Chapter V

Comparative Study between John Donne, Andrew Marvell, Richard Crashaw’s metaphysical Poetry

The Seventeenth century metaphysical esthetic displays that “the incongruent and the contradictory, as well as the paradoxical and the astounding” are deeply twined together. Human being is allowed by the leading cultural traditions to think in terms of extreme opposites. Gospels convince the transformation of the ideal into real in Christianity. The seventeenth century metaphysical felt the strong need to exhibit contradictions and the incongruity of things. They were intellectuals having their careers other than writing. They were university graduates having their offices either religious or political. But they were serious regarding their religion. They wrote the poetry but never bothered about its publication, instead circulated among their friends and never noticed the influences of another’s verse. Their writing was for the selected elite. Donne who was the leader of this style, influenced Herbert, Crashaw, Marvell though not personally.
The best poetry of this kind is an admixture of intellectualized passion and passionate intellectuality that focuses on a genuine truth. The metaphysical poet ransacks all fields of knowledge, science as well as nature. For example, in ‘The Sun Rising’ Donne uses far-fetched images of spice and mine, it not only astonishes but links two disparate areas of experience. The true function of the metaphysical conceit, therefore, is an attempt to join the fragmented world.

According to R. G. Cox,

“*The interest shown by our age in the period from Donne to Marvell, especially in the poetry of Metaphysical wit, amounts almost to a rediscovery--- To those of our own time who have struggled to bring poetry back into the widest range of experience, and to fuse thought and feeling in one act of imaginative apprehension, Donne and his followers have seemed to be particularly relevant.*”

Donne was widely read and appreciated up to the Restoration. Though in the eighteenth century his fame was at low tide, in the twentieth century the emergence of a new poetry and the contribution of T. S. Eliot turned his fame into the rising tide which continued till present time. Donne’s poetry is private. It is concerned with the real subject of the life and records the ‘fluctuations’ of his relationships with God.
R. G. Cox classifies Donne’s poetry in three groups: “the love poetry, the miscellaneous and occasional poems and verse letters, and the religious poems”. Donne is recognized for his love poetry which consist of the wide range of mood, as of the mood id jollity seen, in ‘The Sun Rising’, ‘The Dream’ and ‘The Good-Morrow’, where as ‘The Extasie’ indicates his “profound sense of spiritual union in love”. In between there are a number of poems expressing a variety of moods.

“Donne is certainly not Shakespeare or Dante, but it seems pertinent to ask whether his best poems are not achieved wholes, whether some kind of mastery of experience is not present in ‘The Good-morrow’, ‘The Extasie’, ‘The Valediction forbidding mourning’, and ‘the Nocturnall’, to go no further. Mr. Eliot’s considered conclusion, however, that Donne would never sink back to his earlier obscurity, and that he would always remain as ‘a great reformer of the English language, of English verse’, will be recognized by those familiar with his critical ideas and terminology as by no means faint praise. After twenty years it still seems a safe minimum claim”.  

Donne’s ‘Anniversaries’ meditate “on the corruption of this world and the glories of next”. They present a picture of life and death in general. But Donne's fame rests on the ‘Holy Sonnets’. Donne in most of his erotic or devotional poems, remains sceptic or doubtful. All the time, he is aware of the “vision of Judgment Day”, thinking “God as a conqueror or a ravisher”. Donne’s assured faith is noticed
only in a few last hymns. For example, Donne in Holy Sonnet 1 indicates that love’s Adamantine power can draw the hardest heart.

“Onely thou art above, and when towards thee
By thy leave I can looke, I rise againe
But our old subtle foe so tempteth me,
That not one houre my selfe I can sustaine,
Thy grace may wing me to prevent his art,
And thou like Adamant draw mine iron heart”.

T. S. Eliot wrote an essay on the metaphysical poets which were “more than anything else, propaganda for difficult poetry”. --- Eliot’s term “dissociation of sensibility” interpreted that poets in this age should be “difficult”. According to Dyson, Eliot’s essay was only a review of Herbert Grierson’s anthology.

