Caroline Poetry: Metaphysicals and Cavaliers

by David Hamilton (August 2014)

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There were two groups with recognisable styles in the Caroline or the Stuart period (1603–1714) the Metaphysicals and Cavaliers. T.S. Eliot was a great admirer of the movement known as the Metaphysical poets, especially John Donne. His critical appraisal rehabilitated Donne in the second decades of the twentieth century. Donne's style was crude compared to Ben Jonson and more suited to Verse Satire. Many of these poems show the use of technique but not always depth of meaning.

John Donne (1572 – 1631) in his early life was a womaniser and wrote many love poems. He also wrote verse satires. He travelled widely and later turned to religion. He wrote original secular poems and his love poetry turned on paradox and puns which challenged the hackneyed Petrarchan of Sir Phillip Sidney and Edmund Spenser. He was an intellectual poet in the sense that he used argument and acted in different mental states and also used riddles. His verse was not metrical and he lost favour till rehabilitated by Eliot in the early twentieth century.

Ben Jonson (1572 – 1637), his rival influence used his classical learning in his poetry and drama. Some of his better-known poems are virtual translations of Greek or Roman originals and have an attention to form and style. Jonson avoided the debates about rhyme and meter that pre-occupied Elizabethan classicists and accepted both rhyme and stress and imitated the classical qualities of simplicity, restraint, and precision.

There are many significant poets who were influenced by Donne and Jonson. Some are well known like George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, Robert Herrick and Andrew Marvell and others not so, like Richard Crashaw, Henry King, Abraham Cowley, Thomas Carew, John Cleveland, Sir Richard Lovelace, Sir John Denham, Edward Waller and Charles Cotton.

These poets of the Caroline period were inspired by John Donne and Ben Jonson but with divisions of allegiance; later critics separated them into Metaphysicals, who followed Donne, and Cavaliers who followed Jonson; but the categories are often arbitrary. Roland of

Hawthorndon recorded two criticisms Jonson made of Donne, which highlighted aspects of the Metaphysical style, when Jonson visited him during a walking tour of Scotland in 1618-19:

> *Donne, for not keeping of accent deserved hanging.* Second, *Donne himself for not being understood would perish. The harshness of Donne's rhythms, his not keeping of accent which comes from pursuing the progress of the thinking mind rather than the smooth regularity of prosody and the difficulty of his ideas and conceits would make him not understood*.

These features conversely were admired and imitated by succeeding poets.

The effect was called "Strong line poetry" for Donne and his imitators who could suggest affirmation or criticism. It was not known as Metaphysical until Dryden and Doctor Johnson wrote about it. Thomas Carew, in the most perceptive of the elegies on Donne praised the way his, "*Imperious wit and giant fancy had made our stubborn language bend and had produced a line of masculine expression."*

The followers of Jonson spurned strong lines and abstruse fancies and strove for a smooth elegance of style a plainness, even a simplicity of style. They were thoroughgoing classicists. Robert Herrick, a devoted admirer of Jonson, wrote a charming if fawning tribute, "Prayer to Ben Jonson." He uses religion for this prayer-poem:

> When I a verse shall make,
>
> Know I have pray'd thee,
>
> For old religion's sake,
>
> Saint Ben to aid me.
>
> Make the way smooth for me,
>
> When I, thy Herrick,
>
> Honouring thee, on my knee
>
> Offer my lyric.
>
> When I a verse shall make,
>
> Know I have pray'd thee,

For old religion’s sake,

Saint Ben to aid me.

That is the smoothness and directness some of Jonson’s followers were trying to achieve. The sorting of these writers into twin categories simplified the differences. Henry Vaughan, who is usually classed as metaphysical, opened his first volume of poetry (1646) with a piece that named “*Great Ben*” as the first of poets. “*The gentlemanly cavaliers who wrote with ease*” as Pope described them, lumping them together with the Court Wits of Charles II reign, wove metaphysical conceits into their elegant Jonsonian verse. They really only adopted superficial features from their models and few shared Jonson’s moral idealism or were capable of conveying the psychological insight or depth of passion of Donne. There was a third tradition of devotional verse derived slightly from Donne, but is influenced by George Herbert, which I consider at the end under “Religious Poetry.”

