

Renaissance versus Modernism: Continuities and Discontinuities in the Poetry of John Donne and T.S. Eliot

Babatunde Ezekiel Adigun,
Department of English, University of Uyo, Nigeria
adigunbabatunde03.ab@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the interconnectedness of traditions in English literature, focusing on metaphysical poetic tradition and modernist poetic tradition. It considers John Donne's poetry as an epitome of the former, and T.S. Eliot's as an experimentation of the latter. This study builds on the existing perspectives on the two traditions. It establishes that classical poetic tradition bequeaths poetic forms as foundation for other poetic traditions, including the metaphysical poetry and English modernist poetry. Metaphysical poets bring in their innovations to classical poetic forms to formulate a distinct sub-genre of English poetry that is largely characterised by conceit. The same extant poetic forms cross over to the phase of modernist poetic experimentations, and recreate another distinct subgenre characterised by disjointedness, free verse, imagism, amongst other features. This paper concludes that continuities in English poetry remain typical features of classical poetic features while discontinuities are atypical features regenerated by relative thematic concerns of succeeding periods of poetic experimentations, after the classical period.

Key words: Renaissance, John Donne, Modernism, T.S. Eliot, Continuities, discontinuities

Introduction

Literature is a continuum. Every literary craft has a precursor, and an acclaimed one would generate another of its kind. By this tradition, we see writers as men and women who are inspired to inspire others (of their kind). Amechi Akwanya thus states that "the field is vast and rich: literature. This is the object on which we exercise our minds in search of understanding. It is a field in which, to borrow from Hopkins's 'God's Grandeur,' many 'have trod, have trod, have trod,' but without the soil becoming 'bare now' for all that" (1). Those that are treading the path now are following the footsteps of those that have trodden it in time past and this is why Thomas Stearns Eliot, as quoted

by Mario Praz, says that "it may happen that the poets who are beginning to write find a particular poet, or a particular type or school of poetry with whom they have close sympathy, and through whom or which they elicit their own talents" (6). Flourishing with time, indeed, there had been great *literatures*, but as long as human beings exist, the greatest literature remains an everlasting ambition.

In the history of English literary tradition, the Renaissance literature is a watershed. Just like every other human activities, literature was at its apogee in the English Renaissance period. Noting that the period is also denoted as the "early modern era", Meyer Abrams dates the Renaissance from 1500 to 1660. He explains that the Renaissance period subsumes the Elizabethan Age (1558 - 1603), the Jacobean Age (1603 - 1625), the Caroline Age (1625 - 1649), and the Commonwealth period which is also known as the Puritan Interregnum (1649 - 1660). Literary historians differ slightly in their historiographies. Rewey Inglis, Donald Stauffer, and Cecil Larsen *Adventures in English Literature* (1952) believe that the English Renaissance began in 1485 after the defeat of Richard III which precipitated the Tudor dynasty. With the dramaturgy and bardolatry of William Shakespeare and the host of others, literary activities developed appreciably in the Elizabethan and Jacobean Age. The succeeding Ages (Caroline and Puritan Interregnum) cannot be said to be anticlimactic, but decrescendo with the (re)nascence of the solemn and philosophically profound metaphysical poetics in the Puritan Interregnum that continue to find reverberations in succeeding poetic writings till contemporary time. Put together, John Donne represents the Age.

The Renaissance literature did not start without a harbinger. Simply, as the name implies, it is largely the re-birth or rejuvenation of poetic traditions of the classical period. Reporting on the Renaissance period, William J. Long writes:

First came the sciences and inventions of the Arabs, making their way slowly against the prejudice of the authorities, and opening men's eyes to the unexplored realms of nature. Then came the flood of Greek literature which the new art of printing carried swiftly to every school in Europe, revealing a new world of poetry and philosophy. Scholars flocked to the universities, as adventurers to the new world of America, and there the old authority received a deathblow. Truth only was authority; to search for truth everywhere, as men sought for

new lands and gold and the fountain of youth, that was the new spirit which awoke in Europe with the Revival of Learning (110).

The deluge of Greek literature which Long talks about here and its internalisation created a prepossessing spirit of modernness that is characterised mainly by Reason and the challenge of absolute truth, and would endure centuries to become spellbinding in the period of modernism, the 20th century.