Herbert Grierson criticizes Donne’s love poetry in his volume in 1906. For Herbert’s poetry the word ‘quaint’ is used for evaluation whereas Marvell is considered as the worst of all and his poetry as “descriptive and decorative”. On the contrary a picture of Donne in his 1921 essay is the expression of a strangely blended temperament, an intense emotion, a vivid imagination—“while Marvell is pictured as “the strongest personality of all”
Metaphysical poets produce a vision of the “whole” human being. This sense of wholeness is the basis of metaphysical wit. And there it shows that disparate parts of experience illuminate our understanding. T. S. Eliot, John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate are modern poets affected by the metaphysical influence. So too, are Emily Dickinson, Gerald Manley Hopkins and Dylan Thomas. English metaphysical poetry is “perhaps the best of any era”. The metaphysical temper is found in the odes of Keats, the nature poetry of Wordsworth, the poems of Coleridge, Hart Crane, and Stevens. Besides, the English poetry, it also shows up in the Renaissance poetry of France, Spain, Italy, Germany and Holland.

In this century man is apprehended “by the hydrogen bomb”, “by annihilation”. When we are disrupted by “total revolution in our thinking about the Universe and mass societies”. It is therefore, necessary to study the metaphysical poetry in the context of the need of the hour.

The metaphysical poets followed self analytic and self-conscious style, where the poetry reflects the inner self, and produces “the best erotic poetry and the best devotional poetry”. For instance, Donne’s poetry is full of biographical details of love, marriage and
religion which give a panorama of his whole personality. In compare to 
Donne, Crashaw and Marvell are “more official”. In spite of it, Marvell 
pours “his strongest passions” in the POEM ‘Upon Appleton House’
and the other garden poems, whereas Crashaw is involved in “his 
fancies and hopes”.

The metaphysical poetry can be termed as inconceivable
and presents “their inner conflicts”. For Donne it apt to say that his
poetry gives the picture of his soul’s journey, and inner conflicts. But
Marvell’s poetry shows Herbert’s influences in following “the quieter
and simpler reflective idiom”. A passion in Donne’s “Holy Sonnets” is
shared by Crashaw and Marvell. Crashaw’s finest poem the ‘Hymn to
Saint Teresa’ has “the direct and firm opening”

“Love, thou art Absolute sole lord

Of LIFE and DEATH”

Marvell’s ‘Clorinda and Damon’ has the theme “the grass withereth,
and the flower fadeth” of Isaiah. However Donne’s Holy Sonnet 1
indicates that Love’s Adamantine power can draw the hardest heart.

Marvell’s realism is found in the poem ‘To His Coy
Mistress’:

“Thy Beauty shall no more be found;
Nor, in thy marble Vault, shall sound
My echoing song: then Worms shall try
That long preseru’d Virginity:
And your quaint Honor turn to dust;
And into ashes all my Lust.
The Grave’s a fine and private place,
But none I think do there embrace”.

Crashaw, on the contrary, uses “heavy wit to destroy the credibility of the emotion:” for instance, in the poem ‘our crucified Lord Naked and bloody’, he says:

Th’ have left thee naked Lord, O that they had;
This Garment too I would they had deny’d.
Thee with thy selfe they have too richly clad,
Opening the purple wardrobe of thy side.
For thee to weare, but these of thine owne blood”.

Marvell in his unfortunate lover uses Crashaw’s line “drest in his own blood”. Marvell poetic spirit soars high in quiet atmosphere like the garden, the island, the English estate and the rivers, forests and in the natural surrounding.
Apart from these differences, Marvell and Crashaw share a number of features in common and cultivate the metaphysical sensibility. The metaphysical often exhibit ‘a deliberate confusion of earthly and divine love”. They deliberately merge “the adoration of God with the adoration of his mistress, the passion of love with the passion for death, and the hope for a sanctuary in love with the soul’s salvation”. The metaphysical keenly observed, the spiritual-cardinal indemnification, as it is seen in Donne’s show me dear Christ, thy Spouse, so bright and clear or in Marvell’s ‘To His Coy Mistress’.

Crashaw concludes in the poem ‘An ode, Which Was, Prefixed to a little Prayer book given to a young Gentle Woman’

“How many Heaun’s at once it is

To have her GOD become her LOVER.”

Donne in ‘The Extasie’ exemplifies “religious mysticism”. In short Donne Crashaw and Marvell- all the three metaphysical intended to confuse erotic and devotional genres only to intensify the love for God.

The metaphysical were learned men who had taken university education. They had taken their religion seriously but wrote poetry not as professional but as amateurs. They had other professions than writing poetry. Donne and Crashaw were in religious service while
Marvell was a diplomat. They wrote poetry but except Crashaw, nobody published it. Poetry was written only to circulate among friends and therefore it was free from any sort of fear of censorship. But one drawback is found in the metaphysical poetry that they wrote “complementary verses” under the patronage of the rich people, only to please them. For example, Crashaw wrote poetry to praise the Countess of Denbigh and Donne praises Elizabeth Druary in ‘Anniversaries’.