An exponent of the metaphysical style was John Cleveland and the most conceited writing of the time was known after him as “Clevelandisms.” “Elegy on the Memory of Mr. Edward King drowned in the Irish Sea” is an example on a celebrated casualty. Milton had done a famous version “Lycidas” and wrote in rare and poetic words in pleasant flowing lines which, by comparison, Cleveland’s were unreal conceits. The choice of words and the way the sense flows through the lines show Milton to be a genius; the awkward, halting sense of Cleveland show a poetaster.

Milton’s “Lycidas”:

Who would not sing for Lycidas? He knew

Himself to sing and build the lofty rhyme.

He must not float upon his watery bier

Unwept, and welter to the parching wind,

Without meed of some melodious tear.

Cleveland’s elegy. The first part:

I like not tears in tune, nor do I prize
His artificial grief that scans his eyes;
Mine weep down pious beads, but why should I
Confine them to the Muses’ rosary?

I am no poet here; my pen's the spout
Where the rain-water of my eyes runs out,
In pity of that name, whose fate we see
Thus copied out in grief's hydrography.
The Muses are not mermaids, though upon
His death the ocean might turn Helicon.
The sea's too rough for verse; who rhymes upon't
With Xerxes strives to fetter th' Hellespont.
My tears will keep no channel, know no laws
To guide their streams, but like the waves, their cause,
Run with disturbance till they swallow me
As a description of his misery.

Tears are the beads on a poetic rosary that pour down like poetic rainwater, down the runaway spout of the poets pen in place of ink. He coined the word Hydrography to express the conceit of an elegy written in water. The ocean that drowned King become Helicon, the fount of the classical muses, who themselves become mermaids. The medieval scholastic law that the ocean contains parallel forms of all the forms of life that exist on land is used as Marvell did later more smoothly in "The Garden", "*The mind, that ocean, where each kind does straight its own resemblance.*" According to Cleveland the only things that had no counterpart in the ocean were books, arts and foreign tongues but now the learned edge of King is in the sea, "*Neptune hath got a university*." This is a witty lamentation without sorrow.

At that time Abraham Cowley was regarded as the greatest poet since the restoration. He used a philosophical argument about the nature of identity in a love poem that justifies the lover's lack of constancy. A common metaphysical trait was to produce an outrageous argument against a commonplace of the age like inconstancy:

Five years ago (says Story) I lov'd you,
For which you call me most inconstant now;
Pardon me, Madam! you mistake the man,
For I am not the same that I was then;
No flesh is now the same 'twas then in me;
And that my mind is chang'd, yourself may see.
The same thoughts to retain still, and intents,
Were more inconstant far; for accidents
Must of all things most strangely inconstant prove,
If from one subject they t' another move;

My members then the father-members were
From whence these take their birth which now are here.
If then this body love what th' other did,
'T were incest; which by Nature is forbid.

That style of wit derives from the flippancy of Donne's early work and imparts a limited pleasure in the reader. Cowley's love poetry does not transcend this level of ingenious intellectual play as Donne did in his more profound explorations of human love. Wit without psychological insight is shallow and soon palls. The Metaphysical mode without the passionate genius of Donne finally shrivelled and died of its own sterility.

Cowley, who later wrote an epic on King David, developed from these early imitations to an Augustan mode of classical verse. He was a professional man of letters; the Cavaliers by contrast were gentleman poets, amateurs, who wrote poetry as courtly accomplishments and many were not published until after death and some like Sir John Suckling, Thomas Carew, Thomas Randolph, William Cartwright, Sidney Godolphin and William Strode did not appear until the twentieth century. Suckling is the epitome of the cavalier, not just as a writer but as a dashing, cynical figure in the court society. John Aubery, the late 17c biographer and gossip, later described him as, "*The greatest gallant of his time and the greatest gamester both for bowling and cards so that no shopkeeper would trust him for sixpence.*"

Suckling's heedless attitude and throw away style have much in common with Donne's early style of flamboyant poetry though they lack the wit and intellectual rigor of the dialectic. Suckling never gives the sense that his flippancy conceals great depth of experience that you get with Donne. This exemplifies his style and point of view:

Out upon it, I have lov'd
Three whole days together;
And am like to love three more,
If it prove fair weather.

