to work. And Spenserian narrative and description, particularly in the hands of Spenser's imitators, were often open to the charge of superficiality and facility. As models both Petrarch and Spenser became equally objectionable to the metaphysicals.

The poet, like other artists, finds it necessary to rework the aesthetic principles of his predecessors. Each generation of poets must adjust its art to the changing circumstances of thought, feeling, and mood. The Jacobean found it necessary to take advantage of a shifting psychology as well as an imagery which was already highly developed in point of fulness and speed of communication. They saw that in making this imagery still more rapid, elliptical, and suggestive of new moods lay their only hope. They imitated Donne because he had vitalized a poetry that had been in danger of becoming effete; he had deepened the poetic experience and

¹ *The Teares of the Muses*, in *Complaints* (1591); "Polyhymnia."

achieved an effect which suggested both passion and penetration of thought.

The significance of the change is shown by its appearance in the work not only of Jonson,² a man of different temperament and different critical notions, but of confirmed Spenserians, such as Drayton.³ This change was more than the private affair of one poet. It reflected a broader change in the consciousness of the nation. The obscurity and roughness of metaphysical poetry are a psychologically fitting counterpart of the moody disillusionment of the Jacobean mind.

It is probable that the obscurity of the metaphysicals has but slight connection with that which played a part in earlier English literary tradition. The question of this earlier, non-metaphysical obscurity came to the foreground in the sixteenth century with the revival of the question of allegorical interpretation of pagan literature.⁴ Though English humanists and classical scholars of the sixteenth century were, generally speaking, opposed to obscurity as a literary trait and followed classical rhetoricians in teaching clarity,⁵ they recognized that obscurity in allegory was vital to classical literature; for the tradition of scholarship which they inherited,⁶ as well as their Christian training, made them, like their

² See especially four elegies in "Underwoods" (Jonson's *Workes*, 1640, II, 202-207). Though their authorship has been disputed, the bulk of the evidence is in Jonson's favor. Mr. George Williamson most recently discusses them (*The Donne Tradition* [Cambridge, Mass., 1930], pp. 190 ff.), but he insists without sufficient proof that they were written in direct imitation of Donne.

³ E. g. "My hart the Anuile where my thoughts doe beate," *Minor Poems*, ed. Cyril Brett (Oxford, 1907), p. 23. Such a line suggests a deepening sensibility.

⁴ See J. E. Spingarn, *Literary Criticism in the Renaissance*, Second Edition (New York, 1908), 7 ff., 261 ff.

⁵ The pure classical tradition is best expressed by Jonson; see his *Discoveries* (Bodley Head Quartos), 9, 72, 73, 74.

⁶ E. g. from Boccaccio, whose *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium* contains a defense of poetry which relies to a considerable extent on the traditional allegorical interpretation of pagan literature as a means of combating the hostility of the church. As for obscurity Boccaccio says that if poetry is guilty in that respect, so also are philosophy and theology; moreover "it is not one of the poet's various functions to rip up and lay bare the meaning which lies hidden in his inventions. Rather where matters truly solemn and memorable are too much exposed, it is his office by every effort

Italian predecessors, anxious to reconcile this literature with Christian doctrine. As an artistic method and as a means of interpretation, allegory was still important in the Renaissance, as it had been in the Middle Ages; and there could be no allegory without a certain amount of obscurity. Yet it is noteworthy that Elyot's *Governour*⁷ contains no exposition of the allegorical method of interpreting the ancients and that Sidney, though he knew Boccaccio's *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods*, only touches the subject. Chapman is the outstanding exception. He was a firm allegorist from the beginning and constantly praised obscurity as an essential trait.⁸ It was not until the seventeenth century, however, that the allegorical interpretation of the ancients became once more fashionable and that Bacon, Sandys, Reynolds, and Ross wrote their treatises disclosing the mystical wisdom of Greek and Roman poets.

Though Mr. Williamson,⁹ following the lead of T. S. Eliot and others, has identified Chapman with the metaphysicals, citing the common trait of obscurity as part of his evidence; and though Professor Spingarn¹⁰ has called Reynolds' *Mythomystes* an expression of the metaphysical viewpoint; nevertheless the allegorists should be considered as distinct from the metaphysicals.¹¹ Chap-

to protect as well as he can and remove them from the gaze of the irreverent, that they cheapen not by too common familiarity." Pearls must not be cast before swine. (Charles G. Osgood, *Boccaccio on Poetry* [Princeton, 1930], 59 ff., 62).

⁷ See Bk. I, XIII where Elyot refers to it but stresses only the moral precepts of the poets.

⁸ See particularly his dedication of *Ovids Banquet of Sence*; also his dedication of the *Odyssey*.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, Chap. III.

¹⁰ *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. J. E. Spingarn (Oxford, 1908), I, xxi ff.

¹¹ If Lord Herbert's poetry were philosophical in the same sense as Chapman's, the necessity of this distinction might be doubted. Lord Herbert was acquainted with allegorical interpretation, of course, and made some use—though little, for he did not rely upon the poets—of it in his *De Religione Gentilium* . . . (Amsterdam, 1663), where, attempting to find Christian doctrine and practice among the ancient, non-Christian peoples, he proposed ". . . veritates illas solummodo proponere, quae in mediis etiam Gentilium tenebris elucebant" (p. 4). But as a poet Lord Herbert was not concerned with "truth"; and any connection between the veil of fiction which he recognized in classical literature and the obscurity of his own poetry is of doubtful value.

man's obscurity, I believe, had behind it a time-honoured tradition, important in its philosophical and theological as well as in its literary aspects. As for Reynolds, it is likely that he would have been the first to condemn what he thought the triviality of metaphysical lyrics.¹² The obscurity of the metaphysicals started with the work of John Donne, not a humanist, not an allegorist, not a dispenser of universal wisdom, but a poet who tried to express his own complex thoughts and feelings.

