THE SPIRIT OF RICHARD CRASHAW'S HYMN TO ST. TERESA.

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The sole Roman Catholic among the seventeenth-century English "Metaphysical' poets, Richard Crashaw (1612/13 -1649) laced his art with the vigorous spirit of Counter-Reformation spirituality.[1] When he converted to Catholicism, sometime between 1643 and 1646, he entered a church experiencing a dramatic resurgence of individual piety and practice. The Council of Trent itself set an innovative agenda for the catholic community, stimulating a "new Catholicism" in lay education and activism.[2] New forms of Catholic spirituality also formed the flames of fervour, bringing mystical vitality to a faith on the defensive. This "unprecedented outburst of spirituality energy,"[3] issuing primarily from the lives and writings of Spanish mystics Ignatius Loyola, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross, contributed to the renewed zeal of the church and established the pattern for the transplanted Catholic spirituality in the New World.

Taken together, the counsels of these saints on the devotional life signaled what many historians of theology consider a new departure in Catholic spirituality - the mystical parallel to the Baroque aesthetic of the Counter-Reformation. In contrast to older forms of Christian spirituality that emphasized what the fifth-century mystic Pseudo-Dionysius dubbed a theology of negation (finding God in the pure nothingness beyond all ideas and mental pictures), the new approach in Catholic devotion affirmed the use of concrete images in prayer. It agreed with the classic Thomistic principle that "we can name God only from creatures."[4] In the technical

1. A classic study of Crashaw's life and work is Austin Warren, *Richard Crashaw: A study in Baroque Sensibility* (University of Michigan Press; Ann Arbor 1957).

2. Cf. N.S. Davidson, *The Counter-Reformation* (Basil Blackwell; Oxford. 1987) 37-52.

3. Belden C. Lane, "Baroque Spirituality in New Spain and New France," *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality* (Paulist Press; New York 1988) 72.

4. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica* 1a, 13, 5.

terms of the study of the variety of Christian mysticism, it was *kataphatic* ("according to the image"), not *apophatic* ("beyond the image").[5]

In addition, the new style of spirituality privileged the affective rather than speculative dimensions of religious experience. Solidly based on the philosophical theology of Thomas Aquinas, the new mysticism did not conceive of Christian meditation as the flight of pure reason to the divine mind. Instead, it stressed the primacy of love and the emotions in the spiritual life.[6] Like the fourteenth-century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the Counter-reformation Spanish saints saw the way to God traced by the "sharp dart of longing love." Union with God, accordingly, implied not absorption into impersonal Being, but an intimate relationship with the divine Person, characterized by rapture and ecstacy.

Moreover, this new pattern of spirituality emphasized the active rather than the passive side of mystical devotion. Far from quietism, it advocated an aggressive kind of contemplation - what historian John Bossy has called a "more strenuous, more outward- and forward-looking version" of the interior life.[7] Consequently, it described the spiritual life in distinctive metaphors of vigorous physical exertion: as "exercises" (Ignatius), as a "way" (Teresa), or as an "ascent" (John of the Cross). Metaphors of muscular activity, laborious travel, and taxing pilgrimage fill the works of these saints. John of the Cross even compares the work of prayer to the effort of climbing a steep "ladder of love."

In this poem, "A Hymn to the Name and Honour of the Admirable Saint Teresa" (first published in 1646), Richard Crashaw appropriately exploits this new tradition of Roman Catholic spirituality. He especially relies on distinctively Teresian elements of spiritual teaching. Writing only shortly after her canonization (1622) and even prior to his own formal reception into the church, Crashaw celebrates the life of the saintly woman and offers a poem designed to harmonize with the prominent features of her mystical theology. as an exercise in spiritual discipline, the hymn invites the reader to contemplate in an unusual way the facts of a life consecrated to holiness.

5. Cf. Harvey D. Egan, "Christian Apohatic and Kataphatic Mysticism," *Theological Studies* 39 (1978) 399-426.

6. Cf. Paul Waddell, *The Primacy of Love: An Introduction to the Ethics of Thomas Aquinas* (Paulist Press; New York 1992).

