Chapter II

The Times of George Herbert

The life of George Herbert, like that of any other established reputation, cannot be read properly in isolation from the social and literary milieu of his day. The weight of the habits and influences of his own time, in shaping his life and outlook, cannot be ignored at all. It is important to see if, both as a man of religion and a man of letters, Herbert belonged to the highways or the byways of these particular pursuits, for that will help us see his true talent as evident in his life and poetry. It is necessary, therefore, to focus our attention on such aspects of the first quarter or so of the seventeenth century as have a direct bearing upon an understanding of the poet's life and activities. It is, however, beyond the scope and purpose of the present work to study the period in its entirety. Only three aspects, viz. the intellectual, the religious, and the literary, will be considered, and the discussion of the first two will be mainly in the form of a review which will, obviously, be based on a strict selection of the huge mass of material already made available by many scholarly investigations in those fields. The review of the literary situation will be limited to the practice of poetry only. Even then, no detailed discussion of metaphysical poetry, as such, is intended, for the primary purpose of this work is not to examine Herbert as a metaphysical poet, but to
establish the relation between his poetry and his personality. The aim of the present chapter is to bring out the social and intellectual environment in which Herbert lived and moved and had his being. Such an approach is also expected to help the reader follow the line of argument in the chapters that follow.

The seventeenth century, much of which is reflected in the works of Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, and Traherne, is one of the most varied and interesting periods of the social, political, and literary history of England. It differs intensely from the shorter and more unified period of 'The Age of Elizabeth', when a strong feeling of national unity had developed during the country's long struggle with Spain. But, in spite of the outward unity that was maintained with much difficulty by the compromising Queen, grave dissensions were raising their head, mainly in the form of religious controversies. The Protestant divines who had sought refuge in Germany and Switzerland from the persecutions of Mary Tudor, had since returned to England, and were eager to establish the doctrine of Geneva. Merchants were already grumbling against high taxation. After the exit of Elizabeth and her counsellors from the scene, all the controversies and differences increased under the imprudent governments of James I and Charles I, until they finally came to a head in the Civil War that followed.

Helen C. White has drawn our attention to a famous passage in the second book of 'Paradise Lost' (11.894 ff.) in which 'Original Chaos' and 'Eldest Night' are discovered holding 'Eternal Anarchie' amid the warring elements of the Universe. To more than one reader,
that passage has seemed a fit description of the intellectual climate of the seventeenth century. It has been pointed out by competent critics that it was a time of great confusion, of mingled disillusion and exhilaration, but it was also a time of resolution, of conscious determination to do something about the confusion. It was a highly critical, intensely self-aware age, but it had within itself nothing of the passivity, the fugitive-ness, the carelessness, and the despondency, so often found in such times. In spite of its characteristic delicacy of mood and feeling, the centre of the seventeenth century psychology was the 'Will'. It was not for nothing that the greatest scientist of the century, Issac Newton, tended to subordinate the intellect to the will, wisdom to domination, or that the greatest poet of the time, John Milton, devoted the carefully garnered spiritual and intellectual resources of a lifetime to the extended considerations of the nature and scope of man's will. Puritan absolutism was but an extreme development of something to be found everywhere in the seventeenth century temperament, to which the issues of life were of immediate and critical importance, their solution something to be passionately sought and no less passionately propounded. The cruelty and fanaticism of the time are but the darker expressions of the confidence in the power of the human will.