Mention of obscurity was not, however, limited to the allegorists. The Elizabethan ideal of a noble poetry which should compete with the poetry of Greece and Rome supported the notion that the best literature appealed to the chosen few,¹³ and obscurity was useful for this purpose. Clarity as a means of obtaining more readers was not demanded of the Elizabethan poet. It was essential that he be erudite; for if he was to write vernacular poetry expecting the approval of the humanists, he must not write for the uneducated.

Of course this attitude towards obscurity exists at all times among certain writers. It is not peculiarly humanistic or Elizabethan but the result of any attempt to dignify a literature: the Pléiade ran the risk of not being understood.¹⁴ Undoubtedly the metaphysicals shared this attitude; that is, they would have defended their obscurity by deprecating a vulgar audience.

One or two other considerations need mention. The young intellectuals of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries considered it exceptionally smart to be subtle of conceit. Their reputation as wits depended upon their verbal and conceptual ingenuity. From the swaggering Elizabethan who returned to England with his Italianate language and ink-horn terms to the "subtle gallants" of whom Francis Beaumont speaks¹⁵ the fashionable prominence of the recondite and unusual was a fact. To this extent Donne was a

¹² See two passages in *Mythomystes* (*Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*), I, 142, 154.

¹³ G. A. Thompson, *Elizabethan Criticism of Poetry* (Menasha, Wis., 1914), p. 48: "The salvation of poetry, the critics deemed, lay in the hands of a chosen few. . . . Poetry . . . must be upheld as a learned art and its mysteries hedged in from the despoiling ravages of ignorance." (See also pp. 49-60.)

¹⁴ J. E. Spingarn, *Literary Criticism in the Renaissance*, 218.

¹⁵ But since our subtle gallants think it good
To like of nought that may be understood . . .
(Verses before *Volpone*, Jonson's *Workes*, 1616).

man of fashion, for the preface of his *Progress of the Soul* proves that he prided himself on his subtlety.¹⁶

Moreover in their satires the metaphysicals were aware that they inherited, particularly from Persius, a classical tradition of obscurity. Even Joseph Hall in departing from it half-apologizes.¹⁷

These few references to literary tradition perhaps explain why the metaphysicals need not have hesitated to write obscurely. Exactly why they chose to do so is not so evident. We must seek to explain their motives in terms not of literary tradition but of Donne's own type of mind and his attitude toward the poetry of the Petrarchans and Spenserians.

The prosodic harshness of the metaphysicals is even less indebted to previous poetic tradition. No one would seek to find in Donne's lines a trace either of Skeltonic waggery or of such archaic alliterative measures as appear in "February," "May," and "September" of the *Shepherds Calendar*. To be sure, the harshness of satire was as conventional as its obscurity, but the technical principles of satire scarcely account for the jerky unevenness of the verse of Donne and the other metaphysicals. Nor is bombast, with its strained and stuffed lines,¹⁸ close to the metaphysical style. Further explanation is necessary; this, I think, is to be found in the metaphysical aesthetic, evolved not from tradition but from what certain poets considered to be the need of poetry.

II

At once a difference will be noted between the obscurity of Donne (and other early metaphysicals, such as Lord Herbert) and that of later metaphysicals, whose thought was less subtle and involved but whose expression was artfully complicated. The difficulty of the early metaphysicals is to be explained particularly by their learning, subtlety, and subjectivity; that of many of the later metaphysicals by their jumbled syntax, their dread of simple statement, their elliptical and crowded lines. I do not wish to emphasize this

¹⁶ He ironically describes his mind as "plain, and flat, and through-light."

¹⁷ Hall, *Virgidemiarum, Sixe Bookes* (1597-99), 105. Hall preferred to be "plaine with hope of profite, rather than purposely obscure only for a bare names sake."

¹⁸ Spenser, *op. cit.*, refers to the harshness of Elizabethan bombast:

Heapes of huge words vphoorded hideously,
With horrid sound, though hauing little sence, . . .

distinction unduly, for even the style of King and Marvell remains appreciably close to that of Donne. The point is that such writers as Cleveland, Benlowes, and Eldred Revett¹⁹ recognized obscurity as a trait of their colleagues and attained it not by depth of thought but by the avoidance of natural expression. Therefore what I say here about Donne's obscurity does not apply to all the metaphysicals. To prove that obscurity was a common trait I have chosen Donne, Lord Herbert, Benlowes and the Duchess of Newcastle as sufficiently representative of different kinds of metaphysical poetry.

Donne's obscurity, rising from his thought and his images, is the result of a poetic ambition which sought expression not for the inexpressible but for the untraditional. One of his means of enlarging the field of communicable experience was the conceit.²⁰ As opposed to what it became in the hands of some of the later metaphysicals—that is, a mere matter of imagery, therefore external and more an end than a means—it was for him both intellectual and emotive.