With the catastrophes and cataclysms of the 20th century which featured the first and second world wars, English poetry - particularly the one of the first half of the 20th century - denounces the futility of human existence. The belief in the existence of a force (God) that controls the affairs of human beings was unreservedly queried, Reason advanced into an unprecedented height, and there came a proliferation of modern miracles in auto- and aeromobility, communication, military, etc. For their literary formations, poets of this period took cues from their Renaissance forebears. As such, one can establish a nexus between Donne and Eliot.

This paper's exploration bifurcates into considering John Donne's poetry as a continuation and discontinuation of classical poetry, and considering T.S. Eliot's poetry as a continuation and discontinuation of metaphysical poetics, which is a robust branch of Renaissance poetry. It delineates the quiddities of the duo. In other words, this paper presents, on one hand, the contributions of classical poetry to the poetry of John Donne -- revealing the distinctive elements of metaphysical poetry; on the other hand, the contributions of metaphysical poetics to the poetry of T.S. Eliot -- revealing the distinctive elements of modernist poetry. This is what the notion of continuity and discontinuity suggests: establishing links and disparities, thereby presenting uniqueness.

Continuities and Discontinuities in John Donne's Poetry

Luke Eyoh in *Christopher Okigbo and the Metaphysical Tradition: a Study of 'Heavensgate'* (2002) presents an insightful concise biodata of John Donne. He writes:

Donne was born into a London Catholic family. His early education was Catholic. His thinking and temperament were shaped by his Catholic training though he came to reject

Catholicism in his adult life. By 1602 Donne had renounced the Catholic faith and declared for the Anglican religion. He was ordained Anglican Priest in 1615 from which date he wrote few poems. He became Dean of St. Paul's in 1621 and completed therefrom his rejection of poetry (writing) which he called the mistress of his youth in favour of Divinity.... (55)

Deciphering Donne's poems often requires apprehending "how the fantastic argument [of the poem] is advanced by the pseudo-logic of analogy and far-fetched allusion..." (Frank Kermode and John Hollander, 1016). What Kermode and Hollander consider as "pseudo-logic" can be explained as a non-commonsensical, albeit maverick logic, that has been informed by classical and medieval influences. As Abrams puts: John Dryden said in his *Discourse Concerning Satire* (1693) that John Donne in his poetry "affects the metaphysics," meaning that Donne employs the terminology and abstruse arguments of the medieval Scholastic philosophers" (192).

By, Samuel Johnson in his famous essay, 'Life of Cowley,' one of the essays in *Lives of the most Eminent English Poet 1779*) has used the term 'metaphysical' to apply to John Donne and "a group of seventeenth-century poets who, whether or not directly influenced by Donne, employ similar poetic procedures and imagery, both in secular poetry (Cleveland, Marvell, and Cowley) and in religious poetry (Herbert, Vaughan, Crashaw, and Traherne)", (Abrams, 192). It is not altogether a happy term. As it is conceived, this label was used derogatively, (Mushtaq Ahmed, 280). As Donne and others did not do a poetry that customarily engages the question of *being*, the "metaphysical" in 'metaphysical poetry' is distinct from Aristotelian metaphysics which is a classical dialectic on *being* and *knowing*. Aristotelian metaphysics has morphed in time to become one of the branches of modern philosophy that concerns itself with studies on religious beliefs, cosmology, and the general notions of being.

Critics have been in much more general agreement about who the principal seventeenth-century metaphysical poets were than about what metaphysical poetry is, (Joseph Duncan, 6). The nucleus of John Donne's poetry (and generally, metaphysical poetry) is the metaphysical conceit. Abrams explains conceit as "the term for figures of speech which establish a striking parallel, usually ingeniously elaborate, between two very dissimilar things or situations" (52). The term was adapted from the Italian "conchetto" (ibid).

Johnson describes metaphysical conceit as

...a kind of discordia concors; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike.... The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought and though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased (348).

Michael Stapleton summarises Donne's poetry thus:

The poetry of John Donne is, for most readers, of two kinds - the superb love poetry and the religious poetry ... the latter resulted from the conversion of a man who, after many trials, rejected the nature of his younger self - the high-spirited young man of the Inns of Court and the naval expeditions who found exquisite delight in sex and gave us some of the finest love poems in the English language (244).