The hope of man's revival had grown fanatic and sectarian in the England of the seventeenth century. But it was still the old hope, and it could still be discerned in the thought and feeling even of those men who most resolutely rejected its stricter manifestation. It was one of the things that gave nerve and fibre to
the seventeenth century at its subtlest moments, and a certain reality to its most fantastic influences. The passion for self-aggrandizement and the greed for power found favourable conditions in the England of the time. The breakdown of the traditional feudal nobility had been well under way before the Renaissance reached England. But its place during the reigns of Henry and Elizabeth were being rapidly taken by a new nobility, enriched by the spoils of the monasteries. The increase in speculative bargains of the land-agents gave the people, particularly to those of lower social status, a chance to enrich themselves quickly and with relative ease. The result was a rather fluid social and economic situation that offered richly remunerative inducements to men of energy and parts to advance their fortunes. Even though industrial and commercial lives were as yet but imperfectly competitive, the great world centering in the courts of Elizabeth and James offered all the elements of singularly ruthless and rapacious individualism. Helen C. White has added that there was another side to the growth of individualism. The brilliant development of personality that every student of the period has noted with delight is one of the richest and most stimulating gifts of the time to the poet and the artist. It was during this period of reinstatement of personality that many poets and artists came into the limelight. One has only to compare the typical medieval saint's life with the studies in personality that were beginning to be written. For the medieval biographer, the personality of his hero was of little direct account. The virtues of his subject were of value because of example and the delight that all aspiring amateurs take in a championship player.
The centre of medieval hagiography was the greatness and goodness of God, and the saint was cherished as a witness and as an instrument of God\textsuperscript{2}. But the art of writing biography underwent a radical change during the seventeenth century. The focus was more on the personality of the subject, and less on what divine grace might make of human materials. As a result, we have a large number of interesting accounts of the lives of some very individualistic artists and poets recorded during the seventeenth century.

It can be said that the effect of the Renaissance was most fruitful in the development of the rationalist movement of the seventeenth century. The aim of this movement was to direct all creative energy and time relentlessly to the conquest of nature. It represents the spirit of the new scientific approach. It was Francis Bacon, the towering intellectual of the time, who wrote in 'The Advancement of Learning' that the Renaissance motive was to use the new science for "the glory of the Creator and the relief of man's estate."

Basil Willey has maintained that the most important feature of the development of the rationalistic approach is to be found in a change of attitude as to what constitutes a satisfactory explanation of the natural world. Emphasizing the point, he says:

"Instead of the kind of 'truth' which is consistent with authoritative teaching, men began to desire the kind which would enable them to measure, to weigh and to control the things around them."

The search for the 'why' of the medieval period was replaced by the study of the 'how' of the seventeenth century. The Renaissance
spirit of avid yearning, which had taken all knowledge for its province at the beginning of the sixteenth century, turned to a humble gleaning of pebbles on the shore of the sea of knowledge by its end.

Before the Reformation, notwithstanding the tension in religious circles on the questions of Grace and Free Will, Christianity had managed to take many different viewpoints in its stride. But, the decisive spirit of the seventeenth century threw up the differences between Free Will and Grace, and between rituals and lack of form in prayer. The Puritan approach advocated sitting at ease at the table for Supper and bringing the wine in a pewter tankard, declaring that transubstantiation was idolatrous. The characteristic passion for precision of the seventeenth century was responsible for rapid advancements in the field of science. But, applied to the religious field, it resulted in fanaticism and the creation of a large number of sects. Though the emergence of the sects could be taken as a sign of enhancement of the religious spirit, yet, in the prevailing mood of the seventeenth century, this segmentation came into conflict with efforts directed towards achieving a uniformity of doctrines and modes of worship. It was becoming clear that religious controversies might wreck the work of the Reformation. The individual Christian became aware of his religious problems. Protestantism rejected the authority of the Church. A belief started taking root that each enlightened Christian had the inner light within him as his guide. This religious internalisation soon gained ground, and Christian hearts were filled
with the yearning for experiencing God within. The Bible started being interpreted in a number of ways to suit many religious approaches. This is how a large number of sects started mushrooming.

Commenting on the multiplicity of sects, Helen C. White says that harmless as many of these sects may seem today, it must not be forgotten that in the seventeenth century no sect thought of itself as merely one more contribution among many to the richness of religious life. Each was prepared to take possession of the entire Christian edifice at the first calling. Moreover, the social interrelations of religious theory and government were so close that very few religious issues were considered strictly and exclusively on their spiritual merits. Helen C. White has rightly added that the history of the seventeenth century religious controversies is an appalling one, whatever the approach. A disregard of the circumstances of the times might easily make it seem completely irrational.