Time shall moult away his wings,
Ere he shall discover
In the whole wide world again
Such a constant lover.

This foreshadowed the etiolated lyrics of Charles II's restoration courtiers and prefigures the ethos of the rake heroes on that stage when Suckling enjoyed a vogue and was quoted in plays. The representative of the idealistic strand of the Cavalier mode is Richard Lovelace.

He was imprisoned several times in the 1640s for serving the king. His famous work “To Althea, from Prison”:

When Love with unconfinéd wings

Hovers within my gates,

And my divine Althea brings

To whisper at the grates;

When I lie tangled in her hair

And fettered to her eye,

The birds that wanton in the air

Know no such liberty.

….

Stone walls do not a prison make,

Nor iron bars a cage;

Minds innocent and quiet take

That for a hermitage.

If I have freedom in my love,

And in my soul am free,

Angels alone, that soar above,

Enjoy such liberty.

His other famous work “To Lucasta Going To the Wars”, is typical of his accommodation of Metaphysical conceits to Jonsonian lyric grace and his cavalier attitude to love, which is a development into the Caroline era of an earlier courtly code of chivalry. This poem has a moderate wit shown in the conceit of the mistress and the metaphor of nunnery:

Tell me not, Sweet, I am unkind,

That from the nunnery
Of thy chaste breast, and quiet mind
To war and arms I fly.

It plays on embracing fate and the physical embraces of a woman and the paradox of confirming his love for Lucasta by loving martial honour more. This is an ingenious twist to the ubiquitous theme of inconstancy in the era. It does not have the overt cynicism of Suckling on love, the attitude to woman and woman's place is also cavalier. The dismal in those last two lines as if shouted over his shoulder as he canters off to war implies a different conception of relationships from Donne's valedictory poem that shows strong concern for the lady and mutual suffering. This is poetry from male strength. For the alternative, turn to Henry King's "The Surrender." King conducts a parting ceremony in the speaking tones and conceits one associates with Donne not the songlike tones of the minor cavaliers:

Fold back our arms, take home our fruitless loves,
That must new fortunes try, like turtle doves
Dislodgëd from their haunts. We must in tears
Unwind a love knit up in many years.
In this last kiss I here surrender thee
Back to thy self, so thou again art free;
Thou in another, sad as that, resend
The truest heart that lover e'er did lend.

Now turn from each. So fare our severed hearts
As the divorced soul from her body parts.

The poet begins by lamenting that the love he shared with the lady is ending as if it were like the inconstant and mutable passion of what Donne had dismissed as "*Dull sublunary lovers*":

Dull sublunary lovers' love
(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
Absence, because it doth remove
Those things which elemented it.
But we, by a love so much refined
That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.

Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to airy thinness beat.

Donne was referring to Platonic lovers but their love had not reached such purity while they were under the moon. Henry King's "The Surrender" is metrically excellent and also carries meaning.

My once dear Love; hapless that I no more
Must call thee so: the rich affections store
That fed our hopes, lies now exhaust and spent,
Like summes of treasure unto Bankrupts lent.
We that did nothing study but the way
To love each other, with which thoughts the day
Rose with delight to us, and with them set,
Must learn the hateful Art how to forget.
We that did nothing wish that Heav'n could give
Beyond our selves, nor did desire to live
Beyond that wish, all these now cancell must
As if not writ in faith, but words and dust.

The word "*must*" echoes at the beginning of the second line and is effective at the end of the penultimate line and got there by a poetic inversion. We are not told why "*haplessly*" they have to part but there is that strong sense that something is forcing the end of their relationship they don't want to cease. It was a long standing relationship in which both were equal partners and cannot be easily shrugged off like a Suckling or Lovelace disposed of their mistresses for a new love or military glory. This love must be un-ruffled, slowly, deliberately, painfully, as the texture of their love was woven out of both their loves and the final parting like a death, a sundering of the two parts of a whole living entity:

Fold back our arms, take home our fruitless loves,

That must new fortunes try, like turtle doves

Dislodgëd from their haunts. We must in tears

Unwind a love knit up in many years.