Apart from the Stapleton's simplistic mapping of a progression from “love poetry” to “religious poetry”, Sir Herbert J. C., the editor of Donne's poetry, has contended that Donne switched from the Renaissance style of classical references to more “scientific, philosophic, realistic, and homely” (21) imagery. Rather, when those poems are considered within the purview of conceit the reader may come to discover that such progressions do not actually exist.

Donne might have said the same thing, but in different ways, employing different conceits. For example, what seems an expression of ardent passionate love in “The Sunne Rising,” and an ardent supplication to God in “A Hymn to God the Father” (both poems can be found in the collection, *John Donne – poems -*) are both a satiric call to redemption. Though the former, with its narcissistic tone, indicts the Renaissance man of corruption and mocks his proclivity to shun a moral re-birth which the sun represents, the latter is self-indicting. Also, as regards the switch from Renaissance use of classical references to more scientific, philosophic, realistic, and homely imagery, it can be said that no such switch is clearly in existence because classical references (and not classical myths) run through Donne's poetry.

This paper selects two of Donne's poems collected in the famous *Collected Poems of John Donne* (2014) by Neil Azwved the first poem featured in the collection, 'The Flea', and the last one, 'The Hymn to God the Father'.

On a general note, the classical literary tradition bequeathed the Renaissance poetry all its poetic forms (like lyric, epigram, ode, country house poem, verse epistle, elegy, sonnet, satire, devotional verse, etc.) and elements (such as, versification, tropes of meaning, structure, etc.). 'The Flea', for example, is a lyric that is written in iambic tetrameter and has the masculine rhyme. Bassey Ufot describes such rhyme as the "identity between the nucleus and coda of stressed monosyllabic words at the end of two or more lines of poetry" (118). Ufot notes that it often occurs in iambic verse or as catalectic variations in trochaic verse. The first stanza of 'The Flea' reads:

Marke but this flea, and marke in this,
How little that which thou deny'st me is;
It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea, our two bloods mingled bee;
Thou know'st that this cannot be said
A sinne, nor shame, nor losse of maidenhead
(Azevdo, 2)

This kind of sound pattern is not totally new. What is new about it is the innovative variations, achieved by a stylistic use of deviations, that Donne brought to bear on the poem. The line "And in this flea, our two bloods mingled bee," being an iambic pentameter is an example of a deviation. Though there are other lines that deviate from the tetrametric pattern like "A sinne, nor shame, nor losse of maidenhead", "And pamper'd swells with one blood made of two," etc.; "And in this flea, our two bloods mingled bee" is a strategic deviation as it holds the topic of the stanza. The line is one that can be called the *topic line* -- just as a paragraph would have a topic sentence.

'A Hymn to God the Father' is written in iambic pentameter, with an alternate rhyme. The first stanza reads:

Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,
Which was my sin, though it were done before? Wilt thou
forgive that sin, through which I run, And do run still, though
still I do deplore? When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more. (Azevdo, 321)

The last line "For I have more" is a refrain. It is repeated as the last line of the second stanza. The first deviation, an iambic tetrameter holds the message of the poem, "When thou hast done, thou has not done". The last refrain of the poem "I fear no more" is a conclusive statement of the paradox that runs through the poem -- the perpetual sinful nature of man that only ends in death.

The systematisation of sound patterns that confers lyricism on Donne's poetry was learned from classical poetic tradition. This and other poetic elements like the use of indirect language, tropes of meaning (like metaphor and paradox which are Donne's stock-in-trade), structure, and voice are continuities whose innovative handlings result into recreations typical of the metaphysical tradition. The metaphysical style, thus, recreates versions of the continuities which are tagged discontinuities. As such, the prefix 'dis-' in 'discontinuities' is not a negative marker, but one that suggests departure, re-modification, and transmutation.