Religion dominated both national and personal life in the earlier part of the seventeenth century. Owing to the intensity of feeling it aroused, religion was considered a matter of life and death. The House of Commons declared in 1629 that whoever brought an "innovation in religion" was "a capital enemy of the Commonwealth". An intense interest in theological "controversy, and to some extent in religious books, was common to almost all levels of society. Nearly half the books published between 1600 and 1640 were on religious topics. Their readers ranged from the nobility to the commonalty.
Before and during Elizabeth's time, one of the functions of the universities was to supply efficient preachers who had completed their theological studies. The tone of university life was largely set by the clerical section of the students who were undergoing training for taking holy orders. But the inadequate number of trained preachers during the reign of the Queen gave rise to curious religious gatherings called 'Prophesying' or 'Exercises'. These could be called local schools of oratory and Scripture studies. These were considered as training classes for the would-be preacher. The duration of these gatherings was, generally, a couple of hours, and they consisted of a few practising preachers and some gentlemen of leisure. Each preacher present delivered his sermon for about a quarter of an hour, on a particular part of the Scripture, with a view to exposing the attending gentlemen to various styles of preaching. These meetings began and ended with prayers, after which the president, who was invariably some old minister, gave out the text of the Scripture to be dealt with at the next session. These Exercises were favoured by many eminent persons of the time, including Francis Bacon, as practical training for the clergy in the art of preaching. But it was also argued by many that these gatherings brought discredit to the regular church services. The preachers who generally participated in them were of the Puritan stock, and they made little secret of their contempt for the prescribed rituals of the Church.

There had also come into being a practice whereby monasteries were dissolved and their property and revenue grabbed by greedy courtiers and influential nobles. Queen Elizabeth herself was
known to have kept the sees of many bishops vacant with a view to utilising their income for her own ends. Consequently, many parishes were ill-served and neglected. Many were no better than stark ruins. Some were even used as granaries and stores by local land-owners. Some are known to have been used as places for public amusement also. In addition, carelessness and irreverence was pronounced in the conduct of the services. Many preachers did not wear surplices. Kneeling at the reception of the Communion was not strictly enforced. The Holy Table standing in the middle of the nave was used for ordinary business in some cases. The property of the churches was stolen and wasted. Yet, the high and noble ideals of the Faith were not completely dead. All they required was a gentle and sympathetic touch to organise things religious once again.

Queen Elizabeth devised a practical way of respecting the feelings of both the Calvinists and the Anglicans. Her love of the older ceremonial form of worship had earned her the ire of many ardent Protestants of the day. One of the major issues of Elizabeth's Reformation of 1562 was the substitution of the Book of Common Prayer by one which was in a language understood by the common people, instead of large parts being retained in Latin. Another was the abolition of certain rituals in worship which were of Popish origin. Yet another was the administering of both the kinds of communion, 'The Supper of the Lord' and the 'Holy Communion', commonly called 'The Mass'. The Reformation also brought in the use of wooden Communion tables which were to be placed at the East end of the Chancel where the altar had stood prior to large-scale
destruction of altars in many churches by the Puritans. It appears that the Elizabethan settlement was conceived in an atmosphere of compromise. It was not really a revolution or a reformation in the strict sense. It was merely a settlement to keep as large a part of the Christian nation together as possible. The interest of certain other important sects was also taken into consideration in this settlement. The men who took on the task of translating this settlement into practice, paid attention to the points of view of both the Protestants and the Catholics of their day. Hooker, himself a prominent Protestant, showed a sensitive appreciation of many Catholic practices. He developed a middle path for the Anglican Church, and justified the same by lucid arguments. While Hooker concentrated his efforts on the field of theology, Andrewes took up work in the fields of devotional thought and writing, and, subsequently, Laud also extended the same approach to ritualistic worship and government of the Anglican Church. Laud was backed by the King, the Court of High Commission, and the powerful Star Chamber. He had a strong logical mind. To him, if a thing seemed right to do, it was wrong not to do it. He vigorously proceeded with the practical business of reform. He drove Calvinistic preaching from the pulpits. He permitted the 'lecturers', who were Puritan preachers licensed by bishops, to read the church service before beginning their sermons. He compelled bishops to reside in their sees and generally overhauled the morals and manners of the clergy. He caused the raising of new altars in churches, and arranged for Communion Tables to be placed in their old positions in the east, and got them railed off to avoid contamination. He insisted on kneeling,
instead of sitting, while receiving the Communion. His area of influence extended to the chaplains of the king's ships as well as to the English regiments abroad, and even to those in the service of the English merchant companies in foreign lands. He took the wealthy squires to task for their encroachment upon the assets and premises of the churches. He insisted that tradesmen must close their shops on Sundays and that inn-keepers must not serve any customer during the hours when church was held. He advocated attendance of women and children at the church. He was particularly instrumental in reviving the Anglican system, and literally rooted out the hardcore Puritans.