In this last kiss I here surrender thee

Back to thy self, so thou again art free;

Thou in another, sad as that, resend

The truest heart that lover e’er did lend.

Now turn from each. So fare our severed hearts

As the divorced soul from her body parts.

Henry King wrote another great poem, “The Exequy” about the death of his wife. It is lament in the form of an Elegy. His other works are negligible.

Accept, thou shrine of my dead saint,

Instead of dirges, this complaint;

And for sweet flowers to crown thy hearse,

Receive a strew of weeping verse

From thy grieved friend, whom thou might’st see

Quite melted into tears for thee.

Dear loss! since thy untimely fate

My task hath been to meditate

On thee, on thee; thou art the book,

The library whereon I look,

Though almost blind. For thee, loved clay,

I languish out, not live, the day,

Using no other exercise

But what I practise with mine eyes;

By which wet glasses I find out

How lazily time creeps about

To one that mourns; this, only this,

My exercise and business is.

So I compute the weary hours

With sighs dissolvëd into showers.

Edward Waller, who with Sir John Denham, was picked up by the Augustan poets as one of the refiners of English verse and characterised by Pope as "*Sweet and smooth*." He effectively, in lyric and couplet, passed on the elegance of Jonson to the later classical period. His most famous anthology piece "Go Lovely Rose" has a perfect lyric, but it also has verbal pungency and precision of waiting in the choice and placing of words. This is a c*arpe diem* seduction poem that uses the arguments that Milton's "Comus" uses to the lady, "*Beauty is nature's brag and must be shown in courts, and feasts, and high solemnities where most may wonder at the workmanship.*"

The distinctive cavalier note is in the cynical indifference of the first line. This cavalier is caught exactly in the line from Stanza 3, "*Suffer herself to be desired.*" The passive construction makes her an object of male lust and not an independent agent. The lady like the rose that blooms in the desert will die uncommended, if she persists in her perverse coyness. This is another construction that makes her the object of another's action. That long word uncommended is at the end of a mainly monosyllabic constructio stanza has added weight because an art of lyric is placing a long polysyllable in a context of lighter words.

Edmund Waller wrote:

Go, lovely Rose—

Tell her that wastes her time and me,

That now she knows,

When I resemble her to thee,

How sweet and fair she seems to be.

Tell her that's young,

And shuns to have her graces spied,

That hadst thou sprung

In deserts where no men abide,

Thou must have uncommended died.

That roses have a short-lived span of beauty like youth is commonplace, but here the rose and lady become identified as objects of mans' commendation, desire, and admiration. The whole argument in typical cavalier tones is from the male perspective and women only have value in relation to the activities of man. Lady and rose are both caught up in the undiscriminating now, of stanza 4: The common fate of all things rare. It derives some of its vitality from the witty possibilities of the various meanings of the words common and rare.

Another cavalier poem is "Epitaph on the Earl of Strafford," one of the best short poems of the era and not about love. It is by John Cleveland and shows the mixed influences of Donne and Jonson. Cleveland, an arch Metaphysical in the "Elegy for Edward King," is here a disciple of Jonson. It is a witty poem but not a conceited poem. The wit used derives from a Jonsonian play of words against each other and points to the antithetical style of the Augustan satirists who used couplets to balance each other. It is about the Epitaph on the Earl of Strafford who was executed in 1642. He had been chief advisor to Charles I and was scapegoated by the long Parliament of 1640 who impeached him. He had devised Charles' policies of the 1630s and it appears that Charles sacrificed him as a sop to the powers of parliament.

Here lies wise and valiant dust,
Huddled up 'twixt fit and just:
Strafford, who was hurried hence
'Twixt treason and convenience.
He spent his time here in a mist;
A Papist, yet a Calvinist.
His prince's nearest joy, and grief;
He had, yet wanted all relief.
The prop and ruin of the state;
The people's violent love, and hate:
One in extremes loved and abhorred.
Riddles lie here; or in a word,

Here lies blood; and let it lie

Speechless still, and never cry.

Strafford was a contradiction. His religion Calvinist or Papist; his relationship with Charles, “*His princes nearest joy or grief*”; his political significance, “*The prop and ruin of the state*”