Donne was the leader of this school and the greatest metaphysical poet who influenced the later poets. Herbert followed Donne; and Crashaw and Marvell followed Herbert and Donne. Donne, Marvell and Crashaw all of them travelled abroad. But Crashaw settled abroad and his poetry exhibits continental influence.

The metaphysical- Donne, Crashaw and Marvell used common speech. All of them were against “the Petrarchan use of poetic subject and artifice”. Donne and Marvell opposed “the poetry of imitation”. Crashaw was against Petrarchan in the sense; he replaced the love poetry “with subjects of religious faith lit up by their personal vision and experience”.

Donne wrote on a variety of subjects which his followers derived from him. Marvell and Crashaw imitated Donne in his style and
subject but pursued their own lines. Literary historians accused the metaphysicals for preferring pain style.

The metaphysicals used dramatic and lyrical mode in which the poet speaks to himself. This lyrical mode they shared and it brought them together to introduce a convention which entered into the mainstream of literature later on.

H. J. C. Grierson in Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century comparing Donne and Marvell calls Donne “the great master of English poetry in the seventeenth century, but Marvell proves himself “the strongest personality of all”. Marvell’s ‘To His Coy Mistress’ seems to Grierson “the very roof and crown of the metaphysical love lyric, at once fantastic and passionate”.

“But at my back I always hear
Time’s winged chariot hurrying near,
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.
Thy beauty shall no more be found;
Nor in thy marble vault shall sound
My echoing song; then worm shall try
That long preseru’d virginity;
And your quaint honour turn to dust;
And into ashes all my lust.
The grave’s a fine and private place,
But none I think do there embrace”.  

Donne was not the founder of any school but the poets-Herbert, Vaughan, Crashaw and Marvell are said the followers of Donne and belongs to his school. They took “the example” but refused “the overpowering voice” of Donne.

Donne combines the Renaissance elements like “the haunting meditation on death, the passionate attention to love, the blend of classical and romantic form”. Marvell’s passionate magnificence of the Amorists is seen in ‘To His Coy Mistress’ and ‘The Definition of Love’ has a “splendid beginning”-

“My love is of a birth as rare
As ‘tis for object, strange and high
It was begotten of Despair Upon Impossibility;”

For Marvell and Donne poetry was ‘a social grace’ and not profession. It was a vogue among the Caroline courtly poets and Donne’s followers in the seventeenth century that “like singing or swordsmanship”, poetry was appreciated by friends and not by strangers. It was circulated in manuscript to their friends. Occasionally the poetry was published in courtly anthologies, because they didn’t intend to gain “a poetic reputation outside their immediate circle”.

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The pastoral tradition was mostly practiced in the seventeenth century poetry. Marvell loved nature and this love of nature is reflected in his poetry. ‘Green’ was the word used for “a special kind of beauty”. The perfection of his nature poetry is found in ‘The Garden’ the real subject of which is “paradise and true happiness”. But Marvell presents his paradise “lonely and a sexual”.

In ‘The Extasie’, John Donne and his mistress achieved a similar mystical revelation, eye to eye and sweaty palm to sweaty palm; but to make it perfect, ‘Else a great Prince in prison lies’, they had to come back down into their bodies and make love. In contrast, Marvell’s mystical ecstasy is a solitary experience and at its climax his soul takes flight into the landscape:” For Marvell ecstasy is “an out of body experience.”

Marvell and Donne both played “the game of wit” that was “highly fashionable” in the seventeenth century poetry. Thomas Carew at the end of Elegie upon the death of the Dean of Pauls, Dr. John Donne’ mentions him as “The Universall Gods Priest”. Marvell was very skilled in using wit and he gave “to it his own peculiar brand of perfection”.

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Donne and Marvell both used scientific-mathematical conceit. Marvell’s ‘The Definition of Love’ is Marvell’s handling of this conceit “with a difference”. Regarding logic, Marvell’s logic seems “altogether different”. Donne is fierce in his argument and to prove a point, he, therefore, uses the words like ‘therefore’, ‘thus’, ‘so’. Donne therefore is praised by Thomas Carew for his “masculine expression” and Donne’s own expression “masculine pervasive force”. Donne’s followers appreciated this mannerism of Donne.