During that time the Puritans were parodied on the stage, for they had discouraged all forms of recreation, such as dancing, for men and women, archery for men, and leaping and vaulting. They were against the holding of May games, Whitsun ales, the setting up of May poles and the conduct of Morris dances. They were of both the 'true-blue-Puritan' and the 'Anglo-Catholic' types—both being members of the Church of England. The Puritans believed that the Presbyterian or the Congregational form of church government was divinely authorised in the New Testament, and that prayers and rites being used by the Church of Rome were sacrilegious and Anti-Christ. They interpreted 'Justification by Faith', 'Predestination', and 'Election' in the strictest sense. The 'Anglo-Catholic' amongst them believed that the settlement of 1562 had been contaminated by the heresies of Luther and Calvin, and that episcopacy was the only divinely ordained form of church government. They also advocated conditional revival of ancient ritual, opposing the innovations
or adaptations of the Roman form.

Donne, who was considered to be a literary and religious giant of his time, was born a Catholic. But, as a practising churchman, he held that the moderate approach of the Church of England was the central stream of Christianity. He expounded this idea forcefully from his pulpit at St. Paul's with the impact of a singularly cultivated mind, and with dramatic eloquence in delivering his sermons.

Herbert's short span of life extended from the later days of Queen Elizabeth to the eighth reigning year of the first Charles, and may be said to bridge the gulf separating the old English world from the modern. Whatever the spiritual value or significance of his message, it was delivered to the world at a time of comparative peace. There had been tumult and revolution before his time, and there was strong tremors both in the Church and the State after his death. But there was no great upheaval in his lifetime, except the Gunpowder Plot which had failed badly. Two important questions — one relating to the legal powers and limitations of the British Kingship, and the other to the exactly acceptable form of English Christianity — had not yet been answered. Strong Calvinism was still a formidable force which tried for major changes in church rites and ceremonies, sometimes even asking for their complete abolition. This was opposed by the Anglicans. Both these schools were prepared to use force for justifying the supremacy of their beliefs. Herbert was aligned to the party of conservatism, and he opposed the drastic ideals of the hardcore Puritans. This group
was called the Armenians or the Papistical Group, of which Laud was the driving spirit, and Andrewes the erudite and persuasive advocate. Herbert's humble services to the reascent Church were not of an overt type. His self-sacrificing life as a village priest lasted only three years, and his powerful English verses, which could have affected the religious thought of the time, and 'The Country Parson' were published only after his death.

As an institution, the Church of England appears quite baffling to outsiders, but, by its very illogicality and eclecticism, it commended itself to many English minds, and, in its endeavour to maintain a middle course and to exercise tolerance of judgement, it chimed with something very central to the English spirit. George Herbert had the good fortune to be born and bred in it at a time when it was enjoying a spell of rare equilibrium, and was well able to answer the needs of devout men and women who did not wish to renounce either the wholly Catholic heritage or their own intellectual liberty. Herbert found its via media exactly to his liking. The Church's middle way appealed to him, for he said:

But, dearest Mother, what those misse,
The mean, thy praise and glorie is,
And long may be.