7. John Bossy, *Christianity in the West 1400-1700* (Oxford University Press; Oxford 1985) 127.

"Love's noble history"

Like Ignatius before her, Teresa of Avila invited the aspiring contemplative to cultivate mental images as aids in the life of prayer. As Allison Peers observes in his analysis of her autobiographical *Life,* Teresa discusses the various degrees of prayer in simple, conversational prose. Illustrating her discourse with images drawn from everyday life, she compares the different modes of prayer to four ways of irrigating a household garden. The reader is to meditate on the literal details of bringing water to the garden by bucket, water wheel, springs, and rain. Through this imaginative exercise the reader is lead to an experience of the streams of divine grace refreshing the fertile soil of his or her own heart. More than clever analogies, the images are sensible helps in the search for God.[8]

Over one hundred lines long, Crashaw's hymn approaches its subject in this imaginative spirit of Teresa.[9] Though celebrated saint, tenacious reformer, the austere "Doctor" of the church, Teresa first appears in the poem as one of God's easily overlooked creatures. Like the gospel's disregard of the proud and powerful in its narrative, Crashaw's poem passes over the world's elite examples of perfection, seeking true holiness in the life of an obscure young virgin:

> Love, thou art absolute sole lord
> Of Life and Death. To prove the word,
> We'll now appeal to none of all
> Those thy old soldiers, great and tall,
> Ripe men of martyrdom, that could reach down
> With strong arms, their triumphant crown;
> Such as could with lusty breath
> Speak loud into the face of death
> Their great Lord's glorious name; to none
> Of those whose spacious bosoms spread a throne
> For Love at large to fill; space blood and sweat;
> And see him take a private seat,
> Making his mansion in the mild
> And milky soul of a soft child. (1-14)

8. Cf. E. Allison Peers, *The Mystics of Spain* (Allen and Unwin; London 1951) 80-83.

9. I have used the edition of Crashaw's "Hymn" in the Norton critical edition, *George Herbert and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Poets,* (ed. Mario A. Di Cesare) (W.W, Norton and Company; New York 1978). The complete poetic works of Richard Crashaw may be found in *The Poems of Richard Crashaw,* (ed. L.C. Martin) (Oxford University Press; Oxford[2] 1957).

Crashaw's also follows Teresa's example in his manipulation of language. His diction is remarkably simple and colloquial, even childlike. So is his word choice. The most important words "love", "life", and "death" are monosyllabic and frequently repeated. In fact, "love" occurs sixteen times. Crashaw's syntax, too, is uncomplicated, free from convoluted constructions and piles of gratuitous adjectives. Throughout, in subject matter and in style, he retains a constant tone of gentleness and innocence, "So spiritual, pure, and fair" to celebrate "A life so loved" (88. 91).

As Crashaw's language imitates the simplicity of Teresa's, so his use of imagery mirrors her *kataphatic* approach to the spiritual life. Rarely tied to direct language, richly figurative language dominates the hymn. Pictures of angelic archers, bustling commerce, luxurious clothing, exquisite gems, and grotesque bloody hearts fill the poem. Images of the "blushing" swords of guilty executioners, the "rich flames" of heavenly arrows, the "rosy love" of romantic innocents, the "delicious wounds" of intrepid martyrs, the brilliant lights of celestial glory, and the Queen of Heaven's "snowy" family directly appeal to the senses. Further, sensations of touch and smell are aroused by reference to the "brave hearts" of noble aspiration, the "barbarous knives" of Islamic *jihad,* and the sweet "perfuming clouds" of the heavenbound martyr's soul.

Beyond these extravagant metaphors, Crashaw gives pride of place to imagery intentionally erotic. Dependent upon Teresa's own intriguing concept of "divine marriage," the major portion of the poem concerns the pursuit of the earthly soul by the heavenly Spouse, who repeatedly slays her with his "sweet-killing Dart" (106). Indeed, most of the work deals with this supernatural seduction of the soul. Confronted by such sensual imagery in the course of the reading, one tends to forget that this is a hymn in honour of a professional celibate. For the sensibilities of Teresa, though, it is entirely appropriate.

Outwardly, of course, Teresa was a devoted ascetic, noted for the self-denial and her renunciation of worldly pleasures. Inwardly, however, she was intoxicated with divine love. The affections, she insisted, not the intellect, provided the way to God. Distilling the essence of Teresa's theology, St. John of the Cross asserted, "it is love alone that unites and joins the soul with God."[10] Faithful to this tradition, Crashaw embodies the primacy of love in his poem and transforms the entire work into a celebration of "Love's noble history" in the life of this woman:

10. St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul,* trans. e. Allisoon Peers (Image; Garden City, NY 1959) 166.