The shift from continuities to discontinuities is that of a graduation from simplicity to complexity. In classical poetic tradition, for example, tropes of meaning - in their indirectness - are understood in connotations. However, tropes of meaning, in the metaphysical poetic tradition, are extended beyond the culturally bound conceptual comparisons (between colours and moods, for example) to cover far-fetched associations (like the flea being a symbol of sociopolitical unity). The features of metaphysical poetry which 'The Flea' and 'A Hymn to God the Father' exemplify and which include argumentation, drama, conceit, etc are discontinuities. T. S. Eliot remarks:

John Donne is a poet of dichotomies. Dualities of love and death, the sacred and the profane, the idealistic and the lyrical, the delicate and the coarse are juxtaposed within undivided works and throughout the canon, including the.... Donne's dichotomous vision may be said to predicate his choice of a dramatic mode and style characterised by oxymoron and pun and paradox (23).

The explorations of Donne's *oeuvre* do bear Eliot's remark true.

Continuities and Discontinuities in Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and 'The Waste Land'

When T. S. Eliot died in London in 1965, he was widely regarded as the most important poet to have written in English in the twentieth century. Jewel Booker (2) says that his obituary in the London Times was entitled "The Most

Influential English Poet of His Time” and in *Life* magazine, a memorial essay ended with “Our age beyond any doubt has been, and will continue to be, the Age of Eliot. Being that he responded very prolifically to the pressures of the modern time, Eliot indeed remains one of the most eminent 20th century poets. Starting a meaningful discussion on Eliot imperatively requires a consideration of modernism.

The term modernism is widely used to identify new and distinctive features in the subjects, forms, concepts, and styles of literature and the other arts in the early decades of the early 20th century (Abrams, 167). It is a term that captures the cultural productions of the First World War's preliminary and aftermath. As a period, it lasted from the 1890s to the 1930s. The literary movement we call Modernism rejected Romantic ideas. It grew out of the philosophical, scientific, political, and ideological shifts that followed the Industrial Revolution, through the shock of World War I, and its aftermath. Being a radical time, the philosophical perspectives of the time were offered by radical philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, James G. Frazer, etc. These philosophers inspired literary works of the time and those works selectively depart from past traditions, and completely reject literary traditions that seemed outmoded. These writers also break from Romantic pieties, but embrace progressive technological advancement. They tend to be self-consciously skeptical of language and its claims on coherence.

The Modern Poetry is marked by specific characteristics such as what is popularly known as "disrupted syntax," that is chiasmatic syntax, stream of consciousness (a term coined by American psychologist William James to describe the natural flow of a person's thoughts), the depiction of the theme of alienation, etc. If the metaphysical poetic tradition has the metaphysical conceit, modernist poetry has imagism -- the direct treatment of the subject matter.

Eliot's poetry exemplifies modernist poetry. Like metaphysical poetry, it sustains the poetic forms bequeathed by the classical poetic tradition and other innovations carried over from preceding generations of poetic experimentations. The carried over features are the continuities, while peculiar innovations of modern poetry such as chiasmatic syntax, stream of consciousness, imagism, and the domination of the theme of alienation are the discontinuities -- taking form and content into consideration. This paper has selected 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and *The Waste Land*

(1922), a long poem that has five divisions.

'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' is widely acknowledged as one of the earliest major works of T. S. Eliot, and was published in 1915. It presents prototypical modern man who can be described as overeducated, eloquent, neurotic, etc. Prufrock, the poem's speaker addressing a potential lover, with whom he would like to "force the moment to its crisis" by somehow consummating their relationship. However, his vast knowledge would not make Prufrock "dare" approach the woman. Embedded in the poem is a variation on the dramatic monologue. Abrams notes that three things characterize the dramatic monologue. First, they are the utterances of a specific individual, not necessarily that of the poet. Second, the monologue is specifically directed at a listener or listeners whose presence is not directly referenced but is merely suggestive in the speaker's words. Third, the primary focus is the development and revelation of the speaker's character. Eliot removes the implied listeners and focuses on Prufrock's interiority and isolation. The poem's persona says:

To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"

Time to turn back and descend the stair, With a bald spot in the middle of my hair —

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?