('The British Church')

According to Margaret Bottrall, Herbert's glad adherence to the Anglican Church limited his poetic range in some respects, but it gave him a compensatory strength, the strength of a man who has a spiritual home in which he finds himself happy and at peace.
The first few decades of the century are also marked, according to A.G. Hyde, by its love of the family and its tenderness shown to infancy and childhood. Warm friendships also existed among men. If enmities were strong and lasting, personal regard and admiration were equally so. This was specially true of the group with which Herbert was associated, the group that included the saintly Bishop Andrewes, Dr Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, the accomplished courtier and diplomat, Nicholas Ferrar, the scholar and merchant who gave up the attractions of public life for one of religious seclusion, and, last but not least, Izaak Walton.

"The Book of Common Prayer" and the 'devised' Worship of the Church were both accorded respect by a large part of the Christian community. Some devout persons went a step further, and wanted a revival of the old tradition for a retired and contemplative life which had sent a number of men and women a few generations earlier to monasteries and convents. This ideal was practically realised by Nicholas Ferrar and his family at Little Gidding, where the prescribed religious services were carried out day and night, and religious studies and useful social work went hand in hand. Other minds were also turning to this orderly religious way of living. As regards Herbert, unlike his friend Ferrar, he undertook the duties of a parish priest, and joined them with religious studies, a disciplined household, and the daily offices of the Church. If we call Ferrar's ideal monastic, Herbert's can be called 'parochial'. Ferrar put forward a concept of calm obedience, reverent discipline, and quiet labour while Herbert was like a shepherd in the midst of
his flock, preaching, teaching, and softly cajoling them to righteousness.

It will perhaps not be correct to identify George Herbert strictly with any specific ecclesiastical group. He died five months before Bishop William Laud succeeded to the episcopal throne. We really cannot guess how Herbert would have reacted personally to Laud's style of enforced conformity.

The real downfall of the system, so ardently built up by many zealous religious men like Hooker, Andrewes, and Laud, came almost ten to twelve years after Herbert's death. Few of us can fully understand how complete the ruin was. It was not merely ridding the Church of some ritualistic practices. The die-hard Puritans wanted a root and branch extermination, and the Church of England, as a visible corporate body, was utterly destroyed. Laud was accused of high treason, imprisoned, and beheaded in January 1645. The King also suffered a similar fate four years later. With this, the Prayer Book, and the Order of the Bishops, and their subordinates also came to an end.

Though Herbert had steered clear of all religious and church controversies in his short span as country priest, there are two occasions on record when he had to answer certain charges against the Church of England and her practices in the early part of his life. The first occasion was when Herbert reacted against a Latin poem of two hundred lines written by Andrew Melville, the volatile reformer of the Scottish universities. In the fourth epigram of his 'Musae Responsariae', Herbert disagreed with the threefold
division of Melville's poem, stating: "the first is opposed to sacred rites; the second preaches holy authors; the third is full of God. We agree on the last two: I too praise pious men, and I revere the divine attributes. Only the first gives us a battlefield for our quarrel."  

According to Herbert, his quarrel with Melville was confined to the first sixty four lines of the latter's poem. J.H.Summers states that Herbert approved of Melville's remarks concerning the nature of God, and his praise of the continental divines. Herbert is said to have insisted that the great names, Martyr, Calvin, Beza, and the learned Bucer, whom Melville summoned as his allies, "steadfastly refuse to oppose us". Summers adds that except when he digressed to make fun of Melville's Latin, or of his Puritan taste and nasal accents, Herbert confined himself to the defence of the 'rites' in the general sense of the 'discipline' of the English Church. The rites, which to Melville were only vestiges of superstition and popery, were to Herbert valuable symbols, similar to those which the Puritans also cherished. As a reasonable man, he asked Melville not to think too harshly of his 'toothless Muse', and he called him 'bene doctus, et poeta'. It was also reasonable, Herbert said, that James should "lead his lambs, safest in the middle way". 

