

NEW WHOLE AND OTHER STATES OF MEANT – THE METAPHYSICAL CONCEIT

A
metaphysical
conceit is an elaborate and
finely wrought metaphor whose
implications are teased out over the course
of a poem with a coy ingenuity. For T S Eliot a
metaphysical conceit was the 'the elaboration (con-
trasted with the condensation) of a figure of speech to
the furthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it.'

Metaphysical is that reality beyond the physical one, concerned
with the landscape of the mind. Conceit is a rather devious word,
it may mean alternately: arrogance, an elaborate notion, an artistic
device, a consciously artificial structure, a joke or merely something
that has been 'conceived'; this page is a conceit, these words and the idea
manifested therein.

This device is accredited to the so-called 'metaphysical poets', who presided
over the literary imagination of England in the 17th century. They were poets
of the mind, with less of the sentiment and emotion that characterised later
English poetry. For them, thoughts were experiences, and verse a way to render
these thoughts as experiences for others. Samuel Johnson called their method a
kind of discordia concors: a discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently
unlike, which are then yoked by violence together; an artfully engineered incon-
gruity.

In this species of conceptual construct, or mechanism of sensibility, the idea be-
comes a machine that produces the text

Conscious of the potential of wit to disrupt authority, these metaphysical conceits
are not concerned with fidelity, but a subversive veracity built of untruths.
Improbable joins are forged between dissimilar images by the will of the poet.
A complex logic, one that involves the manipulation of images to create a sophis-
ticated understanding of the subject in the mind of the reader. A structured
discrepancy where we are conscious of likeness and unlikeness both at once,
compressed ingeniously into each other.

This is an art of combination, a certain alchemy presided over by a
mystically inclined imagination, operating on the edge of reason. If a
knowing-smile could take verse-from this is it, faceted and facetious
a dance in dissimilarity.

This is not a democratic art form, for the analytical imagi-
nation is an authoritarian one. Poetry of this kind is the
forcing of categories, until one feels they might break
apart into meaningless fragments, when in fact
under the applied pressure of good poetry
concepts are bent and blown to become
new spaces... and so new wholes
are forged.