Yet however native to his thought Donne's conceits may be, they are not easily assimilated. Because they represent a further step in the rapid evolution of Elizabethan imagery, many of the metaphors have a double gap; their application is sometimes puzzling. Moreover this gap has to be bridged by intellectual effort, since the figures, such as that of the compasses, do not depend on traditional connotations. Donne's evident striving for economy also hindered clarity; he packed his lines by making one figure do the work of several.

Not a little of Donne's obscurity is directly traceable to the subtlety of a mind which constantly qualified, ramified, repeated with shifting emphasis, and at the same time denied and controverted statements just made. The working of such a mind is evident in his poetry, and the reader has every right to assume that Donne thought psychological realism an asset. I feel that passion and sincerity come from the very contortions of the passage beginning:

¹⁹ *Poems*, 1657.

²⁰ That is, the intense and electric figure, e.g. "thorough crooked lymbeckes, still'd . . .," ("H:W: in Hiber: belligeranti"); not the circumlocutive phrase, e.g. "In numerous fleets, saile through their Sea, the aire" ("Eclogue"), which anticipated Augustan poetic diction. Donne used both, but a distinction is necessary in this particular context.

But I am by her death, (which word wrongs her)
 Of the first nothing, the Elixer grown;
 Were I a man, that I were one,
 I needs must know; I should preferre,
 If I were any beast, . . .²¹

Donne was subjective as well as subtle. The outer world furnished symbols but, beyond that function, had little importance. His thought had an existence of its own, and his emphasis on the processes of this thought proves its reality to him. His exaggerations are not only the hyperbole of passion:

She'is all States, and all Princes, I,
 Nothing else is.
 Princes doe but play us; ²²

they are the starting point of a logical structure which must become important to the reader if he is to feel the poem at all:

Let mans Soule be a Spheare, and then, in this,
 The intelligence that moves, devotion is,
 And as other Spheares, by being growne
 Subject to forraigne motions, lose their owne, . . .²³

The subjectivity of this highly refined and quintessential art was bound to produce obscurity. The distilling process that took place in the poet's own brain (and here we do not need to limit ourselves to Donne) resulted in notions strange to external nature. The metaphysicals overworked in this way, or in the less eccentric but equally subjective way of the religious poets, the poetry of interior life, away from which, as Professor Cazamian remarks, later poets turned.²⁴

Jonson remarked that Donne was intentionally obscure in one poem,²⁵ and thought that Donne's poetry "for not being under-

²¹ "A nocturnall upon S. Lucies day. . . ."

²² "The Sunne Rising."

²³ "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward."

²⁴ Louis Cazamian, *L'Evolution psychologique et la littérature en Angleterre 1660-1914* (Paris, 1920), p. 35: L'excès littéraire d'une création d'art trop intense et brillante, l'excès moral de l'utopie puritaine, s'unissent pour provoquer et accentuer une oscillation psychologique qui emporte l'esprit de l'Angleterre vers le pôle opposé de la vie intérieure."

²⁵ According to Drummond, Donne told Jonson that he wrote his elegy on Prince Henry to match Lord Herbert in obscurity, testimony which indicates Donne's amusement, as well as anything else. (Drummond, *Notes of Conversations with Ben Jonson*, Bodley Head Quartos, 7.)

stood would perish"; Henry King wrote in his elegy on Donne of "that awfull fire" which kept away ignorant "rude Empiricks";²⁶ and Jasper Mayne wrote in praise of the *Anniversaries*:

Indeed so farre aboue its Reader, good,
That wee are thought wits, when 'tis understood . . .²⁷

Therefore, since Donne's lines contrast in boldness and in difficulty with those of most of his contemporaries, and since some of his songs show that he could write simply:

Sweetest loue, I do not goe
For wearinesse of thee,²⁸

one may rightly conjecture that Donne was obscure, learned, contorted, and highly metaphorical with a purpose.

Lord Herbert, as truly metaphysical in the literal sense as any except Donne, is also one of the most obscure.²⁹ Of his conceits not a few have that beauty and fitness which impart a magic touch to so much early seventeenth-century poetry.

This said, in her up-lifted face,
Her eyes which did that beauty crown,
Were like two starrs, that having faln down,
Look up again to find their place: . . .³⁰

But the opening stanza of "A Vision" completely mystifies the reader until he discovers for himself that the subject is a woman combing her hair:

Within an *open curled Sea of Gold*
A *Bark of Ivory*, one day, I saw,
Which striking with his *Oars* did seem to draw
Tow'rds a fair *Coast*, wch I then did behold.³¹

Here the attitude of the poet is evidently half playful and the obscurity intentional: the poem is designed as a puzzle, a test of wit.

²⁶ Donne, *Poems*, ed. H. J. C. Grierson (Oxford, 1912), I, 371.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 382.

²⁸ "Song."

²⁹ Professor Grierson speaks of his "love of obscurity and harshness." (Donne, *op. cit.*, II, 158.)

³⁰ *The Poems . . . of Edward Lord Herbert of Cherbury*, ed. G. C. Moore Smith (Oxford, 1923), p. 66.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

Moreover, many of Edward Herbert's poems, with their phrases about "souls," "influences," and "motions," are filled with Platonic philosophy and cosmological learning. As with Donne's verse, philosophy, science, and theology form a solid background for his allusions and figures.