The other occasion when Herbert had taken part in a debate was during his time at Cambridge. It was with Bishop Andrewes, and it was concerned with the issues of 'Predestination', and 'Sanctity of Life'. Since both Herbert and Andrewes were charitable souls, the debate ended in a friendly compromise.
According to Marchette Chute, the problem that tormented Herbert was one that troubled many others in the first half of the century. It was a period when the sense of separation from God weighed with special heaviness upon Western man, and the yearning to be at peace with Him had a greater intensity. Christians might war against each other, but each of them fought an even more strenuous battle against the common enemy of them all. The burden of the Fall, the agonised sense of estrangement from God, and the hourly impassioned effort to return to Him were shared equally by the Roman Catholics, the Anglicans, and the Puritans. They shared also an acute realisation of the shortness of time available — what Herbert calls "my hour, an inch of life," and the knowledge that failure was irrevocable.  

It has been shown by recent research that the habit of reading was comparatively wide-spread during the early part of the seventeenth century. Romantic novels, historical accounts, sermons, handbooks on manners, business manuals, and newspapers were printed to meet the demands of the reading public. Another interesting feature of this period is that a large number of poets and other men of letters, religious leaders, and politicians were friends and acquaintances. Such relationships are valuable, for they often foster the growth and development of new ideas. There was virtually 'God's Plenty' in the field of poetry. Among Herbert's contemporaries were lyric poets like Suckling, Ben Jonson, Walter Raleigh, Carew, Lovelace, Herrick, Wither, Browne, and Waller. The important satirists were Joseph Hall and Marston. The philosophical poets of
the period included Sir John Davies (known for his famous poem; 'Soul of Man and the Immortality Thereof'), Fulke Greville, John Donne, and Crashaw. Among the notable writers of religious poetry were Sir H. Wotton, Francis Quarles, Henry Vaughan, and John Donne.

A certain unity of style is common to all Christian poetry, for it springs from a deep belief in God and His mercy. But the seventeenth century religious poetry is different from similar poetry of other ages in its choice and handling of the genre. Poems of various kinds continued to be written throughout the seventeenth century. Narrative poetry of different quality was written, ranging from the 'Divina Commedia' to 'Paradise Lost' and including D'Aubigné's 'Les Trigiques', Cowley's 'Davideis', Marimo's 'Strage degli Innocenti' and St. Amant's 'Moïse Sauvé'. There were the endless 'recueils' of French religious verse, emblem books of Quarles in England and Jacob Cats in Holland, the popular pastorals of Germany and, of course, the public poems of Donne, Herbert and Vaughan. But the most pronounced genre during the century was the devotional lyric based on the personal relationship of the poet with God. No other century had so many poets of merit devoting themselves to this genre, so much so that seventeenth century religious poetry is thought of as synonymous with the devotional lyric itself. The devotional lyrics are poems of great charm, personal emotion, and intellectual energy. Their range and variety and popularity in the early seventeenth century give the lie to Dr Johnson's opinion.
that contemplative piety or the dialogue between the soul and God cannot be poetical. There is, on the contrary, a virtual demonstration of individuality of temper and style within the bounds of what has been called the 'metaphysical' manner. Mr Garrod, lecturing on Cowley, called this genre of poetry "a poetry of books and thinking". A good deal of such poetry was indeed written by men who had turned away from worldly affairs and found inspiration either in books or in deeply personal experiences. Donne wrestled with his experience of love, and he drew the images, not from mythology which had inspired earlier religious poets, but from profound studies in divinity. Herbert struggled to dedicate his poetry entirely to his religious turmoils after his hopes of worldly preferment were finally abandoned. Vaughan and Traherne took to a life of meditation and retirement.

Etymologically, the word 'metaphysical' is derived from 'metaphysics', the science of being and knowing, or, the science which helps us to explore the purpose and ultimate goal of man's existence. Thus, the 'metaphysical poets' may be said to have studied human existence and its problems in the fields of matter and spirit simultaneously.