She never undertook to know
What death with love should have to do;
Nor has she e'er yet understood
Why to show love, she should shed blood.
Yet though she cannot tell you why,
She can Love, and she can Die. (19-24)

Here, Crashaw underscores the Teresian notion that, in the economy of divine wisdom, the way of love baffles human reason and surpasses the reach of intellectual faculties. Though love will lead to suffering, the Teresian paradox maintains, it constitutes the only route to supreme joy. In like manner, Crashaw's speaker affirms. sainthood is measured neither by the mind nor the might of human beings, but only by the intensity of love:

Love knows no nonage, nor the Mind.
'Tis Love, not Years of Limbs that can
Make the martyr, or the man. (32-34)

Even language itself, he goes on to say, is too weak to express the union with divine love; only emotion is left:

Ask not the tongues of men,
Angels cannot tell: suffice,
Thy self shall feel thine own full joys
And hold them fast forever. (118-121)

Affirming the redemptive value of what Belden Lane has called "semantic humility,"[11] Crashaw suggested that only the ecstacy of love can penetrate where the mind cannot.

In the actual life of Teresa, this conviction became especially strong during a series of visions which dominated her spiritual life in the 1550s. In her *Life*, she relates how an angel would visit her and pierce her heart "several times" with a "long golden spear" tipped with fire. After such experiences, she confesses, she would be left "completely afire with a great love for God."[12] In the pious tradition of biography that developed after her death these experiences were collapsed into

11. Belden C. Lane, "Language, Metaphor, and Pastoral Theology," *Theology Today* 43 (1987) 489.

12. *The Complete Works of Saint Teresa of Jesus*, trans. E. Allison Peers, 1 (Sheed and Ward; London 1946) 192-193.

one event and categorized as Teresa's transverberation, or more commonly, her "spiritual marriage," best captured in Bernini's famous sculpture, "Saint Teresa in Ecstasy" in the Cornaro Chapel of Rome's Santa Maria della Vittoria. Crashaw takes this event for the organizing principle of his hymn. He calls it Teresa's "milder Martyrdom" (68), borrowing the theme from the story of the six year old Teresa who fantasized of joining Crusaders and meeting violent death at the hands of the Moors.

"Thou art Love's victim"

On first reading, Crashaw's poem appears structurally to be a simple narrative of Teresa's life, recounting this childhood wish, her vision of the angel with the spear, and her subsequent entrance into heaven. But if this is Crashaw's intent, his is not ordinary hagiography. For one thing, if the hymn is designed to be a poetic life of the saint, it omits too much. Except for puns on "none" and "nonage," the poem barely hints at Teresa's religious vocation. Secondly, aside from the first sixty-four lines which speak of her in third person, the rest of the work is addressed directly to Teresa.

Furthermore, any narrative, whether of the life of a saint or a sinner, must have a sense of time's sequence in its structure. Crashaw, however, subverts any temporal scheme by using only present or future sense and these only confusingly.

For example, when describing Teresa's transverberation, he writes:

> Thou art love's victim; and must die
> A death more mystical and high...
> Fit executioners for thee,
> The fair'st and first-born sons of fire,
> Blest Seraphim, shall leave their choir
> And turn love's soldiers, upon Thee
> To exercise their archery...
> How kindly will thy gentle Heart
> Kiss the sweetly-killing Dart! (75-76. 92-96. 105-106)

Expressed in this fashion, the "event" is not tied to the experience of a woman in a sixteenth-century Carmelite convent, but seems to float independently in an indefinite timeless realm.

The same thing is true of Crashaw's description of Teresa's "death":

> O how oft shalt thou complain...
> Of a death, in which who dies,
> Loves his death, and dies again,
> and would for ever so be slain
> and lives, and dies; and knows not why
> To live, but that he thus may never leave to Die...
> these thy Deaths, so numerous,
> Shall all at last die into one,
> And melt thy soul's sweet mansion. (97. 100-104. 110-112)

In both cases, what appears to be straightforward narrative fails to narrate anything in a conventional manner. In no literal sense, then, can this poem be taken as the story of a life once lived. As Robert Petersson has observed, the hymn "gives the impression of being a saint's life in verse, but only on the surface."[13] After all, on close reading, the reader discovers that, with few exceptions, nothing really happens. All the "action" of the poem is expressed in terms of present ambiguity or future contingency.