I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each. I do not think that they will sing to me.--from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (web)

The rhyme scheme of the poem is irregular but not random. Some sections of the poem resemble free verse. There is the use of refrains: "In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo" is found in stanzas one and three. The most striking thing about 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' is the dramatic monologue that reveals the frustrations of the prototypical modern man in the person of Prufrock. In the end part of the poem, there is an allusion to Prince Hamlet, the hero of William Shakespeare's notable eponymous tragedy, showing a link between the Renaissance man and the modern man. The persona says clearly that he is not Prince Hamlet, despite their revolutionary resemblances. Though it is largely a thematic issue, we could take cues from the statement and receive insights on the similarities and differences of the Renaissance poetic form and the modernist poetic form. The former influences the latter greatly. For example, the complexity

associated with metaphysical poetry is found in modernist poetry. Only that the far-fetched imagery of metaphysical poetry is subverted by expressionism in criticising the modern life.

In 'The Waste Land,' Eliot experiments with the rhyme scheme of what this paper sees as a broken heroic couplet. The persona says:

I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street...
(Eliot, 9)

This poem is a text on the First World War and its aftermath (Cooper, 63). Published in 1922, the poetic collection is a reflection on the ruins of the First World War. Notably, the spirit of the time which is marked by a break from claustrophobic lifestyle is stylistically evident in the poetry of T.S Eliot. The free verse in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and 'The Waste Land' represents the freedom of the modern society. The technological advancement of the time is evident in the poetic innovations such as the rupturing of heroic couplet, a novel rendering of dramatic monologue, etc. The disjointed plot in 'The Waste Land' demonstrates the chaos and instability of the modern society.

Conclusion

This study has argued that the classical poetic tradition bequeathed succeeding generations (from medieval age to the contemporary time) its poetic forms. However, the content of any of the succeeding generations often necessitates the re-modifications of the poetic forms. Thus, the formal features carried over from the classical time are the continuities. The atypical features are the discontinuities. The discontinuities confer any generational poetic canon its distinctions. The discontinuities in metaphysical poetry include conceit, argumentation, abstrusity, etc. While in modernist poetry, they include disjointedness in plot, dramatic monologue that expresses the frustrations, alienation of the modern man, and others.

Works Cited

Abrams, Meyer. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Cornell: Earl McPeck, 1999.
Print

- Akwanya, Amechi. "Introduction: Criticism and the Need for New Modes of Argument". *Africa and World Literature: University of Nigeria Journal of Literary Studies*. No. 3, 2002, 1– 6, Print.
- Azevdo, Neil (ed.). *Collected Poems of John Donne*. Nebraska: William Ralph Press, 2014. Print. www.poetryfoundation.org (Web)
- Blamires, Harry. *A Short History of English Literature*. London and New York: Routledge, 1974. Print.
- Brooker, Jewel. *T.S. Eliot: The Contemporary Reviews*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Print
- Cooper, John Xiros. *The Cambridge Introduction to T.S. Eliot*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Duncan, Joseph. *The Revival of Metaphysical Poetry: The History of a Style, 1800 to the Present*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1959. Print
- Eyoh, Luke. "Christopher Okigbo and the Metaphysical Tradition: a Study of 'Heavensgate'". *Africa and World Literature: University of Nigeria Journal of Literary Studies*. No. 3, 2002, 52 – 65, Print.
- Herz, Scherer. *John Donne and Contemporary Poetry: Essays and Poems*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Print
- Johnson, Samuel. *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets (1179-1781): With Critical Observations on Their Work*. Ed. Roger Lonsdale. Vol. 1. London: W. Nicol., 2006
- Kermode, Frank and John Hollander. *Oxford Anthology of English Literature* Vol. 1 London: OUP 1973.
- Inglis, Rewey, Donald Stauffer, and Cecil Larsen. *Adventures in English Literature*. Ontario: W. J. Gage and Company Limited, 1952. Print
- Long, William. *English Literature: Its History and its Significance for the Life of the English Speaking World*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2015. Print
- Praz, Mario. "Donne and the Poetry of His Time." *A Garland for John Donne 1631-1931*. Ed. Theodore Spencer. Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1958. 51-72.
- Stapleton, Michael. *The Cambridge Guide to English Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. Print
- Stein, Arnold. *John Donne's Lyrics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962. Print
- Ufot, Bassey. "Phonology and Stylistics: A Phonaesthetic Study of Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' ". *English Linguistics Research*, Vol. 2, No. 2; 2013. Print