H.J.C. Grierson, in his Introduction to 'Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century' (1921) wrote: "Metaphysical poetry, in the full sense of the term, is a poetry which, like that of the 'Divina Commedia', the 'De Natura', perhaps Goethe's 'Faust', has been inspired by a philosophical conception
of the universe and the role assigned to the human spirit in the
general drama of existence. These poems were written because a
definite interpretation of the riddle ... laid hold on the mind
and the imagination of the great poet, unified and illumined
his comprehension of life', intensified and heightened his
personal consciousness of joy and sorrow, of hope and fear, by
broadening their significance revealing to him in the history
of his own soul a brief extract of the drama of human destiny.'

This kind of poetry has, however, been an enigma to many
readers. But the enigma disappears and the poems start making
sense as soon as we begin to respond to the stimulus which forms
the background of the poet's thought. The tension that gave birth
to the metaphysical movement in English poetry was generated by
a peculiar sensibility which imbued the very being of the poet.
There was a paradoxical co-existence of the philosophical legacy
of the earlier world, and ideas which were the product of the
poet's contemporary world. It was a transitional period, torn
between two epochs, the medieval and the modern.

Roughly speaking, the period of metaphysical poetry is
between 1595 and 1660, a period of eventful years during which
England passed through many considerable changes. It was the
period of the unsettled reign of Elizabeth, an age of religious
controversy in the reign of James I, and of the feverish years of
the Civil War. The post-Elizabethan England was faced with nume-
rous problems, the chief among them being the financial position
of the Crown, the problem of defining the meaning of the privilege
of speech of the House of Commons, and the question of deciding the exact nature of the Church of England. All these and other problems accumulated, and then exploded, in the Thirty Years' War, which broke out in 1618.

The term 'metaphysical' was first used by William Drummond of Hawthornden (1585-1649) in an undated letter which was first published in 1711. Dryden employed it to describe Donne as 'metaphysical', stating: "He affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign; and perplexes the mind of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts, and entertain them with softness of love". (Dedication to 'A Discourse Concerning the Origin and Progress of Satire') It was perhaps Dr Johnson's derision of Cowley's excessive exhibition of his pedantic learning that made the term popular.

Metaphysical poetry was influenced by baroque sensibility which, in the words of Odette de Morgues, is the artistic outcome of the destruction of balance between feeling and intellect and the distortion of reality through the cravings of unruly emotion and the desperate vagaries of imagination. A poet of baroque sensibility found life a flux, to him every object of observation was merely an appearance, and, therefore, he was able, at best, to hint at a reality that he was unable to grasp. What really lay behind the 'unreal' world could be best described only in a metaphor or symbol, which even the poet could not fully apprehend.

The Elizabethan poets are known for their keen concern for form and order which they impart to their experience. They looked
for a sense of proportion and reason while converting their emotions into poetry. Their works abound in wit and play of mind, argument and logical development. Their poetry is marked by fluency, copiousness of language, and easy regularity of versification. But all these poetic traditions of craftsmanship were too fragile to express, in most cases, the subtleties of introspection and deep psychological analysis of 'metaphysical' poetry, which required greater directness and concentration.

The term, 'metaphysical', does not stand for style only. The poetry of almost all the poets classified as 'metaphysical' is rich with the ideas of their age. Grierson's assessment of metaphysical poetry takes the middle path between the two extreme views when he states that though the metaphysical poets were inspired by a philosophical conception of the universe, their main theme was not metaphysics. Expanding his argument, he maintains that 'Passionate thinking is always apt to become metaphysical, probing and investigating the experience from which it takes its rise.'

T.S. Eliot has maintained that the metaphysical poets achieved a fine synthesis between the two chief ingredients of sensibility — thought and feeling. He adds that these poets possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could grasp any kind of experience. He argues that, to a metaphysical poet, a thought was an experience which modified his sensibility.

For the religious poet of the seventeenth century, metaphysical poetry, thanks to its unifying power, proved a ready
means of expression. This mode was effectively used by Donne and other poets for transforming their spontaneous and deeply felt experiences into powerful poetry. They all, however, differed in their styles. If Donne is the most metaphysical of the English metaphysicals, as he has been called, Herbert, as Emile Legouis rightly believes, is "the saint of the metaphysical school."