But Herbert's poems offer little to illustrate the obscurity which rises from confusion of syntax, ellipsis, and heavily crowded lines. Of these three fruitful sources of obscurity Benlowes' *Theophila* (1652) is the best illustration.

In *Theophila* Benlowes took full advantage of the enthusiasm and license allowed to produce a poem distinguished both by its complete lack of the normal phrases of prose and by its eccentric diction. He has packed his meaning so tightly into the short three-line- or, in a small part of the poem, two-line-stanza that the style is highly elliptical; phrases are telescoped, and normal transitional phrases are omitted. Of the place to which his soul is to retire he writes:

There, sweet Religion strings, and tunes, and screws
The soul's the orb, and doth infuse
Grave *Doric* epods in th'enthusiastic Muse.³²

As he says in an introductory poem, he is to "Enucleate mysteries to th'ear"; but earthly beauty is not driven from his mind without some description:

Fly, Fancy, Beauty's arched brow,
Darts, wing'd with fire, thence sparkling flow.
From flash of lightning eye-balls turn;
Contracted beams of crystal burn.
Waive curls, which Wit gold-tresses calls,
That golden fleece to tinsel falls.³³

In the height of fashion, *Theophila* was greatly admired by some; therefore the author scarcely needed to defend the style and manner of his poem. Yet if required to do so, he would not have been at a loss; a remark in his preface indicates one point, at least, that he would have made and gives us a clear statement of part of the metaphysical aesthetic. For Benlowes was referring to this aesthetic when he drew his distinction between the "masculine and refined pleasures of the understanding" and the "feminine

³² *Minor Poets of the Caroline Period*, ed. George Saintsbury (Oxford, 1905-1921), I, 339.

³³ "To My Fancy upon Theophila," *ibid.*, 322.

and sensual of the eye.”³⁴ All of Benlowes’ colleagues would have agreed to this; a fixed tenet with them, it was responsible for the intellectual flavor of a large part of their poetry. In its extreme form it meant that a line of verse was considered a nut to crack. The more wit resulted in obscurity, the more obvious was its excellence.

The poems of the Duchess of Newcastle³⁵ need to be mentioned here because they contain a statement, intended to forestall criticism, not unlike that of Benlowes. At the beginning of one of the three sections of the volume, a section highly “poetic” in the metaphysical sense, she requests the reader to proceed slowly in order to comprehend her wit:

I must entreat my *Noble Reader*, to read this part of my *Book* very slow, and to observe very strictly every word they read; because in most of these *Poems*, every word is a *Fancy*. Wherefore if they loose, by not marking, or skip by too hasty reading, they will intangle the *Sense* of the whole *Copy*.³⁶

Yet while the metaphysical fashion was at its height, a revolt against obscurity was taking place. Even before the agitation in favor of plain prose, expressions of dissatisfaction with the obscurity of the poets arose. Besides the remarks of Jonson, referred to above, a phrase in Drummond’s letter to Arthur Johnston, physician and Latinist, indicates that Drummond had the obscurity of the metaphysicals in mind.³⁷ Sir John Beaumont asked for

Similitudes contracted smooth and round,
Not vext by learning, but with Nature crown’d.³⁸

Habington praised Shirley’s “cleare Arte” and freedom from the “witty surfeits” that “force these ruder times to fond amaze-

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 319.

³⁵ *Poems, and Fancies*, 1653.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

³⁷ “Neither do I think that a good piece of poesy which Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Petrarch, Bartas, Ronsard, Boscan, Garcilasso, if they were alive and had that language, could not understand, and reach the sense of the writer.” Quoted in David Masson, *Drummond of Hawthornden* (London, 1873), p. 357. The letter is undated but must have been written before 1641, the year of Johnston’s death.

³⁸ Beaumont, *Bosworth-field* . . . , 1629, 110, “To his late Maiesty, concerning the true forme of English Poetry.”

ment.”³⁹ And Wither, commenting in 1641 on the “three sorts of Poësie now in fashion” declared himself for the sort which

delivers commodious Truths, and things Really necessary, in as plain, and in as universall tearmes, as it can possibly devise . . .⁴⁰

Clement Barksdale, a minor poet who brought out a volume entitled *Nympha Libethris* in 1651, was constrained to say:

My verse, because they are not *hard and rare*,
As some of *Dav'nant's*, *Don's* and *Cleveland's* are,⁴¹
You censure. Pray Sir, must all men write *so*?
Or can we *all* unto fair *Corinth* go?
But, Truth is, I'd not write so, if I cou'd:
I *write*, just as I *speak*, to be *understood*.
Whose sense will not without much *study* come,
Let him, for me, be altogether *dumb*.
No *Persius* be my Reader; but such may,
As *He* who once threw *Persius* away.⁴²

In a conventional commendatory poem, Jasper Mayne praises William Cartwright for his freedom from obscurity, saying that the latter is not one of those who write first and understand afterwards. Mayne's lines may well be contrasted with others by George Daniel,⁴³ written evidently about 1645, the former saying that Cartwright's poems will not have to be studied to be understood; the latter asking for careful study, and intimating that the poetry which requires intellectual effort is better than that which does not. Mayne's lines are as follows:

No cloud of Fancie, no mysterious stroke,
No Verse like those which antient Sybils spoke;
No Oracle of Language, to amaze

³⁹ Verses before Shirley's *The Wedding*, 1629.