It could be, of course, that the speaker is addressing Teresa the child, prophesying of her future life, thereby playing with the reader's sense of time. On closer analysis, however, we find that this cannot be the case, for in the first section of the poem, dealing with her childhood, Crashaw occasionally slips into future tense and even there he refers to Teresa in third person. The poem itself provides few clues as to the canons of its proper interpretation. At best, it appears to be a grand performance of poetic casuistry. For the reader expecting conventional hagiography in verse, Crashaw's hymn is disturbingly problematic.

"Thy soul's sweet mansion"

The key to the problem may lie in Crashaw's subtle reference to the "soul's sweet mansion" (112). In the *Interior Castle,* Teresa's classic analysis of the

13. Robert T. Petersson, *The Art of Ecstasy: Teresa, Bernini, and Crashaw* (Atheneum; New York 1970) *130.*

dynamics of the spiritual life, she describes the progress of the pilgrim soul as the inward journey through the mansions of the soul itself - a journey which culminates in the innermost and seventh mansion where the soul dwells in permanent union with the Holy Trinity. This inner castle, she says, is in the shape of a crystal globe. The journey is neither temporal nor spatial, but is defined by the unusual physics of the interior world. It is not a linear movement from one place to another or one time to another, but rather a spiral descent through the seven purgative stories of the soul into the inner landscape and inner time of the eternal.[14]

Crasham's hymn, in the best Teresian tradition, takes the reader on such an extraordinary journey. Linearly, it goes nowhere, for it is not about travel. Capitalizing on the seventeenth-century liberty in spelling, Crashaw reveals early on that the poem's subject matter really concerns the "travail" to martyrdom - the inner trail of love that leads to sacrifice of the heart. It seems, then, that Crashaw is not narrating the life of a saint at all. Instead, he is **praying** the life of a saint, just as a Tridentine Catholic would pray the private mysteries of the rosary or the Stations of the Cross - fingering the beads and concentrating on the conventional images, but drifting in and out of real time. Put another way, Crashaw transforms the standard history of a saint into a sensory meditation on the variable mental images of sainthood itself.

In his magisterial work on the Baroque impulse in early modern Catholic art and literature, Robert Petersson has said, "Crashaw aims to bring out the essence of Teresa's nature, not its accidents, not her narrative history."[15] While insightful regarding the poem's subversion of normal narrative structure, such a statement is unfortunately misleading, for the poem is not about the disembodied essence of anything but rather the concrete effects of Sainthood - precisely those stubborn idiosyncratic "accidents" that grant a holy life its specific weight and size and shape. Like a guided meditation on the irrigation of a kitchen garden, a swirling passage through a spherical palace, or the eternally present events of the life of Christ and the Virgin Mary, Crashaw's poetic biography of Teresa becomes an Ignatian, or better, Teresian, "spiritual exercise" for the adventurous pilgrim soul. Engaging the senses in an imaginative vision of heroic holiness, the hymn urges the reader to reexamine in a fresh way the complex texture of the consecrated

14. Peers, *the Mystic of Spain,* 86-89.

15. Petersson, *The Art of Ecstasy,* 130.

Christian life, turning our attention to what Thomas Aquinas would call the living "body" of sainthood.

Conclusion

When Crashaw composed his hymn to Teresa, he contributed to the excitement over the new saint and the new surge of devotional piety sweeping through the Tridentine church. As A.G. Dickens, one of the deans of the Counter-Reformation history, observed: "No one wrote more splendidly of St. Teresa than did the convert Richard Crashaw."[16] The fascinating thing about his poem, though, is the way Crashaw incorporates the distinctive spirit of Teresian spirituality into the very fabric of the poem. Her positive assessment of the role of mental images, her celebration of the primacy of love, and her reflections on the unique nature of the spiritual journey toward God shape the structure of the work and inform its imagery and message. Seeking a home in the renewed Roman Catholic church, Crashaw discovered in St. Teresa's mystical doctrine a rich spirituality to infuse and inspire his poetry. In the process, he left an inspiring testiment to the earthly shape of incarnate Christian sainthood.

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16. A. G. Dickens, *The Counter Reformation* Harcourt, Brace and World; New York 1969) 187.