Marvell, in compare to Donne is “less aggressive”. He practices “the classical syllogism” thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. For him, nothing is urgent to prove but it is a “perfect formal shape” of the poem to conclude the result. It is called “a kind of Platonic ideal of the Metaphysical Poem”. Marvell was “a classicist and perfectionist”. Marvell inherited the line of wit from Donne and Jonson but at the same time, he introduced “another tradition” wholly of his own. It was the pastoral tradition which began from Upon Appleton House and culminated in “The Hunting of the Snark’ and ‘The Dog with the Luminous Nose’.

Crashaw and Donne both took Loly orders. Crashaw was an Anglican but became a Roman Catholic. Donne, on the other hand
was a Roman Catholic who became an Anglican later on. Donne converted after much reading and thought”, rose to the position of Dean of St. Paul. Both wrote secular and religious verse. Donne became “the most eminent figure” and the leader of the school of metaphysical poetry.

The career of Crashaw was hindered by the Civil War. Donne’s career was affected by his clandestine marriage with Ann More who was the niece of Sir Thomas Egerton. Donne was the secretary of Sir Thomas Egerton who dismissed him from his work. Donne expected secular office but took holy orders in 1615 and became Dean of St Paul in 1621 and remained on this position till the end of his life. Marvell became a Member of Parliament of Hull and remained on that position till his death.

“much of the religious poetry” of Crashaw was written about “Christ life or that of a saint.” Crashaw took holy order and perhaps found place. Donne wrote much of his religious poetry was written in middle life. Donne composed “the majority of his religious lyrics and the longer pieces”, before his ordination. The critics think that it may be the reason that his lyrics suggest skepticism or doubt. On the contrary
though Crashaw has undergone “agonizing of spirit” Crashaw’s poetry dazzle with ecstasy.

“The language of the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets” changed and the change occurs with Donne’s poetry. Donne preferred “a plainer style” and “anti-courtly attitude to the Petrarchan love convention”. Donne, Crashaw or Marvell were not courtiers and aspire for public office. They, therefore, tried the language of Inns of Court.

Donne is metaphysical. His poetry is the expression of “his deep reflective interest in the experiences”. The divine poets who follow Donne are either Catholic or Anglican. But nobody took the metaphysical theme like St Thomas or Epicurus.

Donne became “the great master of English poetry in the seventeenth century. His poetry is “more intellectual and less verbal,” and blends passion and thought.

Metaphysical poetry according to T. S. Eliot is “difficult to define”. The devotional verse of Crashaw is “more profound and less sectarian than the others”. Marvell’s ‘Coy Mistress’ and Crashaw’s ‘Saint Teresa’ are “so dissimilar”, but in the same meter. Donne,
Crashaw and Marvell themselves “in the direct current of English poetry”.

Helen Gardner points out the metaphysical poets know the world and they believe in God. Therefore,

“The strength of the religious poetry of the metaphysical poets is that they bring to their praise and prayer and meditation so much experience that is not in itself religious. Here too the poems create for us particular situation out of which prayer or meditation arises: Donne riding westward, or stretched out upon his deathbed. --- Even with Crashaw, where this sense of the poet’s own situation is unimportant, how vividly he dramatizes, rather than narrates, the story of St. Teresa, and invokes the weeping Magdalene; and how vigorously he urges the hesitant countess of Denbigh against delay”.

Marvell says in “Little T. C.” that the “Darlings of God” meet death while they are young. Thus she concludes that all poems of Donne, Crashaw and Marvell are metaphysical, with the only difference, same prove “more metaphysical than others”.

In short we come to the point that Donne preoccupies “the work of the twentieth-century Modernists” Donne’s popularity in the present age is due to “his fidelity to emotion--- his recognition of the complexity of feeling and its rapid alterations and antithesis”. Donne express “his genuine whole of tangled feeling”, expresses his “much
more difficult consciousness and honesty” and this makes him “a poet of the world literature”.

“In Donne, there is a manifest fissure between thought and sensibility, a chasm which in his poetry he bridged in his own way, which was not the way of mediaeval poetry.--- But perhaps one reason why Donne has appealed so powerfully to the recent time is that there is in his poetry hardly any attempt at organisation; rather a puzzled and humorous shuffling of the pieces; and we are inclined to read our own more conscious awareness of the apparent irrelevance and unrelatedness of things into the mind of Donne.”  

Modern literature is defined as literature that is true “every where” and “for all time”. The periods of Donne and Marvell appear “sympathetic to us”. Donne expresses “a complicated state of mind” remaining present in every thought and in every feeling. We now live in an age of chaos, we can take “instruction and encouragement” “from Donne and his contemporaries”.  

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REFERENCES