⁴⁰ *Haleluiah*, 1641, reproduction, Spenser Society (1879), “To the Reader.”

⁴¹ Davenant appears in surprising company. But *Gondibert*, also published in 1651, did not immediately change Davenant's reputation. Much of his minor verse is, of course, metaphysical.

⁴² *Op. cit.*, 96, “To the Readers. Conclusion.” Elsewhere Barksdale says of his muse:

She tunes her innocent Notes for pupils yong,
Whose fancy can't digest a verse too strong:
High Poems will deter them; these may teach
And animate, because so near their reach. (*Ibid.*, 1.)

⁴³ (1616-1657).

The Reader with a dark or Midnight phrase,
 Stands in thy Writings, which are all pure Day,
 A cleer, bright Sunshine, and the mist away.
 That which Thou wrot'st was sense, and that sense good,
 Things not first written; and then understood . . .⁴⁴

Daniel, on the other hand, writes in "Carmen Protrepticon; Lectori," before his own *Scattered Fancies*:

Men looke on Poems, but they doe not reade
 Them to the Sence; which makes the Fancie deade,
 And circumscribes the Author in a fewe
 Smooth running Words. But if you passe a Due
 Censure on Writer's ayme, at iudging well;
 Weigh everie word and everie Sillable:
 And though you read 'em twice, and something find
 To strike your Fancie, thinke there is behind
 Another Sence, worth all that you have knowne;
 The Poet made 'em Such, and that's His owne.⁴⁵

The implied qualities which accompany obscurity and clarity, respectively, are, it may be noted, fancy and sense. (In Daniel the word sense = meaning.) These keep up, in a manner, a running antagonism throughout the century.

A slight volume entitled *Naps Upon Parnassus* (1658) and intended to expose the verses of Samuel Austin to the ridicule of its readers offers final testimony. Austin, to a considerable extent, imitated John Cleveland, and, presumably, admired the latter's obscurity:

Call him th' *Muses Metaphysick Reader*,
 Of all the Poets *Troup* stile him the *Leader*;
 Who with rare *Novelties* baffles the *Sense*
 Of the busie pated *Weeks intelligence* . . .⁴⁶

But Austin's own verses were so peppered with obscure metaphors that the wits saw here the best butt for their shafts. In their numerous ironically commendatory poems they made fun of him in the following fashion:

'Tis vulgar to be *clear*. 'Tis but a Quibble
 To write a verse that is *intelligible*.

⁴⁴ Mayne, Verses prefixed to William Cartwright's *Comedies, Tragi-Comedies, With other Poems*, 1651.

⁴⁵ George Daniel, *Poems*, ed. A. B. Grosart (privately printed, 1878), II, 1.

⁴⁶ *Op. cit.*, "Upon Mr. John Cleaveland, my quondam Chamber-fellow."

But *Thy* judicious *Muse* shun's this Offence,
And scorns the pedantry of writing *Sense*.⁴⁷

Enough has been said to indicate how much contemporary discussion was caused by the metaphysical trait of obscurity. The resemblances which metaphysical wit sought and which it expressed in new metaphors were neither common nor superficial. The intellect played a definite part in discerning and relating; that the reader should need to exert his own intellect in following the poet was a natural corollary. It may thus be said that obscurity was encouraged by the metaphysicals and that it was thought of in connection with their poetry. Other poets, such as Waller, attempted to write both more plainly and more regularly; and as the neo-classical scheme of things slowly asserted itself, the wit of poetry grew less extravagant and lost its obscurity along with its other metaphysical traits.

III

From Jonson to Pope, and from Pope to a modern critic, Mr. Williamson,⁴⁸ a considerable amount of Donne's verse has been considered unmusical. Roughness or harshness was a part of Donne's art, and it was undoubtedly conscious and deliberate. The effect—and to some ears the appeal—of this harshness, whether in Donne or Browning, does not make it music. The question "Is it not true that a poet who is not musical is not a poet?"⁴⁹ Donne would have answered in the negative or with the retort that certain types of poetry did not demand harmony.

Jonson, as well as the Spenserians, was opposed to unmetrical verse, as he states in no uncertain terms in his *Discoveries*. Certain poets in his day, he says, think a style "strong and manly" that strikes the ear "with a kind of unevenesse." These men "erre not by chance, but knowingly, and willingly."⁵⁰ If Donne was not their ringleader, he, at least in Jonson's opinion, deserved a ringleader's fate.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* These lines, signed "G. C.," are typical.

⁴⁸ See A. H. Nethercot, "The Reputation of John Donne as a Metrist," *Sewanee Review*, XXX (1922), 463-474; and Williamson, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

⁴⁹ A question raised by M. W. Croll (*Modern Philology*, XXVIII [1930-1931], 491) in reviewing *The Donne Tradition*.

⁵⁰ Jonson, *Discoveries*, *ed cit.*, p. 30.

But the followers of Donne disregarded Jonson's animadversion and shunned Spenserian smoothness, which, indeed, Jonson admitted, had its faults also. They showed an indifference not only to harmony but to the fairly elementary matter of rhythm. To them it was sufficient if in certain kinds of poetry they merely counted syllables, fulfilling, for example, the literal requirement of decasyllabic lines. Where the accents fell, where the pauses occurred, where vowels echoed or consonants grated was not their main concern.⁵¹

Conclusive evidence shows that the metaphysicals counted syllables in their couplet poems which have as a metrical norm the five-stress decasyllabic line. To these I confine myself at present. If the few feminine endings are excepted, it will be found that lines in which other than ten syllables occur are extremely rare. Elision is one of the most frequently employed methods of reducing a line to this number; Donne used it constantly. Words such as *fire*, *being*, *heaven*, *power*, are nearly always, but not invariably, treated as one syllable; occasionally the same word in different places has a different syllabic value. The pronunciation of *every* as *evry* indicates another way in which apparently hypermetrical lines actually conformed. Moreover, the use of two unstressed syllables instead of one is not irregular if one of those two is easily slurred.⁵²

Thus out of the fourteen hundred lines in Donne's verse letters, only about forty (not quite three per cent) are irregular as far as the number of syllables, or syllabic units, is concerned. Yet many more than that are rough and unrhythmical.

Thomas Gray pointed out the same fact about Donne's satires as early as 1760, in his *Observations on English Metre*. There, linking Donne and Spenser because of the latter's license in *Aegloga octava*, he said:

And after him Dr. Donne (in his Satires) observes no regularity in the pause, or in the feet of his verse, only the number of syllables is equal throughout.⁵³

⁵¹ It is possible—I think the evidence does not justify a stronger statement—that they were striving for a natural speech rhythm in poetry. Yet if so, their verbal and mental contortions are hard to explain.

⁵² E. g. "*Withering* like prisoners, which lye but for fees." (Donne, "The Storm," l. 18). The parts in (my) italics are reducible to one syllable each.

⁵³ Gray, *Works*, ed. John Mitford (London, 1858), V, 242, note.

A remark follows which shows that in Gray's estimation Donne's intentions may have applied to satirical verse alone:

I suppose he thought this rough, uncouth measure suited the plain, familiar style of satirical poetry.⁵⁴

Lately M. Pierre Legouis has pointed out the same regularity in syllables and irregularity in accent.⁵⁵ His own solution, however, is that many of Donne's decasyllabic lines take four accents instead of five,⁵⁶ a solution which is needless if intentional roughness is admitted as part of the metaphysical art.

Little difference metrically is noticeable between Donne's satires, his verse letters, and his other decasyllabic couplet poems, e. g. "Elegie XVI. *On his Mistris*." Of the fifty-six lines of this, only four have more than ten syllables—the rest have exactly ten—and elision or slurring gives three of these four the equivalent of ten syllables.⁵⁷ Yet this fourth is only one of the lines in which the stresses do not fall regularly; the others are ll. 8, 15, 25, 28, 30-34, and possibly 13.

Lines justifying the same deductions may be cited from Lord Herbert, Carew (who is rough in fewer poems, however), Cart-

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Donne the Craftsman* (Paris, 1928), 88. Four lines which he quotes from the first satire show this especially well:

Wilt thou grin or fawne on him, or prepare (l. 23)
For better or worse take mee, or leave mee: (l. 25)
Sooner may one guesse, who shall beare away (l. 57)
Perfect French, and Italian; I replied, (l. 103).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 92. The lines are really no better off in four sections.

Hee quarrell'd, fought, bled; and turn'd out of dore (l. 110)
goes easily with four stresses, but more naturally, if more roughly, with five. And

Now we are in the street; He first of all (l. 67)
seems to me preferable to

Now we are in the street; He first of all. . . .
The question, of course, is whether Donne would have sacrificed natural stresses for rhythm, and a changed rhythm at that.

⁵⁷ These three are:

Temper, ô faire Love, loves impetuous rage, (l. 13)
To thy selfe onely; All will spie in thy face (l. 29)
Nor spungy hydroptique Dutch shall thee displease, (l. 42).

The fourth:

Openly loves force, nor in bed fright thy Nurse (l. 50).

wright, George Herbert, Lovelace, Vaughan (especially from his secular poetry), Cleveland, and Cowley, to name only a few. Of Cowley it should also be said, both as a qualification and as a hint of the fate of metaphysical roughness, that he shows not only neo-classical scruples in numbering syllables but also metrical balance and a more skilful use of pauses, both of which counteract the effect of the rough line.

Certain other sources of roughness might be mentioned, such as abrupt, compressed phrases and internal pauses. Although these may be less productive of harshness than the failure to observe regularity of stress, they often accompany irregularity. And they illustrate how far beyond mere accentual negligence the metaphysicals strayed as they went over the line into the region of cacophony. Compressed phrases led to a jumbling of consonants from which only harshness resulted:

Blathon owe Cornhill, Stella share Cheapside.⁵⁸
All the long-toil'd-for treasure his ship stows⁵⁹
As joy to his *Mothers* and his *Mistress* grief affords: . . .⁶⁰

These lines are typical of much of the work of the metaphysicals. The other, almost equally characteristic fault of too frequent and irregular pauses produced a jerkiness for which the Augustans substituted the flowing line. This passage from Henry Vaughan's "Love-sick" has a staccato effect:

Thou art
Refining fire, O then refine my heart,
My foul, foul heart! Thou art immortall heat,
Heat motion gives; Then warm it, till it beat,
So beat for thee, till thou in mercy hear,
So hear that thou must open: open to
A sinfull wretch . . .⁶¹

Many of Donne's lines, though less staccato, are equally jerky:

Yet as a firme house, though the Carpenter
Perish, doth stand: As an Embassadour
Lyes safe, how e'r his king be in danger . . .⁶²

⁵⁸ Cleveland, "News from Newcastle" (l. 98).

⁵⁹ Carew, "My Mistress" (l. 2).

⁶⁰ Cowley, "The Praise of Pindar" (l. 31).

⁶¹ Vaughan, *Works*, ed. L. C. Martin (Oxford, 1914), II, 493.

⁶² Donne, "To Mr. T. W.," *op. cit.*, I, 206.

What were these "certain kinds" of poetry which allowed them such metrical license? All of the major metaphysicals were masters of harmony as well as of harshness, else the early seventeenth century would not have attained such an enviable reputation for song. The magic touch that molded Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Carolinian lyrics was shared by Donne, Lord Herbert, Crashaw, Carew, Cowley, Marvell, and all the rest. In no age have lyric and song been sweeter.

The answer is contained in certain passages of Cowley, Sprat, and Henry Reynolds. The first says in the preface to his imitations of Pindar:

And lastly . . . we must consider that our Ears are strangers to the Musick of his *Numbers*, which sometimes (especially in *Songs* and *Odes*) almost without any thing else, makes an excellent *Poet*. . . .⁶³

The reasonable inference from this is that harmony was of undisputed importance in songs and odes (though perhaps complications arise in regard to the latter).⁶⁴ A passage that is longer but not more specific occurs in the life of Cowley which Sprat wrote for the edition of the former's works in 1668:

If his Verses in some places seem not as soft and flowing as some would have them, it was his choice, not his fault. He knew that in diverting mens minds there should be the same variety observ'd as in the prospects of their Eyes, where a Rock, a Precipice, or a rising Wave is often more delightful [sic] than a smooth, even ground or a calm Sea. Where the matter required it, he was as gentle as any man. But where higher Virtues were chiefly to be regarded, an exact numerosity was not then his main care.⁶⁵

It is notable that Sprat makes the following points: (1) Cowley

⁶³ Cowley, *Poems*, ed. A. R. Waller (Cambridge, 1905), 155.

⁶⁴ The ode was, properly speaking, a type of song (cf. Jonson's "An Ode or Song by all the Muses, in celebration of her Majesty's Birthday"); yet Cowley himself says of his pindarics that the "*Numbers* are various and irregular, and sometimes . . . seem harsh and uncouth . . ." (*op. cit.*, 11). The subsequent insistence that "*Sweetness* and *Numerosity*" are to be found in them is tempered by the nature of the "*Pindarique Pegasus*." (Cf. also note, *ibid.*, 217). Cowley may have been aiming at a certain metrical effect, but not smoothness.

There is no doubt at all about *song*. Cf. the observation which Coleridge jotted in Lamb's copy of Donne. (Edmund Gosse, *Life and Letters of John Donne* [London, 1899], I, 282.)

⁶⁵ *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, II, 129.

was rough by choice; (2) his roughness depended on the matter; (3) "an exact numerosity" was not considered one of the higher virtues of poetry. And finally, in his preface to *Mythomystes* Henry Reynolds says that he will not discuss things of lesser importance, such as "... where the strong line (as they call it) where the gentle, sortes best . . ." ⁶⁶

The work of the metaphysicals as a whole supports the conclusions that may be drawn from the above evidence, conclusions foreshadowed by Sprat's remarks on Cowley. Though probably not attempting a new prosody,⁶⁷ Donne and the metaphysicals thought that harshness had its advantages in satire—so far they were conventional—and in elegiac, expository, and occasional poetry. These were the more important types in which license was allowed. We can be less sure of the verse letter, although Sprat thought some of Cowley's attempts smooth; but the greater part of the evidence shows that freedom was allowed here too. Donne's epistles are as rough as anything he wrote.

In their lyrics and songs, however, the metaphysicals experimented most freely with metrical forms. The profusion of stanzaic forms and line-lengths found in the lyrical poetry of the seventeenth century shows what skilful prosodists these poets were. To fail to recognize the intentions behind their harshness is to refuse them their due.

A few more quotations will prove that they deliberately attempted roughness. Sometimes they used the term *masculinity*, which meant much the same, though suggesting force and concentration in addition,⁶⁸ elevating it to the rank of a poetic virtue.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 143.

⁶⁷ George Saintsbury (*History of English Prosody* [London, 1906-10], II, 161), cites *The Progress of the Soul* in support of his opinion that Donne was not attempting a new prosody. But Donne had no objection to rime schemes or stanzaic forms; he merely scorned internal harmony, which he thought a secondary consideration.

⁶⁸ Further explanation is necessary here because Ben Jonson, who was a foe to wrenched accent, had his name identified with "masculine expressions" by his sons. Masculine expression was not the sole property of the metaphysicals; it belonged to whoever wrote in the packed, vigorous, intellectual line, which was often uneuphonious but not necessarily unmetrical. In praising Jonson, James Howell used the phrase "strenuous lines," and Marmion spoke of "strength." (*Jonsonus Virbius*. See also Lord Clarendon's *Autobiography* [edition of 1759], p. 16). Jonson's lines

The "masculine line," the "strong line" were always opposed to feminine smoothness.

As early as 1631, the date of his *Whimzies*, Richard Brathwaite spoke of strong lines as if they had run their fashionable course:

Strong lines have beene in request; but they grew disrelishing, because they smelled too much of the Lampe and opinionate singularity.⁶⁹

This and the passage which follows show how this roughness was identified with affectation—i. e. it was a cultivated, artificial roughness—and with singularity, both of which were opposed to judgment and discretion:

Hee writes best, that *affects* least; and *effects* most. For such as labor too intently to please themselves, they for most part make it their labour to please none but themselves. This hath beene ever my *maxime*, that *singularity* and *affectation* are Antypodes to *Iudgement* and *Discretion*.⁷⁰

Sprat, some of whose remarks I have cited earlier, continues in his defense of Cowley that perhaps he has answered those "who upbraid some of his pieces with roughness, and with more contractions than they are willing to allow":

But these Admirers of gentlenesse without sinews should know that different Arguments must have different Colours of Speech: that there is a kind of variety of Sexes in Poetry as well as in Mankind: that as the peculiar excellence of the Feminine Kind is smoothnesse and beauty, so strength is the chief praise of the Masculine.⁷¹

were rugged (cf. critics such as Dr. Johnson and Macaulay), but they were not rough in the extreme sense: he generally kept accent. The combination of masculinity and extreme roughness is the peculiar property of the metaphysicals.

One other qualification may be made. In a few instances the word *masculine* was applied to the virtuous as opposed to the sensual. (See the "To the Reader" of Bishop Corbet's *Poëtica Stromata* [1648]; and Samuel Daniel's *Musophilus*, Works, ed. A. B. Grosart [London, 1885], I, 241).

⁶⁹ Brathwaite, *Whimzies* . . . (London, 1631), "Epistle Dedicatorie."

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, II, 129. Cf. also Sprat's half-apologetic defense of the few poems in which Cowley was unstudied and plain and which have "a Natural easiness and unaffected Grace . . ." (*ibid.*, p. 137). The reference seems to be to the feminine kind.

Another interesting passage is provided by the preface to Dryden's *Albion and Albanus*: ". . . the recitative part of the opera requires a more masculine beauty of expression and sound; the other, which . . . I

Carew's invaluable elegy on Donne is helpful at this point because it opposes masculine expression and wit to soft lines. He says that Donne has opened a mine of "rich and pregnant phansie" and

. . . drawne a line
Of masculine expression . . .⁷²

Donne is contrasted with the ancients, whose language was harmonious and "More charmes the outward sense" but would not have been equal to the demands of Donne's imagination:

Since to the awe of thy imperious wit
Our stubborne language bends, made only fit
With her tough-thick-rib'd hoopes to gird about
Thy Giant phansie, which had prov'd too stout
For their soft melting Phrases.⁷³

Early and late references to Cleveland's style are full of mention of masculinity, which is practically identified with the metaphysical manner. Fuller, for instance, says in his *Worthies*:

Such who have *Clevelandized*, endeavouring to imitate his masculine style, could never go beyond the hermaphrodite, still betraying the weaker sex in their deficient conceits.⁷⁴

And as late as 1687 a commendatory poem in an edition of Cleveland contained the lines:

Each Word of thine swells pregnant with a Page,
Then why do some Mens nicer Ears complain
Of the uneven Harshness of thy Strain?
Preferring to the Vigour of thy Muse,
Some smooth, weak Rhymer, that so gently flows,
That Ladies may his easie Strains admire
And melt like Wax before the softning Fire.
Let such to Women write, you write to Men;
We study Thee, when we but play with Them.⁷⁵

Two poems before Nicholas Murford's *Fragmenta Poetica*

must call the *songish part*, must abound in the softness and variety of numbers; its principal intention being to please hearing rather than to gratify the understanding." (*Essays*, ed. W. P. Ker, [Oxford, 1926], I, 271.)

⁷² Donne, *op. cit.*, I, 378 ff.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 379.

⁷⁴ Fuller, *The History of the Worthies of England*, ed. P. A. Nuthall (London, 1840), II, 240.

⁷⁵ Cleveland, *Works* (1687), "On Mr. Cleveland and his Poems."

(1650) praise the author's strong lines. The author of the first, Ralph Piggott, wrote:

Ev'n as the nasty Swine both flies and hates
All fragrant Ointments . . .
Just so of thy strong lines the very sent
Will make the Borish Rusticks scud amain . . .⁷⁶

And a friend who signed himself "T. P." declared:

Thy wit by Nature's lot
Was such, that thou a Poet masculine
Becamst by drinking *Helicon* divine.⁷⁷

Such testimony is sufficient to show that masculinity was firmly established as one of the qualities of metaphysical poetry. The contemporary reaction, like that against obscurity and extravagance, gathered headway steadily and surely; though it was not until after the Restoration that that regard for harmony which was paramount with Spenser and other Elizabethans successfully expelled the rather widespread harshness illustrated above. Augustan ideals, demanding a more harmonious distribution of vowels, consonants, and pauses, were to triumph, later, in the studied mellifluousness of Gray's *Elegy*.

The metaphysicals were often both obscure and rough intentionally. The only metrical requirement of the less lyrical kinds of poetry was the counting of syllables. Their wit was accordingly the more unhampered and could seek more original and more profuse expression. The packed, vigorous line which was their objective remained on the intellectual level, above what they thought the lower level of clarity and harmony.

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⁷⁶ Murford, *op. cit.*, reproduction (King's Lynn, *n. d.*), pp. xii ff.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, xiv ff.